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# The Dilation of the Poem (Philippe Jaccottet)

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# The Dilation of the Poem (Philippe Jaccottet)

## **Abstract**

This study of the works of Swiss poet Philippe Jaccottet (born in 1925) provides a broad overview of his writing, from his first published poems in the early 1940s to his most recent volume of prose in 2015, and illustrates the various ways in which it emblemizes what could be called a poetics of dilation. My first chapter considers the influence on Jaccottet of the German poet Novalis, who at the turn of the 19th century had envisioned what he called *die erweiterte Poësie* (“expanded poetry”); via Jean-Christophe Bailly’s recent reflections on *la poësie élargie* (an adjective that can mean both “expanded” and “liberated”), I in turn derive the notion of dilated poetry, the polysemy of which term is especially suggestive where Jaccottet is concerned. On a formal level, past and present English definitions of dilation account both for the expansion of Jaccottet’s early *poème-discours* and the dispersal of the later *poè`mes-instants* as well as of the fragments gathered in the notebooks of *La semaison*. The second and third chapters further probe poetic experience: the former reexamines Jaccottet’s relationship to images and visibility (the dilation of the poem’s eye), while the latter explores the multivalent motif of blood that runs throughout his writing (the dilation of the poem’s veins). I set out to show that the poet’s encounter with the world is lived first of all as an interdiction, a temporary loss for words before the seemingly inexpressible, and is then brought into language as an entrediction that traces a path between silence and eloquence, music and speech, poet and reader.

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THE DILATION OF THE POEM (PHILIPPE JACCOTTET)

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Samuel Edward Martin

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*In memory of Dennis and Edna, Helen and John*

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All love and thanks, lastly, to my parents and to JR, who've been with me at every step.

## ABSTRACT

### THE DILATION OF THE POEM (PHILIPPE JACCOTTET)

Samuel Martin

Philippe Met

This study of the works of Swiss poet Philippe Jaccottet (born in 1925) provides a broad overview of his writing, from his first published poems in the early 1940s to his most recent volume of prose in 2015, and illustrates the various ways in which it emblemizes what could be called a poetics of dilation. My first chapter considers the influence on Jaccottet of the German poet Novalis, who at the turn of the 19th century had envisioned what he called *die erweiterte Poesie* (“expanded poetry”); via Jean-Christophe Bailly’s recent reflections on *la poésie élargie* (an adjective that can mean both “expanded” and “liberated”), I in turn derive the notion of *dilated poetry*, the polysemy of which term is especially suggestive where Jaccottet is concerned. On a formal level, past and present English definitions of dilation account both for the expansion of Jaccottet’s early *poème-discours* and the dispersal of the later *poèmes-instants* as well as of the fragments gathered in the notebooks of *La semaison*. The second and third chapters further probe poetic experience: the former reexamines Jaccottet’s relationship to images and visibility (the dilation of the poem’s eye), while the latter explores the multivalent motif of blood that runs throughout his writing (the dilation of the poem’s veins). I set out to show that the poet’s encounter with the world is lived first of all as an *interdiction*, a temporary loss for words before the seemingly inexpressible, and is then brought into language as an *entrediction* that traces a path between silence and eloquence, music and speech, poet and reader.

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## CHAPTER 1

### The Dilation of the Poem

With the publication in 2001 of a slim volume of lyrical prose, *Et, néanmoins*, Philippe Jaccottet effectively became a poet of the new millennium. The extent to which he had ever been a representative poet of the preceding half-century of French letters is less straightforward than it may seem at first; every sign appearing to show him as a consecrated establishment figure is counterbalanced by another sign of his unorthodoxy. A stalwart of France's most prestigious publishing house, Gallimard, Jaccottet has nevertheless always professed his attachment to the Swiss literary milieu in which he grew up, and in the early 1950s shunned the noisy ostentation of the Parisian scene in favor of the Provençal countryside where he has lived ever since. Maintaining close ties of friendship – and even writerly affinity – with major poets in the capital over the years, from Francis Ponge to Yves Bonnefoy, has not stopped him keeping his distance from anything resembling a movement or a circle; likewise, despite what is often said to be the philosophical current running through his work, Jaccottet could not be further removed from any intellectual dogma. His books are among the most extensively studied of any contemporary poet's, yet he remains as wary of academic commentary as he is grateful for his readers' attentiveness. Not that he has ever set out to be a special case. Jaccottet's singularity lies exactly, one might say, in his not having sought it in the first place. His writing is never more recognizably his own than when he is striving to translate the crux of everyday experience in the most transparent manner possible. As he avowed in a recent interview on the cusp of his 90<sup>th</sup> year, “Je n'ai jamais cherché à renouveler la poésie. Il y a, au fond, peu d'écrivains et peu de poètes qui aient

consacré autant de pages à ce sens qu'on pouvait peut-être donner au sentiment de la beauté dans la nature.”<sup>1</sup>

*Et, néanmoins.* With its implied sense of continuity, the title serves as a bridge between two centuries; it emblemizes the *evenness* of the path Philippe Jaccottet's writing has taken. Yet the phrase is also a reactive one, a gesture of linguistic resistance, even ontological resilience: *even so*, it says.<sup>2</sup> When, as in this instance, the expression is taken on its own, the conjunction *et* finds itself connecting two *néants*: phonetically, that of *néanmoins* on the one hand, and on the other, that of the silent emptiness preceding it, to which it offers itself as a corrective. The *Petit Robert* defines *néanmoins*, meanwhile, as “malgré ce qui vient d'être dit”<sup>3</sup> – although here, nothing (and certainly not everything) has yet been said.<sup>4</sup> This simple two-word phrase, then, is an affirmation of the very possibility of language itself. But an affirmation in the face of what? On an intimate scale: the difficulty of finding the right words to convey one's meaning, the pain of mourning, the weariness of advancing age. Casting wider, given the particular context of poetry written in the waning years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, we could go so far as to hear in the words *et, néanmoins* a rejoinder to Theodor Adorno's oft-quoted dictum regarding the impossibility of poetry after Auschwitz, that most conspicuous *néant* of modern European history and culture.<sup>5</sup> And we could continue a century and a half

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<sup>1</sup> Jaccottet, “Short portrait of author Philippe Jaccottet.”

<sup>2</sup> “Toujours ces prépositions, adverbes ou locutions adverbiales exprimant l'opposition, le paradoxe, la ténacité: ‘MALGRÉ TOUT, MÊME SI, POURTANT, QUAND BIEN MÊME, NÉANMOINS.’ Petits mots grammaticaux admirables de force et de grandeur tant morale que spirituelle par lesquels l'homme précipité dans le chaos du mal, l'abîme du néant, se ressaisit soudain et s'affirme être doué d'absolue liberté, de pouvoir de pensée, de capacité d'amour et de fidélité au mépris de la mort” (Germain, *Les échos du silence*, 95).

<sup>3</sup> *Le nouveau Petit Robert*, 2nd ed., s.v. “néanmoins.”

<sup>4</sup> The title of *Et, néanmoins* echoes that of Jaccottet's 1994 collection of articles and literary chronicles from 1956 to 1964, *Tout n'est pas dit*.

<sup>5</sup> To those who rightly point out that Adorno's remark tends to be taken out of context, I would suggest that what matters most is less the author's intention than the way in which the remark has been received, and the resulting extent to which it has continued to generate poetic responses. See, for example, Allen Grossman's

further back – as Jaccottet himself has so often done as a reader and translator – to the age of the German Romantics, and see *Et, néanmoins* as engaging with the famous question posed by Hölderlin in one of his elegies: “Wozu Dichter in dürftiger Zeit?”<sup>6</sup> – in other words, as a tacit acknowledgment of, and answer to, the various literary, historical, and capitalistic forces conspiring to render a certain kind of poetic language improbable in our present age.

That language, for Philippe Jaccottet, is not so much produced as it is *received* and *rendered*, the fruit of a sustained interrogation of the world around him (as well as of the work of other writers and artists, past and contemporary, who have followed a similar line of questioning). A poem’s eventual success consequently depends on the acuteness of the poet’s attention, while the natural source of the language he would wish to speak flickers and threatens to vanish altogether. The precariousness of that presence may seem to increase with the passage of time, but even as a young man Jaccottet was telling his readers how vital it was – if anything, by virtue of its very fragility – and how it might yet be spoken of, *nevertheless...*

Très loin, à peine perceptible, un miroitement sur des marais: je ne possède guère plus, et n’ai pas grand-chose d’autre à dire. C’est pourquoi je voudrais parler un langage de pauvre. Et néanmoins...

Ce qui nous reste est si peu de chose, et si fuyant, si lointain, qu’il nous semble parfois en avoir seulement entendu parler: la lumière n’est plus guère que la légende de la lumière; l’amour se souvient de ce qu’il fut; notre vie elle-même, nous l’écoutons distraitement comme un récit. Et néanmoins, comment le dire sans élever un peu la voix? néanmoins, cet amour, pareil à une parole étouffée; ces feux, pareils à des rêves, cachent le même abîme de merveilles qu’ils ont toujours caché; devant eux, si frêles soient-ils, j’éprouve toujours le même saisissement et, quoique tout cela se passe, comment dire? dans un monde de fumées vite dispersé par des vents d’une terrible violence, le mystère subsiste, et dans le mystère l’entrevison du salut, de la victoire toujours possible.<sup>7</sup>

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essay “Poetry and Enlightenment,” in which he considers the implications for contemporary culture of both the original observation and its inverse, “*Only* poetry after Auschwitz” (*True-Love*, 1-13).

<sup>6</sup> Hölderlin, *Poems and Fragments*, 326.

<sup>7</sup> Jaccottet, *Œuvres*, 1301.

These lines from a prose reflection published in the *NNRF*, when the author was all of 28 and had only just settled in the quietly lovely landscape of Grignan, betray something of youthful idealism; Jaccottet would grow mistrustful in years thereafter of a poetics framed, even negatively, in terms of “possession” and “victory.” But in this text from January 1954, a resolute *et, néanmoins* already provides the key in which the poet’s distinctive melody will unfold. The title of the piece, “Toujours la même histoire,” makes it clear that what is being dramatized is an archetypal poetic experience. A glimmer in the distance catches the eye, and precisely because it appears so insubstantial, it sets the imagination to wondering what unseen dimension it might contain.<sup>8</sup> Such is the *entrevision* evoked here,<sup>9</sup> at once glimpse and anticipation – literally an *interseeing*, as if to suggest that the poet’s gaze on the world were being returned, or that he were looking at his object between eyelids partly closed. The task of the poem then becomes to widen its eyes as fully as possible, to expand the depth of field while still somehow maintaining the concentrated focus of a squint. This opening of the eyes corresponds to an opening of the throat in order for breath (inspiration) to enter, and the voice to rise – not in triumphal affirmation, but rather continuing to query both the world and itself: in “Toujours la même histoire,” as throughout Jaccottet’s work, the question “How to say?” is an integral part of the saying. The victory ultimately envisaged here is that of the poem become possible.

The full text of 2001’s *Et, néanmoins* unfolds along similar lines. The book’s initial piece begins with the poet “having scratched out the title”; rather than beginning with a

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<sup>8</sup> See in particular the work of Michel Collot on the importance in modern French poetry of the relations between the visible and the invisible: “La perception ne tient pas seulement compte de l’aspect que l’objet présente à notre regard, mais aussi de ses autres faces qui, pour n’être pas actuellement visibles, ne sont pas moins ‘apprésentées,’ c’est-à-dire obscurément pressenties à l’arrière-plan, à l’horizon du champ visuel ... [ce qui] semble attirer tout particulièrement les poètes contemporains” (*La poésie moderne et la structure d’horizon*, 16).

<sup>9</sup> The corresponding verb, *entrevoir*, is notably the title of the début collection by one of the slightly younger poets and translators much admired by Jaccottet, namely Paul de Roux.

framework, then, it begins with an utterance, which will extend over nine segments of thematically unified (if sometimes jagged) poetic prose. One by one, Jaccottet takes in various features of his surroundings in a kind of panoramic sweep around the landscape of Grignan, with occasional glances down at the book on the table in his room. Doubtless the most striking images in the collection, though, are to be found in the poet's mind at the outset, as the figure of Anubis visits him in a waking dream. From this nocturnal point of departure, *Et, néanmoins* proceeds to arc through a series of daytime visions, or *entrevisions* – violets, Queen Anne's lace, kingfishers, robins – before returning once more to night. "Rossignol" is the collection's only versified text, an unrhymed ode to the nightingale, whose song crowns the close of the day much as the poem represents the cumulative point of the book's exploratory phrasing.

And in the midst of that phrasing, two short texts labeled "parentheses"; and within the second parenthesis, an observation about a particular experience of reading: "Lisant le *Cantique spirituel* dans sa langue, c'est-à-dire sans rien perdre de sa musicalité, aussi âpre, aussi nette, aussi limpide que le paysage castillan que j'avais tant aimé traverser un jour de grand soleil, j'entrais spontanément, sans même avoir à y penser, dans un espace 'entre deux mondes' où tout mon être, lui-même double, se dilatait avec joie."<sup>10</sup> This single sentence weaves together a great many strands of Philippe Jaccottet's life and work, each of them worth untangling in order to better situate the poet. There is, to begin with, a biographical consideration. Jaccottet's first encounter with the *Spiritual Canticle* of St. John of the Cross owed to his fellow Swiss poet Gustave Roud, a mentor who would become a close confidant

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<sup>10</sup> Jaccottet, *Œuvres*, 1108.

of several decades; Roud cited four lines of the poem in 1943's *Air de la solitude*.<sup>11</sup> They made a sufficiently powerful impression on the young Jaccottet for him to cite the same lines in turn, in a text from *Éléments d'un songe* written while in Majorca 15 years later<sup>12</sup> – whence the Catalonian scenery evoked above. The landscape in the sentence from “Autre parenthèse” is consubstantial with the melody of poetic language; the poet enters easily and naturally into both. The excerpt also manages to hint at the central place of walking in Jaccottet's poetic experience, a taste likewise acquired from Gustave Roud, and to which titles of key works such as *La promenade sous les arbres* and *À travers un verger* attest. Finally, the feeling of joy, and the word *joie* itself, have preoccupied the poet over the years, even prompting an extended reflection in his 1983 volume of alternating verse and prose, *Pensées sous les nuages*,<sup>13</sup> the elation in this passage seems to push back the boundaries of space and time, a remembered moment of plenitude drawn out again by the winding progression of the syntax.

Indeed, space and the self are doubled here, in a movement typical of Jaccottet's writing. Some of the most telling prose pieces from his earlier collections – “La promenade sous les arbres” in 1957's book of the same name, and “Poursuite” from *Éléments d'un songe* (1961) – take the form of inner dialogues, Socratic enactments of the poetic process; his sole foray into full-length narrative fiction, 1961's *L'obscurité*, is primarily a fraught exchange between an ambitious and idealistic young disciple and a jaded older master, both of whom, as Jean Starobinski was quick to point out, embody the poet's own conflicted mind.<sup>14</sup>

Jaccottet is ever seeking to balance, if not in fact to reconcile, the extremities of existence, to

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<sup>11</sup> See Roud, *Écrits*, vol. 2, 155.

<sup>12</sup> See Jaccottet, *Œuvres*, 302.

<sup>13</sup> For an insightful study of Jaccottet and *joie*, see Labrusse, *Au cœur des apparences*, 111-46.

<sup>14</sup> “Devient-il narrateur – comme dans *L'obscurité* – c'est pour prendre congé d'un double de lui-même, d'un contradicteur intérieur, dont le discours désespéré n'est pas radicalement étranger” (Starobinski, “Parler avec la voix du jour,” 10).

inhabit the interstices between them. There can be no *entrevoir*, in other words, without a concomitant *entredire*, an *intersaying* that gradually emerges from an initial *interdiction*: in French, after all, to be *interdit* is also to be astounded, lost for words. Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, in *La poésie comme expérience*, writes, “À la limite de sa propre possibilité, ‘au bord de lui-même,’ s’arrachant de son ‘déjà-plus’ vers son ‘toujours-encore,’ le poème doit se frayer passage entre silence et discours, entre le *ne rien dire* du mutisme ou de l’aphasie singulière et le *trop dire* de l’éloquence.”<sup>15</sup> Jaccottet traces just such a path in his texts, between light and shadow, silence and verbal facility, speech and music, inner and outer landscape – as well as between languages (as a translator) and idioms (as a reader and critic nourished by constant exchange, that “secret transaction” of poetry, as Virginia Woolf put it in a phrase that yielded yet another of Jaccottet’s titles<sup>16</sup>).

Perhaps it is in large part because Jaccottet places a primacy on exchange that his work has not lacked for its own commentators: far from it, indeed. What Gustave Roud wrote of poetry’s relation to the world in *Air de la solitude* – “La poésie (la vraie) m’a toujours paru être [...] une quête de signes menée au cœur d’un monde *qui ne demande qu’à répondre*, interrogé, il est vrai, selon telle ou telle inflexion de voix”<sup>17</sup> – could equally be said, it seems to me, of Jaccottet’s relation, not just to the world, but to his readers, who feel compelled to respond (often in their own texts) to the searching tone of his writing. This could go some way toward explaining why an *oeuvre* that aspires above all to transparency continues to generate as many academic theses in France as any other contemporary poetic corpus. *Tout n’est pas dit*, to be sure, even as Jaccottet looks to have laid down his pen, at least as far as

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<sup>15</sup> Lacoue-Labarthe, *La poésie comme expérience*, 84.

<sup>16</sup> Woolf, *Orlando*, 238.

<sup>17</sup> Roud, *Écrits*, vol. 2, 100.

new poetry is concerned; it is nonetheless rare to find a critic contriving to offer a radically different reading of his work. There are bound to be exceptions – but to claim Jaccottet for a hermetic current of contemporary French poetry, for instance, as Omer Massoumou has recently done, strikes me as woefully (if not willfully) misguided.<sup>18</sup> Jaccottet is a writer who asks to be read *with the grain* – which is also to say, with the seed: “Qui sait combien les graines sont légères, / redouterait d’adorer le tonnerre.”<sup>19</sup>

In the midst of a large (and largely concordant) body of critical work, what matters most in any new commentary, I might venture to suggest, is its *inflection*, to borrow Roud’s term. If “true” poetry, in his eyes and Jaccottet’s, interrogates the world in order to (re)present it faithfully, the true reader would do well to reactivate the terms of that interrogation, to join the poem’s intersaying with the eventual hope of looking on the world through the poem’s eyes. Jaccottet’s contemporary Michel Deguy (the title of whose long-running journal, *Poésie*, stands for just the sort of conjunctive reading I have in mind) asks, in a poem from *Donnant donnant*, “Redire ce que dit le poème / fait-il partie du poème?”<sup>20</sup> While proposing neither to answer Deguy’s sly yet sincere question nor simply to rearticulate Jaccottet’s poetry, I would at least wish – though this is by no means as simple as it sounds – to pose some of the same questions posed in the latter’s texts, and to slip into some of the same interstices. Less a thesis, then, than a *parenthesis* like those of *Et, néanmoins*, nestling in the center of the work while at the same time marked as marginal, and in which elemental concerns of Philippe Jaccottet’s writing are quietly addressed.

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<sup>18</sup> See Massoumou, *Les formes hermétiques dans la poésie française contemporaine*. Hélène Samson, in contrast, is on the mark when she writes, “Dans le panorama de la poésie contemporaine, traversé par deux options opposées, l’option ‘hermétique, qui postule la clôture du texte,’ et l’option ‘herméneutique, qui considère le langage comme moyen d’une interprétation de soi et du monde,’ Jaccottet se situe incontestablement du côté des poètes [...] qui ont élaboré des œuvres pénétrées de la référence au monde” (Samson, *Le tissu poétique de Philippe Jaccottet*, 51).

<sup>19</sup> Jaccottet, *Œuvres*, 15.

<sup>20</sup> Deguy, *Poèmes II*, 132.



All of which brings me back to the sentence from “Autre parenthèse” about the *Spiritual Canticle*, the Catalonian landscape, and the space between worlds, so that one final word might be noted: “tout mon être *se dilatait* avec joie” (my emphasis). The verb *dilater* is not a frequent one in the poet’s lexicon, figuring only once in over 1300 pages of verse and prose collected in the recent Pléiade edition, and yet no verb, I think, better answers the question “What happens in a poem?” where Jaccottet is involved. The passage is a synesthetic illustration of the extent to which the acts of reading, writing, and looking on the world are inextricably fused; the poem, as Lacoue-Labarthe’s phrase indicates, is *experience*, widening further and further to draw each additional reader in. “Hâtons-nous donc de demeurer dans ce vibrant séjour...”<sup>21</sup>



On January 12<sup>th</sup>, 1798, Friedrich von Hardenberg addressed a letter to his friend August Wilhelm Schlegel containing the following declaration: “Diese erweiterte Poësie ist gerade das höchste Problem des practischen Dichters [...] Man könnte jene höhere Poësie die *Poësie des Unendlichen* nennen.”<sup>22</sup> That same year would see the publication of Hardenberg’s first poetico-philosophical fragments (under the name by which he would come to be far better known: Novalis) in the inaugural issue of the journal *Athenaeum*, to which A. W. Schlegel and his brother Friedrich likewise contributed in what was the first real flowering of the German Romantic movement. Novalis’s text, suitably enough, bore the title *Blüthenstaub (Pollen)*, a scattering of literary grains that anticipates the seed-sowing metaphor

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<sup>21</sup> Jaccottet, *Œuvres*, 160.

<sup>22</sup> Novalis, *Schriften*, vol. 4, 247.

adopted by Philippe Jaccottet for his own notes and fragments collected in the volumes of *La semaison* (1954-1998). A blossoming of poetic seeds in the reader's mind: this is one way to envision the "enlarged" or "expanded" poetry (*erweiterte Poësie*) whose advent is hailed by Novalis in his letter of January 1798, and which would be the fundamental preoccupation (*das höchste Problem*), not only of Hardenberg, the Schlegels, and their contemporaries, but of the subsequent hundred years and more of European literary production. For if one can designate the 19<sup>th</sup> century as that of infinite poetry (*Poësie des Unendlichen*), it is that there can henceforth be no stable boundary dictating where poetry ends and prose begins. According to Jean-Christophe Bailly, "Il ne faut pas penser le poème en prose comme un genre, mais comme le mouvement d'un genre vers un autre, d'un mode vers un autre. Le poème traverse la prose, c'est-à-dire aussi qu'il se conserve comme poème dans ce mouvement qui l'élargit."<sup>23</sup> Bailly takes his cue from Novalis, tracing *diese erweiterte Poësie* from the German Romantics to such modern-day figures as Paul Celan and Osip Mandelstam, via the poetic prose of Georg Büchner and the prose poem pioneered by Baudelaire – all inescapable points of reference for Philippe Jaccottet (as Bailly himself has become in recent years, for that matter). Jaccottet thus inscribes himself within a lineage of "poésie élargie," though he is not, of course, the sole inheritor; it would be instructive to consider briefly the cases of two other such heirs apparent, and Jaccottet's distance from them, so as to clarify how his own *erweiterte Poësie* ought – and ought not – to be understood.

Prior to Jaccottet in 2014, only two French poets had been honored with a Pléiade edition of their works during their lifetime: Saint-John Perse and René Char. The former's princely status among the writers of his generation (he was crowned with 1960's Nobel Prize

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<sup>23</sup> Bailly, *L'élargissement du poème*, 65.

in Literature) was already long since assured by the time a not-quite-18-year-old Jaccottet read *Exil* in the spring of 1943 and confessed to Gustave Roud a hesitant admiration.<sup>24</sup> The aspiring poet recognized the grandeur of Perse's declamatory style and the sheer power of the elements in a work whose affinity for the natural world rivalled that of Roud, yet the texts' magisterial assurance left him ill at ease. Eleven years later, in a note eventually published in *Observations* (spanning 1951 to 1956), he was able to articulate his reticence when commenting on a well-known passage from *Vents*: "Il y a dans ces lignes de Saint-John Perse la puissance du souffle, l'orgueil du vent, l'ivresse du mouvement; il y a peut-être là aussi la vérité du vent, mais c'est une vérité qui fait beaucoup de bruit, qui soulève beaucoup d'agitation, et qui passe. J'aimerais au contraire lui opposer la vérité de la roseraie et du clavecin, la vérité frêle, gracieuse et transparente de la graine."<sup>25</sup> For Jaccottet, the "poésie élargie" of Saint-John Perse is an *amplified* poetry, which swells in a musical but too often blustery way; whatever the forceful and even true presence therein of some aspects of the world, there remains a constant risk of other aspects, no less true, being drowned out.

The case of René Char is all the more salient for Jaccottet harboring an affectionate regard for the man himself at the same time as a mistrust of his most representative work. Char's poetry, in the eyes of his younger contemporary, exhibits an inflexibility of form and an imperiousness of tone; its crackling energy ends up leaving the reader fatigued. It is Char, after all, who serves as Roland Barthes's primary point of reference for his diagnosis of the "demiurgy" and "coercion" of modern poetry in 1953, the very year Jaccottet published

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<sup>24</sup> See Jaccottet and Roud, *Correspondance*, 50.

<sup>25</sup> Jaccottet, *Œuvres*, 66-67.

what he would regard as his first mature collection.<sup>26</sup> Jaccottet, for his part, highlights the purely accumulative logic of Char's corpus, noting in a "Brève remarque" on the latter that one would be hard-pressed to distinguish between two poems separated by as many decades; the sustained elevated tone leaves little room for ascension or progression. From his lofty height (Barthes refers to the *verticality* of the word in contemporary poetry, while Jaccottet likens Char to an eagle), the poet casts a keen eye on the world below, which does not, however, prevent his gaze from turning inward in self-satisfaction, "l'œuvre finissant par *s'enchanter d'elle-même*."<sup>27</sup> The *erweiterte Poësie* of Char is an *aggrandized* poetry, impressing – and impressing itself upon – the reader, where Jaccottet would look instead for seductiveness, suppleness, subtlety.

A comparative analysis of what appear at first to be markedly similar short poems by the two men may help to pinpoint the gulf between their respective approaches. Char's collection *Fureur et mystère* contains a text entitled "Le loriot," dated September 3<sup>rd</sup>, 1939 – the day that saw France declare war on Germany:

Le loriot entra dans la capitale de l'aube.  
L'épée de son chant ferma le lit triste.  
Tout à jamais prit fin.<sup>28</sup>

There can be no doubting Jaccottet's admiration for the poem; he would eventually include it among his selection of Char's texts in his personal anthology of 20<sup>th</sup>-century French

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<sup>26</sup> "[À l'époque moderne] on peut difficilement parler d'une écriture poétique, car il s'agit d'un langage dont la violence d'autonomie détruit toute portée éthique. Le geste oral vise ici à modifier la Nature, il est une démiurgie; il n'est pas une attitude de conscience mais un acte de coercition. Tel est du moins le langage des poètes modernes qui vont jusqu'au bout de leur dessein et assument la Poésie, non comme un exercice spirituel, un état d'âme ou une mise en position, mais comme la splendeur et la fraîcheur d'un langage rêvé [...] La poésie moderne, dans son absolu, chez un Char, par exemple, est au-delà de ce ton diffus, de cette *aura* précieuse qui sont bien, eux, une écriture, et qu'on appelle ordinairement sentiment poétique" (Barthes, *Le degré zéro de l'écriture*, 41).

<sup>27</sup> Jaccottet, *L'entretien des muses*, 177.

<sup>28</sup> Char, *Œuvres complètes*, 137.

poetry, and it is hard to imagine that he did not already have it in mind, even unconsciously, when he composed his own three-line poem to the oriole, an entry in the notebooks of *La semaison* from May, 1960:

Tout était poudre grise sauf un peu de feu  
et le loriot disait: Qui es-tu? Que fais-tu?  
Rien n'avancait encore vers sa fin.<sup>29</sup>

Syntactically, the difference is clear straightaway, Char's text firing off three terse salvos, each with its own aphoristic potency (a compact illustration of what Jaccottet sees as the additive nature of Char's writing), whereas Jaccottet's concern is more one of phrasing, the second line prolonging the first with a conjunction. The verb tenses, too, create a tonal distinction, the decisiveness and irrevocability of Char's *passé simple* contrasted with the vaguer and more descriptive *imparfait* of Jaccottet. Finally, the parallel scenes evoked by the two texts are qualitatively far apart. The resplendency of the *capitale de l'aube* (to which the *loriot* is tied by means of alliteration and internal rhyme) calls to mind the luminescent Surrealist images of Paul Éluard, for example; the dawn light in the first line of Jaccottet's poem, on the other hand, is fainter and more diffuse, the flame of *feu* in this case being phonetically linked to *peu*. In the second lines, the song of Char's oriole slices through the air, a movement which the verb *fermer* indicates is one of both *firmness* and *closure*, while Jaccottet's bird *opens* a space of communicative possibility, at the same time introducing, with its insistent questioning, an element of uncertainty characteristic of the younger poet's work.<sup>30</sup> Char's apocalyptic conclusion evidently alludes to an historical circumstance that is

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<sup>29</sup> Jaccottet, *Œuvres*, 362.

<sup>30</sup> A distinct echo of Char's line is to be heard in an early poem by Jacques Dupin, Jaccottet's friend and contemporary, and for whom Char played a mentoring role similar to that of Gustave Roud for Jaccottet; Dupin writes of "Le chant qui est à soi-même sa faux" (*Le corps clairvoyant*, 60). Significantly, it is Jaccottet who cites this line – on the page of *La semaison* facing that of the oriole poem, no less – as a kind of definition of the

not operative in the other case, and yet it reflects a prophetic tendency altogether foreign to Jaccottet. The latter's conclusion is not a conclusion at all, but rather a suspension; poet, bird, and reader are held together in momentary harmony. Although both third lines thus mark a halt, the *encore* in Jaccottet's text is a gentle hint that time will presently be resuming its course, as opposed to the unequivocal stoppage of *à jamais*. From the quality of light and the relation between poet and nature to poetic expression and temporality, the two texts diverge in just about every respect, a photograph and its negative, almost as though Jaccottet had deliberately set out to differentiate his own approach to poetry from that of the older master.

Amplified, aggrandized... One could say of Saint-John Perse and René Char in sum that their *erweiterte Poësie* represents an *enhanced* poetry. Jaccottet never fails to acknowledge his esteem for their work, or that each took modern French poetry to new heights, yet with such an enhancement comes the potential for excess. His appreciations of both *oeuvres* in *L'entretien des muses* – a title, incidentally, taken from a harpsichord suite by Rameau, whose delicacy Jaccottet wages against the thunderous music of Perse in the passage quoted earlier – broach the possibility of their embodying *too much beauty*, a strange indictment, perhaps, but an indictment all the same. As he puts it, “Trop de beauté (un trop à peine pondérable) ne chasse-t-elle pas la beauté? Comme trop de hauteur la hauteur?”<sup>31</sup> Furthermore, considering the notorious circumstances in which the Pléiade editions of the elder figures were prepared (the poet in each case being granted the final say in the selection of texts and critical apparatus, contrary to the widely accepted rules of the collection), it is a beauty somewhat

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haiku, whose ephemerality and self-effacement could be said to be at odds with the weighty durability of Char's writing.

<sup>31</sup> Jaccottet, *L'entretien des muses*, 179.

jealously guarded, an image of poet and work crafted and curated for posterity. The consecration of Perse and Char meant both a *broadening* of their poetry's visibility and a *constriction* of the terms on which it might be encountered.

We are consequently not yet in the domain of *la poésie élargie*, at least not in the fullest sense, for the French verb *élargir* both translates and expands its German counterpart, *erweitern*; an *élargissement* is at once an expansion and a liberation. In "Crise de vers," Stéphane Mallarmé had famously proclaimed the liberation of French verse upon the death of Victor Hugo in 1884.<sup>32</sup> On the face of it, the exemplars of this newfound formal freedom in the the 20<sup>th</sup> century would seem to be the Surrealists and their ilk (hence, among others, Saint-John Perse and René Char) much more so than Philippe Jaccottet, whose early works in particular remain rooted in traditional verse forms and metrical patterns even as they explore new possibilities within them.<sup>33</sup> Yet Jaccottet's blurring of generic boundaries, in the vein of the German Romantics, becomes more pronounced with the passage of time. The hybrid collections of his later years, from *Cabier de verdure* (1990) to *Ce peu de bruits* (2008), as well as what might be termed his earlier lyrical essays, from *La promenade sous les arbres* to *À travers un verger*, not to mention the notebooks of *La semaison*, undeniably see poetry "traversing prose" (to return to Jean-Christophe Bailly's description of *la poésie élargie*). To speak of his liberation of poetic form is no anachronism, and no exaggeration.

Yet the still more fundamental liberation for which Jaccottet's poetry is in ceaseless quest is that of the self. The opening note of *La semaison* from May of 1954 is placed very deliberately at the outset of the book to fulfill a programmatic function, not only for the notebooks themselves, but in a sense for the entire corpus, like a tuning fork being struck

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<sup>32</sup> See Mallarmé, *Poésies et autres textes*, 347-61.

<sup>33</sup> For the most recent and comprehensive metrical analysis of Jaccottet's corpus, see Monte, *Mesures et passages*.

softly: “L’attachement à soi augmente l’opacité de la vie. Un moment de vrai oubli, et tous les écrans les uns derrière les autres deviennent transparents, de sorte qu’on voit la clarté jusqu’au fond, aussi loin que la vue porte; et du même coup plus rien ne pèse. Ainsi l’âme est vraiment changée en oiseau.”<sup>34</sup> For all that this is a highly personal poetic statement, no *I* speaks here; rather, the only pronoun used, the third-person *on*, communicates a melding of inner and outer space, as the poet’s gaze becomes synonymous with the ever-outstretching landscape. Poetic movement is that of an invisible bird, which leaves the ego behind – a movement corresponding to the French idiom *prendre le large*. This passage takes the form of a description, to acknowledge that the detachment of self from self does indeed occur at intervals, although as the allusion to forgetting makes clear, the occurrence can only ever be an unconscious one; to strive for it is all but to have lost the battle in advance. What is arguably Jaccottet’s most oft-quoted line, from 1957’s poem “Que la fin nous illumine” – “L’effacement soit ma façon de resplendir”<sup>35</sup> – could thus be seen as a more representative description of his work than the note from *La semaison*, despite being phrased in terms of a wish; the paradoxical juxtaposition of the word *effacement* with the first-person possessive adjective *ma* highlights the constant struggle being waged within his texts, the difficulty of eradicating the self completely. Dominique Viart, among others, has pointed out Jaccottet’s audible dissatisfaction with regard to his own writing, dissatisfaction to which an ideal of absolute (self-)effacement can hardly fail to lead.<sup>36</sup> Just as quintessentially Jaccottetian as the blissful “moments de vrai oubli,” in other words, are the moments of doubt, frustration, and circumspection, when the prospect of liberation seems to be out of reach.

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<sup>34</sup> Jaccottet, *Œuvres*, 335.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 161.

<sup>36</sup> See Viart, “La parole effacée de Philippe Jaccottet,” in *Lectures de Philippe Jaccottet*, 23-38.



How, then, can an *élargissement* be possible? Through endurance, perhaps; through patience. If the poet cannot burst the spatial and temporal lock on his own, he must not despair of some outside agent arriving to complete the task. Judith Chavanne has elucidated the importance and frequency of metaphors of incarceration in Jaccottet's work;<sup>37</sup> the following notebook entry from March, 1976 evokes the prison-like enclosure of night:

Je reviens à la pensée des "deux nuits," celle qui est transparente, vaste, magique, et l'autre, la prison dont on ne sort pas. Que l'on se sente oppressé au lit, dans la chambre obscure, on se lève, on pousse la porte, on descend l'escalier – le silence est, à ces heures-là, total –, mais toute la maison est une prison encore; et que l'on sorte de la maison, il y a encore ces plus hauts murs, cette immense voûte sans la moindre faille [...] Mais, pourvu que l'on patiente, on sait que le mur va bientôt se démanteler. Les oiseaux vont venir; ils sont comme des ouvriers levés très tôt qui ouvrent des brèches et dont le zèle grandit à mesure que le travail avance. Quelquefois, on les entend comme le prisonnier les clefs de l'élargissement. Un tintement dans l'étroit couloir.<sup>38</sup>

It is one of the achievements of Jaccottet's writing that he manages to avoid a hermetic mode of expression when evoking precisely that which is most confining (here, the physical and metaphysical confines of darkness). Insofar as the nocturnal cell lacks an apparent opening, thereby restricting the flow of air and threatening to stifle the poet, this passage allegorizes the wait for inspiration, in the literal sense of the term. One is brought to mind of Maurice Blanchot's reflections on inspiration in *L'espace littéraire*, in which the critic elaborates a similar essentializing distinction between "two nights."<sup>39</sup> Unlike for Blanchot, however, for Jaccottet it is not Eurydice who liberates the Orphic figure of the poet, vanishing forever and so initiating him into a linguistic realm of irrevocable loss; instead, the

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<sup>37</sup> See Chavanne, *Philippe Jaccottet*, 13-42.

<sup>38</sup> Jaccottet, *Œuvres*, 652.

<sup>39</sup> See Blanchot, *L'espace littéraire*, 211-48. Jaccottet, meanwhile, ultimately voices his reticence toward Blanchot's prose, which itself verges on the nocturnal and the obscure: "Je n'ai plus le désir d'entrer dans ces labyrinthes-là – sans doute parce qu'il me manque le fil qui m'en délivrerait. Aucun désir de me retrouver *enfermé* face à cette obscurité fascinante, pareille à un minotaure qui pourrait bien être né de nos songes, de nos fumées" (*Taches de soleil*, 91).

song of birds is compared to the unexpected jangling of the jailor's keys, restoring the poet to the world and the world to the poet – an opening, once more, rather than the closure enacted in the poem by René Char examined above. And one should hear in the word “key” (*clef*) a double meaning akin to that of *élargissement*: it tells of a musical as well as a physical liberation.

The note from 1976 parallels a much earlier episode in Jaccottet's life. June 27<sup>th</sup>, 1941, as he would say, marked the emancipation of his poetic consciousness. That evening, three days short of his 16<sup>th</sup> birthday, Jaccottet attended the prize-giving ceremony in Lausanne of the Prix Rambert (which he himself was to win 15 years later), having been urged by an acquaintance to listen to the acceptance speech of one Gustave Roud, with whose work he was as yet entirely unfamiliar. Roud's address on the occasion transfixed the would-be poet, and one observation above all stood out: anyone who had not heard the morning song of the lark ascending after a restless night, the older man concluded by saying, could not fully understand what poetry was.<sup>40</sup> Jaccottet heard fulfilled in this remark his own developing intuitions with regard to literature, as both a reader and a nascent writer. The moment signaled far more than an elective affinity between two generations; for the young student, it announced a vocation. Roud would soon introduce him to a wealth of poetic riches, in particular the works of the German Romantics at the time still largely unknown to French-language readers: Hölderlin, and Novalis...



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<sup>40</sup> See Jaccottet, *Gustave Roud*, 7-9.

And so we have wound our way across languages and epochs, from *die erweiterte Poesie* to *la poésie élargie*, and find ourselves back at Jaccottet's *dilated poetry*, which translation warrants an explanation. Jean-Louis Chrétien, in *La joie spacieuse*, outlines three primary criteria for what he calls a poetics of dilation: breath, movement, and amplification.<sup>41</sup> The first category wholly corresponds to the work of Jaccottet, whose 1967 collection *Airs*, which could be considered the purest distillation of his aesthetic, epitomizes respiratory ease. Chrétien cites the compression of Mallarmé's poetry as a counterexample, one that obtains for Jaccottet as well; however, Chrétien's case studies from the modern poetic canon (namely Victor Hugo, Walt Whitman, and Paul Claudel) imply an epic dimension of dilation which is at odds with the modest and restrained scale of Jaccottet's writing. The breath of *Airs* is not concentrated in the poet's person – as opposed to the oral and oracular power of Chrétien's examples – and instead circulates freely, the poet a mere conduit, a participant in a natural cycle from which he could almost be absent altogether, were it not a matter of voicing it in such a way as to involve the reader as well:

Tout à la fin de la nuit  
quand ce souffle s'est élevé  
une bougie d'abord  
a défailli<sup>42</sup>

Chrétien's third category is likewise at variance with Jaccottet's work, since the amplification described (demanded?) by the author of *La joie spacieuse* contains an emphatic, hyperbolic dimension, precisely what Jaccottet finds it hard to accept in poets such as Saint-John Perse. Chrétien is right to underline the inherent excess of any poetry that preoccupies itself with that which ostensibly cannot be expressed: "Toute écriture mystique et toute poétique de

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<sup>41</sup> See Chrétien, *La joie spacieuse*, 21-23.

<sup>42</sup> Jaccottet, *Œuvres*, 426.

l'indicible tendent à l'emphase: elles signifient plus qu'elles ne disent et ne peuvent dire, elles montrent encore au-delà de ce qu'elles décrivent."<sup>43</sup> One would need to be able to speak in Jaccottet's case, then, of an amplification unrelated to *volumé*, a dilation of the affective world of the text which would nevertheless remain impersonal.

A more exact linguistic notion of dilation, I think, might help to name a further property of Jaccottet's writing, and of his early verse poems especially. *Amplificatio* and *dilatatio*, in effect, designate rhetorical techniques widespread throughout Renaissance Europe, and illuminated by Patricia Parker: "The specifically rhetorical meaning of 'dilate' – the amplifying and prolonging of discourse – involves both an expansion and an opening up, the creation of more copious speech through the explication, or unfolding, of a brief or closed, hermetic 'sentence,' widening the space between its beginning and ending and generating much out of little, many words (or things) where there had been few."<sup>44</sup> The opening of discourse from within, as a calculatedly anti-hermetic gesture: the poems of *L'effraie* (1953) and *L'ignorant* (1957), which Jaccottet refers to as his practice of the "poème-discours,"<sup>45</sup> respond to this definition superbly. To take a close look at an example, a celebrated poem from *L'effraie*, the last in a cycle of "Quelques sonnets," thematizes the very distension and delay which Parker locates in Bacon and Shakespeare:

Sois tranquille, cela viendra! Tu te rapproches,  
tu brûles! Car le mot qui sera à la fin  
du poème, plus que le premier sera proche  
de ta mort, qui ne s'arrête pas en chemin.

Ne crois pas qu'elle aille s'endormir sous des branches  
ou reprendre souffle pendant que tu écris.

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<sup>43</sup> Chrétien, *La joie spaciense*, 24.

<sup>44</sup> Parker, "Dilation and Delay," 520.

<sup>45</sup> Jaccottet, *Œuvres*, 359.

Même quand tu bois à la bouche qui étanche  
la pire soif, la douce bouche avec ses cris

doux, même quand tu serres avec force le nœud  
de vos quatre bras pour être bien immobiles  
dans la brûlante obscurité de vos cheveux,

elle vient, Dieu sait par quels détours, vers vous deux,  
de très loin ou déjà tout près, mais sois tranquille,  
elle vient: d'un à l'autre mot tu es plus vieux.<sup>46</sup>

A more mature Jaccottet would later look back on texts such as this, if not with outright scorn, then at least with a wry skepticism at the presumptuousness of youth (“Autrefois [...] j’ai prétendu guider mourants et mors. // Moi, poète abrité, / épargné, souffrant à peine, / aller tracer des routes jusque-là!”<sup>47</sup>). He need not have been so harsh, for the poet who speaks in “Sois tranquille” is as much undone by the implacable onset of death as the reader, who is drawn into a morbid complicity with the speaker right from the opening address. The poet’s whisper in the reader’s ear, channeled through a stream of sibilance and alliteration, finds itself synchronized with the breath of time itself in one steady exhalation. While the poem, in its relationship to the addressee and its dependence on temporal allegory, owes far more to Baudelaire than to Mallarmé,<sup>48</sup> there is arguably more than a hint of the latter’s “Sonnet en X”<sup>49</sup> in the systematic negation of the images in the second stanza, and the depiction of an oblivious – not to say absent – writer, as though the text were at once a transparency and a looking-glass. Mallarmé’s “sonorous inanity” is here rendered as an accumulation of smoke and mirrors (“À partir du rien. Là est ma loi. Tout le

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<sup>46</sup> Jaccottet, *Œuvres*, 6.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 451.

<sup>48</sup> For a perceptive reading of this poem’s intertextual play with a well-known sonnet by Baudelaire, see Sheringham, “Allégorie et temporalité dans deux poèmes de Philippe Jaccottet,” in *La poésie de Philippe Jaccottet*, 137-53.

<sup>49</sup> See Mallarmé, *Poésies et autres textes*, 211.

reste: fumée lointaine”<sup>50</sup>). Its lack of substance notwithstanding, the poem flows toward the inevitable end which its enunciation defers. The final sentence stretches out over eight lines, accounting for more than half of the text, and twisting, one might say, through the very detours of which the 12<sup>th</sup> line claims to have no knowledge. This sonnet is pure movement (Chrétien’s central criterion for a poetics of dilation) – a precocious masterclass, and no mistake, on how to *die late*...

There comes a point when the English verb *dilate* reaches beyond the French *dilater*. Parker recalls in her study that an older sense of the term, significant in Shakespeare’s day, is to *disperse* as well as to enlarge. The writing of Philippe Jaccottet fully performs this polysemy, from the patient gathering of signs strewn throughout the perceptible world to their redissemination in the form of notes, poems, and poetic prose.<sup>51</sup> Novalis (again) had framed this undertaking in quasi-spiritual terms which Jaccottet identified as the hallmark of Gustave Roud’s poetics, but which are by no means without bearing on his own case: “Le Paradis est en quelque sorte dispersé sur la terre entière, diffusé partout, – et c’est pourquoi il est devenu si méconnaissable. Ses traits épars doivent être réunis.”<sup>52</sup> Jaccottet’s prose text entitled “Dieu perdu dans l’herbe,” from *Éléments d’un songe*, recasts Novalis’s image to see (or, rather, not to see) the ruins of the ancient gods themselves dispersed in nature. Poetry, in his view, ought not to attempt a resurrection or a reconstitution of these old figures. Where Roud’s writing assumes a postlapsarian tone, yearning for a return to a harmonious state that has long since been dissolved, Jaccottet steers clear of anything resembling true nostalgia, religiously inflected or otherwise. Nor can there be a question of proposing new

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<sup>50</sup> Jaccottet, *Œuvres*, 365.

<sup>51</sup> *Rassembler*, *recueillir*, and *réécrire* are the three verbs by which Ariane Lüthi characterizes the gradual compilation of a volume of notes in particular. See *Pratique et poétique de la note*, 100-104.

<sup>52</sup> Cited in Jaccottet, *Œuvres*, 53.

divinities and new images in place of the old. “Chaque statue de divinité est à la fois manifestation et trahison de l’énigme,”<sup>53</sup> he affirms. What, then, *does* the poem do in the present world which is constituted by the gods’ very absence? Its phrasing extends over the void, stretching out like a string across a sounding box. (The image employed toward the end of “Dieu perdu dans l’herbe,” that of phrases conceived as so many footbridges, tells of their precariousness as much as of their connective purpose.) The vacuum of the vanished gods is simultaneously a potential for resonance; its silence is what makes poetic enunciation possible. To aspire, as Jaccottet does, to speak *against* the void (“Être un homme [...] qui parle contre le vide”<sup>54</sup>) is thus not to adopt a purely oppositional stance; it is to recognize that the poem is at once supported and imperiled by the space beneath it. The wider the space, the greater the poem’s dilative impetus.

The dilation evoked in the previous two examples is a somewhat anxious movement, corresponding in large part to Jaccottet’s circumstances at the time of the texts’ composition. The poet of *L’effraie* had only just begun to shed the accents of a tormented adolescent looking to be sure both of his own foothold in a bustling literary landscape and of poetry’s foothold in the wider world, and an existential angst permeates much of the collection; *Éléments d’un songe*, meanwhile, arose out of an extended period of creative infertility and self-doubt. A serener passage from a later moment in Jaccottet’s trajectory dilates the image of paradise’s dispersal more comprehensively, so to speak, than “Dieu perdu dans l’herbe”; the inaugural paragraph of “Le cerisier,” which itself begins *Cahier de verdure*, is an opening in more ways than one:

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 322.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 327.

Je pense quelquefois que si j'écris encore, c'est, ou ce devrait être avant tout pour rassembler les fragments, plus ou moins lumineux et probants, d'une joie dont on serait tenté de croire qu'elle a explosé un jour, il y a longtemps, comme une étoile intérieure, et répandu sa poussière en nous. Qu'un peu de cette poussière s'allume dans un regard, c'est sans doute ce qui nous trouble, nous enchante ou nous égare le plus; mais c'est, tout bien réfléchi, moins étrange que de surprendre son éclat, ou le reflet de cet éclat fragmenté, dans la nature. Du moins ces reflets auront-ils été pour moi l'origine de bien des rêveries, pas toujours absolument infertiles.<sup>55</sup>

A primordial and unlocalized joy swells until it can no longer be contained (though what has contained it prior to this point?), and bursts, spreading itself more widely than before: expansion *and* dispersal. We are reminded here that for Jaccottet, before dilation can be discursive, it is experiential – which, as I have previously begun to suggest, is the antithesis of saying that it is *personal*. (Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe goes so far as to prefer speaking of poetic *existence* to speaking of poetic *experience*, nodding toward an analogous distinction between that which is personal – that which can be *claimed* – and that which is not: “L'on peut parler, au sens rigoureux, d'une *existence* poétique, si l'existence est ce qui troue la vie et la déchire, par moments, nous mettant hors de nous.”<sup>56</sup>) The joy evoked in the passage above is far from being uniquely human; what rekindles it is precisely what dissolves the boundaries between self and world.

*Dilation* – more so than any of the alternatives explored heretofore (“expansion,” “augmentation,” “enhancement,” and so forth) – encapsulates “Le cerisier,” and Jaccottet’s poetry at large, to the extent that it can connote a response to some external stimulus. The pupil dilates in darkness in order for more light to pass into the eye; likewise, a poem can be said to dilate to increase its receptivity to the world – what the young Jaccottet, in his

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 746. Jean-Claude Pinson briefly but fruitfully considers the dilative nature of joy in Jaccottet’s writing; see *La joie de vivre*, especially 12-16.

<sup>56</sup> Lacoue-Labarthe, *La poésie comme expérience*, 34.



notebooks of *Observations*, refers to as *accueillance*<sup>57</sup> or *accueillement*<sup>58</sup> (which two neologisms accomplish precisely that task of welcoming into the language something that had not been there before). Never is this (re)action more vital than when the source of light is faint, whether it be the particular winter light of Provence which the poet celebrates in 1977's *À la lumière d'hiver*, or the night, both real and metaphysical, which so often serves as the backdrop to Jaccottet's poetic meditations. And it is in just such obscurity that the poet must take especial care that his eyes do not deceive him, and that false or fanciful images are not allowed into the text incautiously. The first lines of *Et, néanmoins* dramatize an episode of resulting tension:

“Devant le dieu à gueule de chien noir”

Beau titre, ai-je pensé  
quand il m'est venu dans la nuit,  
belle et noble image.

Mais cette nuit je ne suis pas dans un musée,  
le noir devant moi ne s'orne d'aucun or  
et si j'affronte un chien, ce ne sera qu'un chien de ce monde,  
prêt à mordre.<sup>59</sup>

The poet resists the apparition of Anubis in the night, not so much on the grounds of the god's association with death and the afterlife, but rather insofar as he is an *image*, which is no sooner introduced into the text than it is doubted and ultimately cast aside as incommensurate with reality. The image's seductive beauty is recognized, yet proves the very reason for its unsuitableness. So it goes with images throughout Jaccottet's work, their inclusion never gratuitous, their role often questioned. The dilation of the poem, as with any

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<sup>57</sup> Jaccottet, *Œuvres*, 44.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 58.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 1093.

opening or welcoming, is thus also a *risk*, significant enough in Jaccottet's case that his stance toward images bears reexamination.

## CHAPTER 2

### *Et, néanmoins, des images*

Jaccottet's commentators have scarcely neglected his relationship to images over time. Indeed, for a writer who expresses such a degree of guardedness where images are concerned, they would almost appear to have been granted a place of disproportionate prominence in assessments of his work. Yet the responsibility for this emphasis on the question of images lies first of all with the poet himself; as André Wyss has pointed out, "Constamment, la poétique de Jaccottet fait le procès de l'image, et constamment sa production poétique y recourt."<sup>60</sup> Even if he distrusts poetic images and their capacity to obscure reality, Jaccottet can no more eradicate them from his writing than he can do without words themselves. This apparent contradiction at the heart of his work alternately proves a fecund source of reflection and a spur to circumspection that risks stifling poetic utterance altogether – a conflict often played out over the course of a poem.<sup>61</sup>

But what exactly is meant by "poetic image," and what are the roots of Jaccottet's wariness? The poet makes it clear that metaphor and simile are the primary objects of his critique, citing the early decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and the Surrealist movement in particular, as having seen such devices in poetry pushed to unwieldy extremes. In an essay from 1917, Pierre Reverdy famously theorized the "spark" of the poetic image: for Reverdy (and for the Surrealists who were quick to adapt his definition to their own purposes), the

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<sup>60</sup> Wyss, "Semaisons dans *La Semaison*," in *Lectures de Philippe Jaccottet*, 221.

<sup>61</sup> To take but one prominent example, in the opening lines of a celebrated short poem from 1974's *Chants d'en bas*, the poet's proposed alternative to linguistic imagery is itself in the form of an image: "J'aurais voulu parler sans images, simplement / pousser la porte..." (*Œuvres*, 543).

greater the disparity between two terms, the more explosive and illuminating their juxtaposition.<sup>62</sup> In Jaccottet's eyes, on the other hand, the spark too often fails to ignite imagination's fuse; the image instead tends to yield a murky imbalance, with one of the two elements concealing the other and resulting in temporary blindness, as he confides in an interview from 2011 (with Saint-John Perse once again coming in for a strong critique): "Rappelez-vous Saint-John Perse, dans *Amers*, montrant la mer apparue entre des feuillages: 'écaille vive, entre les mailles, d'un grand poisson pris par les ouïes'... C'est très beau, mais je ne sais plus ce que je dois voir: un poisson ou la mer? [...] En ce sens-là, l'image poétique me détourne de la relation immédiate dont j'ai toujours rêvé."<sup>63</sup>

The immediacy of the "correspondences" holding the visible world together, as well as of the relationship between the visible world and the viewer, is of paramount importance to a poet so firmly grounded in his landscape as Jaccottet. Furthermore, regardless of the extent to which it may be verbally expressible, it is an immediacy that precedes language – more conducive, one could argue, to being conveyed in the instant of a photograph than in words. It is all the more striking, then, that so little should have been said regarding Jaccottet's stance on the dominant visual medium of his era. In contrast, more traditional visual arts have occupied a central place in his life and work from the very beginning of his career. Among the earliest commissions from his Swiss editor Henry-Louis Mermod, shortly after the budding poet's arrival in Paris in 1946, was a collection of biographical notices for a 4-volume *Histoire du dessin français à travers les siècles*; the project would entail long formative

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<sup>62</sup> "L'Image est une création pure de l'esprit. Elle ne peut naître d'une comparaison mais du rapprochement de deux réalités plus ou moins éloignées. Plus les rapports des deux réalités rapprochées seront lointains et justes, plus l'image sera forte – plus elle aura de puissance émotive et de réalité poétique" (Reverdy, *Œuvre complète*, vol. 1, 495).

<sup>63</sup> Labrusse, *Au cœur des apparences*, 37.

hours spent in the Louvre, a period well documented in the fragments collected in 1998's *Observations*. While Jaccottet has never claimed expertise on painting, to the point of refraining from sustained commentary thereon (the remarks on Giorgio Morandi in 2001's *Le bol du pèlerin* constituting a notable exception), his marriage to the watercolorist Anne-Marie Haesler, and occasional collaborations with artists such as Pierre Tal-Coat and Zao Wou-Ki, have continually refreshed his perspective on a medium for which he has an undeniable affinity. When it comes to photography, however, the evidence appears thin. Jaccottet has neither indulged in a sustained photographic practice complementing his written work (along the lines of such fellow poets as Denis Roche, Lorand Gaspar, or Gérard Macé), nor offered anything resembling a theoretical or even intuitive reflection on the art or its practitioners (unlike, for example, his friend and contemporary Yves Bonnefoy). He has, on the contrary, expressed misgivings about photography, even acknowledging his concern at one point that Gustave Roud's photographic *oeuvre* would eclipse his writing in the public eye.<sup>64</sup> Tracing this unease back to the beginnings of his own career will enable us to offer an explanation for it, and to show the decisive part that photography does in fact play in his story. As will become clear, to ask what light the idea of photography might shed on Jaccottet's poetic practice is simultaneously to ask what shadow it casts.

Before Jaccottet ever sent a poem to Roud, he sent a photograph. He had initiated their correspondence only a few months prior when, on the last day of August, 1942, the seventeen-year-old enclosed with his latest missive a picture of a farm which he had taken on

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<sup>64</sup> "J'ai une réticence devant la photographie en général. En ce qui concerne Roud, il y avait dans son activité de photographe un aspect très privé qui me gêne un peu. Cela dit, je pense surtout qu'il reste d'abord un grand poète, et qu'il ne faut pas mettre ces deux formes d'expression, chez lui, sur le même plan" (cited in Rodriguez, "À Grignan," 6).

a long walk through the Vaud countryside, and awaited the judgment of his older friend's more practiced eye. If the image no longer survives seventy years on, the letter, whose fervent descriptive prose owes at least as much to Roud's influence as did the pursuit of photography, affords some idea of the colorful spectacle, with the "taches rouges, et tellement douces, des villages," and the "richesse presque infinie" of the surrounding green hills.<sup>65</sup> By his own admission, it would take a move to the rural Provençal setting of Grignan just over ten years later to awaken Jaccottet fully to the beauties of the natural world, yet thanks to Roud's encouragement and example, the landscape had already begun to come alive for the aspiring young writer; it was intimated to him how its mysterious potency might be harnessed in an image, or in a poem. Even neutral Switzerland, however, could hardly remain immune to the catastrophic war unfolding around it on all sides, and the photographs that were to make the greatest mark on Jaccottet and his career during these years of literary apprenticeship did not consist of idyllic pastoral scenes like the one sent to Roud, but were instead of a different and vastly more sinister nature.

At some point during the year 1945, a friend of Jaccottet showed him a bundle of photographs displaying the bodies of Resistance fighters of the Vercors whom the Nazis had tortured and killed. This gesture provided the impetus for the *Requiem* composed over the ensuing months and first published in April, 1947. As Jaccottet recalls in his afterword to the *Requiem*'s reedition in 1991, "Je n'aurais probablement pas écrit ce livre si la vue de ces photographies n'avait atteint en moi une région encore plus profonde que celle où se décident les combats politiques, la région où se tapit notre horreur de la mort, plus vive

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<sup>65</sup> Roud and Jaccottet, *Correspondance*, 36.

encore s'il s'agit de mort violente, et portée à son comble devant celle d'êtres jeunes."<sup>66</sup> Jean-Claude Mathieu suggests in turn that the poet's shock when confronted with images of such horror was compounded by a nagging sense that to look upon them at a safe remove was somehow a moral violation; the writing of the *Requiem* was perhaps an attempt to assuage whatever guilt Jaccottet may have felt as well as to pay homage to the war victims: "[La liasse de photographies a plongé] l'homme jeune qui les regardait [...] dans un sentiment d'indécrot et coupable voyeurisme de l'insoutenable. La photo, ravissant des apparences, a dérobé avec elles les figures interdites de la mort, ce mur où l'on tatonne en cherchant le passage [...] Le regard bute sur un mince mur de photos, d'épreuves infranchissables."<sup>67</sup> In his letter to Roud from August, 1942, Jaccottet had described his satisfaction at having conquered his nerves and a seemingly insurmountable obstacle when climbing in the Alpine region near his home; the pictures of the Resistance fighters now imposed no such physical demands, yet the barrier they represented appeared the greater for it. The *Requiem's* epigraph from the *Inferno* ("*Qui pourrait, même avec des paroles libres des gênes de la poésie, même en y revenant à plusieurs fois, dire tout le sang et les plaies que je vis alors?*"<sup>68</sup>) articulates the seeming impossibility, while setting up the subsequent text as an implicit response to Dante's question, and an attempt to navigate the difficulty.

From the very dedication of the opening "Dies Irae" to the author's parents, youth is foregrounded in the *Requiem*, both tonally and thematically. No effort is made to describe the figures of the captive fighters as they appear in the posthumous photographs; instead, the text has soon conjured a wistful landscape of memory, in which "les garçons, de leurs rires

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<sup>66</sup> Jaccottet, *Œuvres*, 1289.

<sup>67</sup> Mathieu, *Philippe Jaccottet*, 32.

<sup>68</sup> Jaccottet, *Œuvres*, 1279.

nus, / se débattent aux caresses de l'eau couronnée d'or!"<sup>69</sup> Poetically preserved in eternal childhood, the dead remain ever innocent – and in a state of unending vulnerability. It falls to the living to assume responsibility for their care. Jaccottet affirms that “nous sommes tous les mères de ces morts,”<sup>70</sup> not merely insofar as the cruelty of their absence afflicts the whole of society, but also in that a collective effort is required to ensure that their memory does not perish with them. To the poet in particular, it is left to devise a *chant d'adieu* that is simultaneously a lullaby, a gentle melody to ease the victims' passage into lasting sleep. In spite of his own tender years, then, Jaccottet finds himself in a parental role – become, as it were, the voice of experience.

It is both paradoxical and fitting that this voice is borne along throughout the text by a kind of *basso continuo* of deeper, more established poetic and musical voices, some more distinct than others. The seven distinct sections of the poem – the “Dies Irae,” a central section, “Requiem,” in five parts, and a concluding “Gloria” – correspond to the movements of a classical requiem (those of Johannes Brahms or Gabriel Fauré, for instance).<sup>71</sup> Textually, too, traces of Jaccottet's literary forebears can be discerned. Echoes of Jouve, Rilke, and even Rimbaud aside, the poet himself is quick in his 1990 afterword to acknowledge the especially pronounced influence of T. S. Eliot; the hushed repetition of *shantih* at the conclusion of the latter's *Waste Land* becomes, at the heart of Jaccottet's *Requiem*, an incantatory “Diamant, diamant, diamant,”<sup>72</sup> evoking the light emanating from the spirits of the dead – an image, in other words, transposed onto another poet's rhythmic template.

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<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 1280.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 1286.

<sup>71</sup> Pierre Brunel has meticulously accounted for the musical influences at work in Jaccottet's text, from Fauré and Couperin to Mozart and Monteverdi. See Brunel, “Philippe Jaccottet, ou l'impossible *Requiem*,” in *Présence de Jaccottet*, 11-35.

<sup>72</sup> Jaccottet, *Œuvres*, 1285.



Augmenting the tension already present in the *Requiem*'s premise is the young author's struggle to find his own individual voice. Almost in spite of himself, the poem's 1<sup>st</sup>-person speaker thematizes this search. No sooner has the word *je* first appeared in the text, early in the second movement, than there occur two lines set apart from the strophe that encloses them: "Je sourdement / surnage, sombre..."<sup>73</sup> Ironically, the double alliteration could be said to anticipate the tertiary rhythm that would later become a hallmark of the mature Jaccottet's verse and prose – ironically, because the authorial *I* of the poem, in this instance, is submerged, weighted down by the heavy burden of the subject matter as well as by the multitude of other poetic and musical voices threatening to drown it out.

The *eye* of the poem fares little better. The text's second movement concludes with a brutal evocation of young, martyred bodies, "enfants écorchés vifs"; an image of swollen hands penetrated by nails is an evident enough allusion to crucifixion, but the poet reserves a particular fate for the victims' eyes:

au moins pitié pour les yeux qui regardent!  
couronne d'épines dans les yeux,  
serrant, serrant,  
forant les yeux,  
sciant l'iris grandi des yeux qui virent,  
aiguilles, aiguilles, guêpes!<sup>74</sup>

The act of looking is a perilous one, punished here by the destruction of the instrument of looking; one is reminded that a *martyr*, etymologically, is first of all a *witness*. These wounds are not inflicted solely on the young men being remembered, but at the same time on the eyes of the poet himself, confronted by a spectacle that is too terrible to behold and seemingly impossible to reconcile with the earth's beauty elsewhere, as the poem's final lines

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<sup>73</sup> Ibid., 1281.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid., 1282.

convey: “et je descends, / chantant la gloire de la terre pour ne plus voir.”<sup>75</sup> For the young Jaccottet of the *Requiem*, poetic song can only be realized at the expense of a sustained gaze onto the world and all its horrors. What had begun as a hymn to the visible, tangible world (“Ô terres de l’été! // Ce n’est plus la saison de la nuit amère, et / d’être seul: la douceur a levé les yeux purs, / la vallée s’est ouverte au vent dans les hauteurs”<sup>76</sup>) concludes by shutting its eyes and sealing its ears, resulting, no doubt, in a resonant inner music, but a music that closes itself off to any real possibility of communication.

Remembering what has ended up leaving the young poet’s innocent eyes and vulnerable voice *exposed* throughout the *Requiem*, we have to return to the *exposures* lurking behind it, the photographs of the murdered Vercors fighters. I might push Jean-Claude Mathieu’s earlier observation a step further, for it seems to me that the tremendous impact the images had on Jaccottet is inseparable from the photographic medium itself – in other words, that a photograph depicting dead bodies represents a visual *absolute* of death, and hence an absolute defiance of language’s resources, poetic or otherwise. Photography has the double effect of bringing one face to face with the indisputable evidence of some past state or being – what Roland Barthes succinctly refers to as a realization that “ça a été”<sup>77</sup> – and of inscribing an equally indisputable measure of finitude. If such concentrated power can be a quality to aspire to in one’s own medium, Jaccottet would nonetheless have sensed the relative poverty of the written word alongside the pictures of the victims from the Vercors. For an author already deeply preoccupied with the notion of truth, here, in effect, was a

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<sup>75</sup> Ibid., 1288. Half a century later, in a note from *La semaison*, Jaccottet confesses an urge to rectify these lines in accordance with what had become his mature poetics: “Aurais-je aujourd’hui, un demi-siècle plus tard, le droit de réécrire autrement cette ligne, par exemple ainsi: ‘Tâchant de dire, de traduire la lumière de ce monde pour mieux voir,’ pour mieux voir au-delà de ce monde, pour mieux rendre compte de la totalité de mon expérience? C’est du moins ce qu’en de rares moments de confiance je voudrais croire” (Ibid., 1013).

<sup>76</sup> Ibid., 1279.

<sup>77</sup> Barthes, *La préparation du roman*, 115.

collection of truths (“proofs” in every sense, as Mathieu implies), concise to the utmost degree, yet at the same time impossible to elaborate or to explain. The *Requiem* crystallizes this encounter with the permanence of death; “Éternel est cristal,”<sup>78</sup> declares the poet in the text’s crowning movement, and one could perhaps be forgiven for seeing this as an image deposited almost like silver halide crystals on a film base, with a desire that the poem be endowed with a photograph’s lastingness.

It is, in a way, the *Requiem*’s very desire for durability that relegates it to the margins of Philippe Jaccottet’s essential writings, for in striving to create a timeless work, the poet (by his own subsequent admission) strains to achieve poetic effects, and ultimately betrays his inexperience. What is meant to be grandiose risks sounding shrill; what is meant to be solid risks proving brittle. I am tempted to speak of the poem’s *compensatory lyricism*, an ardent attempt to account in verse for the unaccountable images of the Vercors. The more fanciful or insistent images of the *Requiem* (“Volés à la lumière, / honorés de laurier / d’eau morte purifiés [...] cendre légère, agile, / éternelle, radieuse, / tisons aux portes de la ville,”<sup>79</sup> etc.) are poetic imagination’s endeavor to find its way out of an “impasse de l’imagination,”<sup>80</sup> as Georges Didi-Huberman has characterized an analogous collection of photographs having emerged, against all probability, from the ashes of the war. Didi-Huberman’s extensive study of the four surviving images from the Auschwitz camp during the period of its operation opens with an urgent reminder that imagination is not just the best means we have of nearing an eventual understanding of what the war victims suffered; it is furthermore a moral imperative: “N’invoquons pas l’inimaginable. Ne nous protégeons pas en disant qu’imaginer

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<sup>78</sup> Jaccottet, *Œuvres*, 1285.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, 1284.

<sup>80</sup> Didi-Huberman, *Écorces*, 31.

cela, de toutes les façons [...] nous ne le pourrons pas jusqu'au bout. Mais nous le *devons*, ce très lourd imaginable. Comme une réponse à offrir, une dette contractée.”<sup>81</sup> Jaccottet’s poem acknowledges just such a debt, and offers just such a response in return.

The *Requiem* is perhaps best appreciated at this point as a statement of intent, a well-meant template for the poetic and ethical commitment to which Jaccottet would thereafter hold true, even if in less explicit or sustained dialogue with events of contemporary history. In his 1990 afterword, he expresses a self-deprecating surprise that the text should represent the only example, to his knowledge, of a “poème engagé”<sup>82</sup> to have come from wartime Switzerland; it could, I think, be even more aptly termed a poem of resistance. The Vercors fighters’ very real resistance to the enemy is prolonged in the photographs’ resistance to visual, conceptual, and linguistic appropriation; the poem, in short, resists the poet. Jaccottet’s initial severity toward his youthful effort took a long time to overcome, but having been out of print for several decades, the *Requiem* finally reappeared in 1991, and is included in the 2014 Pléiade edition, albeit at the head of the appendices, thereby leaving no doubt as to the author’s reticence, and, as it were, gesturing unwittingly toward the title of Didi-Huberman’s book about the Auschwitz photographs, *Images malgré tout – a malgré tout* that Jaccottet might express as an *et, néanmoins...*

And in spite of all, images would indeed maintain an important presence in Jaccottet’s writing over the years. A poem from 1967’s *Airs* declares quite candidly, “J’ai de la peine à renoncer aux images”<sup>83</sup> – a line which makes clear that the poet has not let down his guard. The important thing, after the *Requiem*, would be to ensure that any images remaining

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<sup>81</sup> Didi-Huberman, *Images malgré tout*, 11.

<sup>82</sup> Jaccottet, *Œuvres*, 1289.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, 435.

in Jaccottet's poems not be overly remarkable for their own sake, but rather that they slip as smoothly and *necessarily* as possible into the flow of the text, in order that the text in turn (like the sonnet "Sois tranquille," examined earlier) coincide justly with the passage and breath of time. For among the challenges posed to poetry by the Vercors photographs, and by the photographic image in general, one of the most substantial, to my mind, is a problem of temporality. Jean-Christophe Bailly, in *L'instant et son ombre*, points to the manner in which a photograph simultaneously collapses and dilates time:

Dans l'image réalisée, manifestée, fixe, ce que l'on voit ce n'est pas le temps aboli, c'est un souvenir du temps qui se déploie comme un présage. Étrangement et tout comme, sans épaisseur, elle a (peut avoir) une profondeur, l'image, sans durée et complète à elle-même dans l'instant, a un tempo, une sorte de longueur, de durée intégrée, qui se condense. On pourrait résumer cela en une formule: l'immobilité est une vibration, un absolu de la vibration, et c'est ce tremblement du temps, ce tremblement des choses dans le temps, que la photographie donne à voir.<sup>84</sup>

The musical movements of Jaccottet's *Requiem* look to inhabit this tempo, but are fated to remain behind the beat; to encounter a photograph is always, in a sense, to arrive too late, and to speak of it, even indirectly, is to inscribe this lateness within one's language. The Jaccottetian motif of the "poète tardif," which Jean-Claude Mathieu convincingly argues is symptomatic of the lyric poet in the modern age,<sup>85</sup> could, if understood in a different way, be traced back to the young man's confrontation with the Vercors images. Contemplating the dead is sufficiently distressing no matter what the circumstance, but the *fixedness* of the photographs doubtless magnified the sense that henceforth one would always already be powerless to come to the victims' aid, while at the same time the *premonition* contained in the images would have left a troubling impression that the catastrophe was yet to unfold (a suggestion which is borne out by the poem's emphasis on childhood). The *Requiem* thus

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<sup>84</sup> Bailly, *L'instant et son ombre*, 57.

<sup>85</sup> See Mathieu, *Philippe Jaccottet*, 533-47.

finds itself on either side of the instant represented by the photographs, yet they can never quite manage to be synchronized. The ambition of Philippe Jaccottet's mature work is here laid out implicitly: the poem must dilate in order to *coincide* with the "tremblement du temps" that occasions it. Like a photograph, though in a different tone and by different means, it seeks to be at once anticipation and realization, *presage* and *passage* – what Jean-Christophe Bailly elsewhere calls an "instantané mobile."<sup>86</sup>



Bookending Jaccottet's career on the other end of the *Requiem* are two recent, slim volumes, each of which inflects the story of the poet's relation to photographic images in a new way. 2008 saw the publication of a small book, *Le cours de la Broye: Suite moudonnaise*, notable, among other reasons, for its generic status distinguishing it from the other works in Jaccottet's corpus, constituting neither criticism, nor travel narrative, nor an "oeuvre de création" in the poetic vein that characterizes the texts collected in the Pléiade edition. Not only does *Le cours de la Broye* find Jaccottet in rare autobiographical mode, but also – and by no means coincidentally – it represents his most explicit engagement with photography to date. The volume gathers a number of short texts in both verse and prose, many of them written earlier and published elsewhere, to pay homage to Moudon, the poet's birthplace in Switzerland. Like several of Jaccottet's titles (*Requiem*, *Airs*, *L'entretien des Muses*, and *Libretto*, to cite the principal examples), the subtitle *Suite moudonnaise*, along with the "Coda" that is the book's final text, evoke a musical paradigm; the river Broye, pictured on the cover in a

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<sup>86</sup> Bailly, *Le dépaysement*, 13.

map of 16<sup>th</sup>-century Moudon drawn by the poet's uncle François Jaccottet, is analogous to a repeated theme flowing through and unifying the volume's various movements. What sets the book apart, though, are the photographs punctuating the melodic line at regular intervals. Almost without exception, the images, taken from private collections or local museum archives, show the picturesque town as it appeared in the years during or predating the poet's childhood. An epigraph culled from the notebooks of *La semaison* immediately instills an air of nostalgia and tranquil reverie that permeates the subsequent pages: "Un rêve me ramène dans la vieille maison de Moudon (quittée voilà quarante-quatre ans): de très hautes fenêtres, une cheminée et soudain la neige; des plaques de glace fondent sur la tablette de bois de la cheminée, et l'émotion de dire, ou d'entendre dire: 'Voici la neige...'"<sup>87</sup>

While the primary impetus for *Le cours de la Broye* came from a 2001 visit to Moudon on the occasion of Jaccottet receiving the town's inaugural literary prize, the book owes its format above all to a relatively recent literary influence on Jaccottet's work, namely, the novels of W. G. Sebald (1944-2001). The German writer, whose father had served in the Wehrmacht during the Second World War, was very much preoccupied with the Holocaust, and his novels, which combine elements of autobiography, historiography, travel writing, and wide-ranging essayistic reflection, weave elliptically around many of the major human catastrophes of recent memory, with frequent insertion of photographs. His only mention in Jaccottet's published writings occurs in a brief note recording the news of Sebald's death in 2001 – "L'un des rares écrivains 'nouveaux' qui m'ait totalement conquis,"<sup>88</sup> Jaccottet declares at that point, with admiring regret – but the poet had been aware of Sebald as early as 1990, and the inclusion of the photographs in *Le cours de la Broye* is testament to the extent

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<sup>87</sup> Jaccottet, *Le cours de la Broye*, 7.

<sup>88</sup> Jaccottet, *Taches de soleil*, 193.

to which the Sebaldian model had captured his interest.<sup>89</sup> This is not necessarily to say that the photographs' function is equivalent in the two writers' works. Whereas Sebald's images tend to problematize the accompanying text rather than to clarify it,<sup>90</sup> the photographs in Jaccottet's Moudon volume seem to serve a simpler, less ambiguous purpose, providing the reader with further illustration of the places recalled fondly by the author. Nevertheless, beneath the benign surface lies a subtler depth of meaning and affect that is not as far removed from Sebald as it may at first appear to be.

Sebald's final novel, *Austerlitz*, is a quest for the main character's identity, which has been fragmented and partially erased by past events he struggles to remember. Jacques Austerlitz, as he has come to be called, had arrived in Britain as a child refugee from the continent shortly before the outbreak of the war in 1939, and thereafter is told nothing of his origins, which he consequently attempts to retrace several decades later.<sup>91</sup> Interspersed throughout the narrative are photographs, largely (though not exclusively) of place, offering glimpses into a vanished Europe; the human figures evoked prove more elusive, not least those of Austerlitz's parents, who are never shown. What one might easily call "landscapes with absent figures" are even more prominent in *Le cours de la Broye*, in which aunts and uncles, cousins and family acquaintances people the prose, but are not to be found elsewhere. Only two of the images reproduced in the volume do not feature an outdoor setting of one sort or another, and both are newspaper cuttings – an Easter poem published by Jaccottet's aunt Rosine and an advertisement for Jaccottet's father's veterinary services, respectively – almost as if to imply some lasting primacy of the written (or printed) word

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<sup>89</sup> See *Œuvres*, LXXI.

<sup>90</sup> On the multiplicity of ways to interpret Sebald's photographs, see Long, *W. G. Sebald*, 46-70.

<sup>91</sup> See Sebald, *Austerlitz*.



over any picture that may give a misleading impression of the person(s) in question. The stock images of Moudon and the surrounding landscape are a calm backdrop against which the work of memory can take place – the memory, not just of certain individuals, but of a bygone generation more generally, and a prewar way of life in small-town Switzerland that has ceased long since. Thus, like *Austerlitz*, the book possesses an elegiac dimension, albeit in a wholly different tonality from the young Jaccottet’s 1947 *Requiem*.

Couched between two quaint townscapes at the end of the volume is the final “Coda,” a paragraph-long excerpt from a text entitled “Dernière visite à Roud” recounting what was to prove Jaccottet’s farewell to his friend in the autumn of 1976, just a matter of weeks before the latter’s death. This page, in a way, is the real requiem contained within *Le cours de la Broye*, hearkening back to Jaccottet’s literary and photographic beginnings under the guidance of his mentor. (Roud himself, incidentally, was still working during the last months of his life on his own *Requiem*, which was to remain unfinished.) The last sentences evoke the car journey to the hospital through a countryside in growing darkness, “ces ombres mêmes dont Roud s’était toujours senti trop proche, dont il se rapprochait maintenant en réalité, dont il savait qu’il allait se confondre avec elles. Et j’étais d’autant plus ému que j’allais le retrouver malade, condamné, dans ce qui avait été ma ville natale [...] à laquelle sont liées les plus anciennes images de ma vie; et déjà la nuit tombait, l’asphalte humide miroitait dans les rues étroites.”<sup>92</sup> The two photographs of Moudon on either side of the text are suddenly imbued with an even greater poignancy, becoming at once an origin (“the oldest images of my life”) and the ultimate destination toward which the reader is driven as night falls on the road. The images tell of stillness; the words, of motion. As with the photographs lying

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<sup>92</sup> Jaccottet, *Le cours de la Broye*, 71.

behind Jaccottet's *Requiem*, these pictures are visual and temporal anchors, between and around which the text finds itself winding its way.

At no point does *Le cours de la Broye* make direct reference to the images dotting its pages; the photographs actually mentioned in the book, meanwhile – from those in a beloved old edition of the Germanic legend of the *Nibelungen* to one of the poet's father proudly riding a horse as a boy – are not included. Such is not the case, however, with the latest (not to say last) previously unseen book published by Jaccottet, 2015's *Ponge, pâturages, prairies*, a small collection of homages to Francis Ponge written over the course of the 25 years following the latter's death in 1988; near the end of the book is a single photograph, taken by the author in 1959 and showing Ponge, his wife Odette, and Anne-Marie Jaccottet smiling broadly in evident enjoyment of one another's company. Commenting the image in December 2013, in the book's final paragraph, Jaccottet writes, "Je regarde encore, avec une joie émue, cette photographie que j'ai prise, moi qui n'ai jamais été photographe le moins du monde, dans la cour d'entrée du Tertre, dans l'été de 1959: c'est l'image même qu'il me plaît aujourd'hui de garder d'une amitié [qui] a duré jusqu'aux dernières années de sa vie – comment dire? au-dessus, ou au-dessous, c'est-à-dire plus profondément, de nos différences."<sup>93</sup> The differences alluded to here are not inconsiderable; the preceding text details Jaccottet's surprise upon reading a letter sent by Ponge in 1968 to a mutual friend, the poet Jean Tortel, in which Jaccottet's poetic approach is criticized in such vehement terms as to make the reader wonder whether their comradeship, based in no small part on long-standing literary affinities, could have endured had Jaccottet known at the time of the extent of Ponge's professed disdain. The photograph is as much a tribute to an old friend as the

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<sup>93</sup> Jaccottet, *Ponge, pâturages, prairies*, 74-75.

land- and townscapes of *Le cours de la Broye* are a tribute to Gustave Roud, though its inclusion in the book is arguably even more important to Jaccottet, to the extent that it has less to do with a deliberate aesthetic of text and image than it does with photography's simple, unanswerable documentary power. The "ça a été" of a photograph, so disturbing in the case of the Vercors images, here becomes a contented affirmation, proof of a strong bond of friendship that no words or retrospective doubt can undo.



Jaccottet's engagement with photography – oblique in his *Requiem*, modestly artistic in *Le cours de la Broye*, unabashedly personal in the book on Ponge – takes place on the periphery of his literary career, and not just in a chronological sense. *Le cours de la Broye* and *Ponge, pâturages, prairies* are not, strictly speaking, poetic texts; as for the *Requiem*, as we have seen, its intended centrality to the poet's work very soon proved to be a youthful misperception. If we now return to some of the key texts from Jaccottet's main poetic corpus, it will consequently be in the absence of further photographic documentation – yet the *idea* of photography will remain as a kind of backdrop to these reflections. What becomes of poetic images in the immediate aftermath of the *Requiem*, and how does the eye of the poem dilate to see the world as a photograph could not?

Like the city at nighttime with which the title poem of *L'effraie* opens, much of the collection as a whole is dimly lit, edged in by shadows and illumined here and there by a faint, flickering glow. As a result the poet often comes to depend on mental images, almost in spite of himself, to mask the darkness and reassure himself of his own presence – yet this

procedure has the converse effect of deepening a sense of *un*reality. Aline Bergé has enumerated many instances in which the poet likens himself, explicitly or by suggestion, to a specter, for whom a vivid memory exists more fully than he does himself.<sup>94</sup> One finds a prime example toward the end of the second sonnet in an early sequence from the collection, when Jaccottet notes that the hour has come “où seul avec ces paroles faciles / je me souviens d’une bouche réelle...”<sup>95</sup> Poetic language becomes a way for the writer to absent himself, to linger in a past rich with reminiscences as if one could thereby stand outside the onward march of time. Such hopes, of course, cannot be realized. One of the signal features of the poems of *L’effraie* is their temporal reinscription in the closing lines, a sudden “déjà” or its equivalent bringing the rhapsodic flow of images abruptly to a halt. Midway through the collection, the poem entitled “Lettre” acknowledges and defies language’s tendency to make one oblivious to the passage of time, the poet desiring “plus d’images entre nous” (*plus*, here, in the sense of “no more”) – but later lines indicate that this wish, too, has come too late to prevent him assuming a ghostly aspect, as he observes that

je voyageais, je vieillissais, je te quittais,  
 et quand nous sommes remontés vers l’aube crue,  
 c’est un spectre que tu guidais de rue en rue,  
 là où le chant du coq ne pourrait plus l’atteindre.<sup>96</sup>

Although Jaccottet had left Switzerland by the time he composed the poems of *L’effraie*, they still bear the hallmark of his native country’s literature. As Aline Bergé and others have pointed out, many of the most prominent Francophone Swiss writers, from Benjamin Constant and the diarist Amiel in the nineteenth century to the poets Pierre-Louis

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<sup>94</sup> Bergé highlights the elegiac qualities of *L’effraie*, remarkable for a poet so young. See “Réminiscences, lueurs, reflets,” in *Philippe Jaccottet: La mémoire et la faille*, 38-40.

<sup>95</sup> Jaccottet, *Œuvres*, 5.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*, 9. Jaccottet left this poem out of the reedited version of *L’effraie* in 1971; Aline Bergé therefore does not list it among her examples in the article cited above, although thematically it belongs with them in many respects.

Matthey and Edmond-Henri Crisinel in the twentieth, have been so much inclined to introspection that their grip on physical reality seems tenuous at times.<sup>97</sup> The title given by Jaccottet to a 1952 review in the *Nouvelle revue de Lausanne* of Constant's newly reedited diaries, "Un fantôme vivant,"<sup>98</sup> befits the young Jaccottet just as well as it does Constant, and *L'effraie* could easily have selected as its epigraph Constant's declaration that "je ne suis pas tout à fait un être réel."<sup>99</sup> To Jaccottet's mind, however, such writers, if their gifts are sufficient, do more than simply to absorb the forces of the outside world to channel them into inward contemplation: they reflect these forces back. A separate essay on Constant from 1951 concludes, "Il a tiré de ce fantôme de vie toute la lumière qu'il pouvait, une lumière lunaire, peut-être, mais inépuisable."<sup>100</sup> One might say that a comparable lunar light infiltrates Jaccottet's writing of the next several years.

If the move from Lausanne to Paris in 1946 had opened the doors of the literary world for the young poet, the subsequent move to Provence seven years later opened his eyes to the world of the elements as they had never been open before. Jaccottet could not escape the lures of self-interrogation entirely, but now he felt attached to the landscape, without quite understanding the nature of this attachment; to examine it was to inquire both into his surroundings and his own feelings – without necessarily seconding Amiel's famous dictum according to which, "Un paysage quelconque est un état de l'âme."<sup>101</sup> The poems of *L'ignorant* and the prose pieces of *La promenade sous les arbres*, both published in 1957, demonstrate less concern than *L'effraie* for mourning the past (and each successive moment

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<sup>97</sup> See Bergé, *Philippe Jaccottet, trajectoires et constellations*, 42-43.

<sup>98</sup> Jaccottet, *Écrits pour papier journal*, 35-40.

<sup>99</sup> Constant, *Journaux intimes*, 76.

<sup>100</sup> Jaccottet, *Écrits pour papier journal*, 21.

<sup>101</sup> Amiel, *Journal intime*, vol. 2, 295.

as, one by one, they *become* the past). Time is as much of a constant and a force as ever, but is less often metaphorized, as the images that occur in the texts seek to transmit something of the perpetually evolving relation between the subject and the visible world. I would like to pay especial attention here to *La promenade sous les arbres* and to the function of images at a key transitional point in Jaccottet's writing.

In the opening movement of *La promenade*, tellingly entitled "La vision et la vue," Jaccottet sets out to clarify what he means when he speaks of "a poetic experience," and what such experiences comprise. His search for their defining characteristics leads him to recognize what he refers to as "mon sentiment d'avoir vécu, certains jours, mieux, c'est-à-dire plus pleinement, plus intensément, plus *réellement* que d'autres [...] que j'avais eu envie d'écrire des poèmes, somme toute, à chaque fois que j'avais vraiment, selon mon sentiment, vécu."<sup>102</sup> Affirmative though the passage sounds, it still finds the poet running up against the obstacle that marks so much of *L'effraie*. The poem casts a retrospective eye on lived experience; the greater the sense of a past moment's reality, the more the present moment, the moment of writing, seems insubstantial in contrast. Jaccottet states elsewhere that the encounter with others' poems (when they are successful, at least) corresponds to a feeling that his own reality has been somehow enhanced.<sup>103</sup> At stake in *La promenade sous les arbres*, I would argue, is the possibility of living a parallel experience, not just as either a reader or as a wanderer beneath the trees at a temporary remove from the literary realm, but as a literary creator as well. Attentive interaction with the outside world, and a continued attempt to express its mystery, could potentially offer such a chance: "Plus [ce mystère] semblait se

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<sup>102</sup> Jaccottet, *Œuvres*, 79-80. For an incisive study of temporality in Jaccottet's writing which takes this passage as a point of departure, see Poulet, *La pensée indéterminée*, vol. 3, 251-61.

<sup>103</sup> "Jamais un livre de poèmes n'aura été pour moi objet de connaissance pure: plutôt une porte ouverte, ou entrouverte, quelquefois trop vite refermée, sur *plus de réalité?*" (*L'entretien des muses*, 7).

dérober à l'expression, plus je ressentais le besoin de l'exprimer quand même, comme si le travail que j'aurais à faire sur les mots pour y parvenir allait m'aider à l'approcher, c'est-à-dire, aussi bien, *à être de plus en plus réel...*"<sup>104</sup>

The shorter texts following "La vision et la vue" take the form of "examples," demonstrations of what a poetics questing after more reality might entail. Images certainly have their role to play, though it be a paradoxical one: as rapidly as they occur to the poet's mind to translate into language what he observes in the world, he dismisses them, never satisfied that he has found the formula to impart his experience. "Le jour me conduit la main," the second in the series of "Exemples," supplies a particularly rich passage in this regard:

Car la lumière du matin ne ressemble pas au feu; moins encore à la lueur d'une lampe; elle n'est pas l'éclat d'un soleil juvénile, elle ne me fait pas penser aux dieux, pas davantage à une figure humaine, fût-elle sans tache, et très aimée. C'est bien plutôt (encore n'en parlerai-je pas sans l'offusquer), comme une propriété des choses, non pas leur vêtement, non pas le lin ni l'armure argentée, mais une transparence, une limpidité; et non pas seulement du ciel, mais de tout l'espace et de toutes les choses dans l'espace, montagnes très éloignées, suspendues en l'air, rares nuages à leur cime, puis les arbres, l'herbe, la terre, un tas de bois contre une maison; une allusion au cristal, plutôt que le cristal lui-même, qui n'étincelle que dans l'Alpe. En effet, quoique pas un souffle n'anime les feuillages, que la lumière ne tremble pas, tout respire avec naturel. Eh bien: si ridicule que cela soit, il me semble que brille devant moi en ce moment le "dedans" des choses; que le monde rayonne de sa lumière intérieure, qu'il m'est apparu "dans sa gloire." C'est d'une lumière semblable que me paraît baigné maint poème de Hölderlin.<sup>105</sup>

For the poet to claim that he is *not* thinking of a human face (to take but one instance from the above passage), only to go on and evoke a detail or two of whatever face of which he is supposedly not thinking, may appear disingenuous at first. Yet this tactic serves as a means for the writer to remain, as it were, in a world of *presences*, however undefinable, and to hold

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<sup>104</sup> Jaccottet, *Œuvres*, 82; emphasis added.

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*, 97-98.

the reader there in turn. For Jaccottet, Hölderlin's poetry realizes so full an identification with these presences that it radiates a light identical to that which he imagines emanating from things themselves. If such plenitude in poetry is no longer achievable in Jaccottet's eyes, he can still look for this enigmatic light to imprint itself on the words he chooses, leaving a trace, a negative of a kind.

The prose piece entitled "Sur les pas de la lune" takes a significant step in this direction; fittingly, it anchors the "Exemples" and *La promenade* as a whole, coming squarely in the middle of both. It represents a companion text to a poem from *L'ignorant* bearing the same title (and occupying a similarly central position).<sup>106</sup> The poem, for its part, is pure affirmation. Looking out onto the moonlit night, Jaccottet writes, "Je vis que le monde était devenu léger / et qu'il n'y avait plus d'obstacles," before attesting in the final line, "Sur les pas de la lune je dis oui et je m'en fus..."<sup>107</sup> The only negations to be found in the text – neither of which, for that matter, is a poetic image blocking access to visible reality – are the "plus d'obstacles" in the third line and a profession in the eighth that poet had felt "aucune peur" before stepping into the unknown. On the other hand, the prose version of "Sur les pas de la lune" begins directly with a negation that also becomes an admission of fear: "Le silence presque absolu qui se fait parfois au dehors, même dans une grande ville, à la fin de la nuit, ne m'est jamais apparu comme un bonheur, j'en étais effrayé plutôt."<sup>108</sup> Whereas the

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<sup>106</sup> For a detailed comparison of the texts' respective construction and a full account of the experience that prompted the writing of both, see Gallet, "Travaux à la lumière de la lune," in *Lectures de Philippe Jaccottet*, 199-212. Gallet leaves open the question of whether one version or the other should be considered "definitive"; it is interesting to note that in his recent self-compiled anthology of his poetry and prose, *L'encre serait de l'ombre* (2011), Jaccottet includes the version from *La promenade sous les arbres* but leaves out the one from *L'ignorant* – though even this gesture need not be considered the poet's own implicit answer to the question, given the wealth of texts (in quantitative and qualitative terms) for which the anthology could not make room.

<sup>107</sup> Jaccottet, *Œuvres*, 158.

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*, 104.



poem suggests openness, the prose, at least in its early stages, emphasizes emptiness, in a manner decidedly reminiscent of the initial poem of *L'effraie*.

Nevertheless, one after another, the text goes about removing the obstacles that have already been set aside at the outset of the version in verse – almost inviting the reader to hear the “pas” of the title both as steps in the night and as their simultaneous negation. As a series of images are progressively conjured and rejected, the writer draws nearer to his object until a picture swims into view, still indistinctly focused but its features identified simply and without any descriptive terms that may put poet or reader on the wrong track: “En réalité, toutes les choses qu’on pouvait discerner cette nuit-là, c’est-à-dire simplement des arbres dans les champs, une meule peut-être, une ou deux maisons et plus loin des collines, toutes ces choses, claires ou noires selon leur position par rapport à la lune, ne semblaient plus simplement les habitants du jour surpris dans leur vêtement de sommeil, mais de vraies créations de la lumière lunaire.”<sup>109</sup> Here, the world itself is become a reflection, a *negative of night*, like Hölderlin’s works lying open on Gustave Roud’s table.<sup>110</sup> The haystack outlined against the landscape calls to mind Roud’s own favored rural scenes – as well, perhaps, as the farm which Jaccottet had photographed for him in 1942.

More surprising is the clear echo of the *Requiem* which follows: “Un instant, donc, il me parut que [...] j’avais ouvert par mégarde une porte sur un lieu jusqu’alors inconnu ou même interdit, et que je voyais, avec une parfaite tranquillité de l’esprit, le monde des morts.”<sup>111</sup> Without knowing how, the poet has slipped through the “portes closes des

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<sup>109</sup> Ibid., 104-5.

<sup>110</sup> “Des livres s’ouvraient comme s’ouvrent les cassettes dans les contes: c’était le *Comp de dés* aux grandes pages constellées, plus souvent encore les derniers volumes de l’édition Hellingrath de Hölderlin [...] eux aussi fourmillant de mots comme un négatif de la nuit” (Jaccottet, *Gustave Roud*, 10).

<sup>111</sup> Jaccottet, *Œuvres*, 105.

morts”<sup>112</sup> alluded to in the “Dies Irae” of the earlier text, to find that the space is momentarily habitable. The overwhelming obstacle embodied by the Vercors photographs has, so to speak, been set aside in turn, and a measure of resolution attained: “Une terre plus libre, plus transparente, plus paisible que la terre; un espace émané de ce monde et pourtant plus intime, une vie à l’intérieur de la vie, des figures de la lumière suspendues entre le soir et le matin, le chagrin et l’ivresse, le pays des morts sans doute teinté de noir mais quand même sans horreur, pas un bruit qui ne parût juste et nécessaire, n’étais-je pas entré cette nuit-là, sur les pas de la lune, à l’intérieur d’un poème?”<sup>113</sup> The subtle deployment of imagery has led in the end to a conflation of text and world, to the feeling of more ample reality desired in “La vision et la vue” – which, odd though it may sound, turns out to be a feeling of weightlessness and transparency. By uniting the apparently incompatible in language – less in the incendiary manner of the Surrealists than in an effort to account as discreetly and truly as possible for lived experience – the poem dilates, and hangs in momentary suspension.



“J’avais peur de relire ce livre après cinq ans, d’y découvrir trop de mensonges ou d’illusions; comme on hésite à regarder d’anciennes photographies, à revoir les lieux où la jeunesse étincela.”<sup>114</sup> So confesses Jaccottet in a note dated the seventh of June, 1961, and added to subsequent editions of *La promenade sous les arbres*. To the extent that the book’s prose pieces replicate the power of photography to pinpoint an instant in time, he hesitates

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<sup>112</sup> Ibid., 1280.

<sup>113</sup> Ibid., 106.

<sup>114</sup> Ibid., 135.

to look back at them and thereby be served notice of his advancing age. One might suppose this a measure of their success. Even so, the sustained imperfect tense of a text such as “Sur les pas de la lune” means that the instant in question is always already located in the past, leaving room for the possibility that the prose has somehow distorted or misremembered the experience it tries to convey. For Jaccottet, it seems that to live the present moment in writing requires yet a different approach. As he observes in a note from July 1966, in a striking reversal of *L’effraie*’s “Sois tranquille” and its insistence on the present’s unreality, “Le plus étonnant est peut-être cela: la réalité n’est jamais que de l’instant immédiat; passé et avenir, de chaque côté de ce point, ne sont que des ensembles d’images. Si vive que puisse être la douleur, elle n’est que celle du moment; celle d’hier n’existe plus déjà qu’à l’état d’image.”<sup>115</sup>

If Jaccottet can make this claim with such conviction, it is that in 1959, three years after the completion of *La promenade*, he had come upon a form of writing apparently better suited than any other to realizing a poetic immediacy while maximizing the effect that the fewest possible images could have, namely, the haiku. A four-volume anthology of haiku assembled in English translation by Reginald Blyth several years before proved a catalyst for another turn in Jaccottet’s aesthetic, at once showing him a new avenue for exploration and confirming what he had long imagined that poetry might do. Inspired by this newfound form’s modesty, its simplicity, and its firm grounding in the natural world and the cycle of seasons, he was able to leave aside for a time the “poème-discours” at which he had become adept, in favor of a “poème-instant”<sup>116</sup> resembling haiku in several respects. The resulting short lyrics, written between 1961 and 1964, were collected together in *Airs*. Jaccottet has

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<sup>115</sup> Ibid., 400.

<sup>116</sup> Ibid., 359.

periodically expressed his particular fondness for these poems, and his critics, too, have tended to consider them among the high points of his work.

The haiku has come as a similar revelation for a number of French poets and writers of the past half-century, including (and perhaps most famously) Roland Barthes. Even before dedicating a series of lectures to the haiku in his final seminar series at the Collège de France in the late 1970s, which take it to be a supreme example of “la notation du présent,”<sup>117</sup> Barthes reflects on the form in *L’empire des signes* (1970), where for the first time he draws a parallel, reiterated at various intervals in his writing and teaching of the following decade, between haiku and photography:

Ne décrivant ni ne définissant, le haïku [...] s’amincit jusqu’à la pure et seule désignation. *C’est cela, c’est ainsi*, dit le haïku, *c’est tel*. Ou mieux encore: *Tell!* dit-il, d’une touche si instantanée et si courte (sans vibration ni reprise) que la copule y apparaîtrait encore de trop, comme le remords d’une définition interdite, à jamais éloignée. Le sens n’y est qu’un flash, une griffure de lumière [...] mais le flash du haïku n’éclaire, ne révèle rien; il est celui d’une photographie que l’on prendrait très soigneusement [...] mais en ayant omis de charger l’appareil de sa pellicule.<sup>118</sup>

The value of this passage for our purposes lies above all in its suggesting, not that a haiku and a photograph are equivalent artistic ends, but rather that the *gesture* of a writer of haiku is analogous to that of a photographer – and a photographer, at that, who has forgotten to insert a roll of film into his camera: there results a passing impression in the mind, the *suggestion* of an image that nevertheless lacks all consistency and has shifted and vanished in an instant. Such, I would say, is the poet’s approach in *Airs*. The poems in the collection are not, formally speaking, haiku, yet insofar as they are akin to haiku they are also

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<sup>117</sup> Barthes, *La préparation du roman*, 53.

<sup>118</sup> Barthes, *L’empire des signes*, 114-15.

akin to the photographic gestures evoked by Barthes.<sup>119</sup> The book's title, whether understood as musical melodies or something more elemental, invokes the inherently unphotographable, while its contents come as close to the "instantanés mobiles" of Jean-Christophe Bailly as could be wished.

But even before going any further with a consideration of the poems' structural approach, what of their positioning, their stance? A photograph, for Georges Didi-Huberman, can represent a *malgré tout*, and poetry in our day, for Philippe Jaccottet, is an *et, néanmoins*, as we saw at the outset; the haiku in particular, where poetry becomes a quasi-photographic gesture, has, one could say, historically embodied a *pourtant*. Philippe Forest's 2004 novel *Sarinagara* begins with an imagined biography of the Japanese poet Kobayashi Issa (1763-1827), one of the acknowledged masters of the haiku form (and hence figuring prominently in Jaccottet's own collection of translated haiku from 1996); the novel gets its title from the Japanese word meaning *pourtant*, which concludes one of Issa's most iconic poems, rendered by Forest as follows: "je savais ce monde – éphémère comme rosée – et pourtant pourtant..."<sup>120</sup> Forest takes the final line to be emblematic of haiku's entire ethos: a recognition of the world's transience, an enunciation of this transience that is itself so slight as to be almost nothing, and a simultaneous nod to the possibility (however distant) that there is nonetheless something more to it all – what Jaccottet often designates as the indefinable "autre chose."<sup>121</sup> By virtue of its simplicity, by virtue of its very *existence* as an affirmation of self, world, and their conjunction, the haiku (and the analogous short form

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<sup>119</sup> The poet and photographer Gérard Macé, meanwhile, writes suggestively of "photography without a device," in terms not so far removed from those one might attribute to Jaccottet: "Ce que j'appelle la photographie sans appareil est [...] cette curieuse façon, maniaque mais esthétique, de découper le réel sans laisser de traces" (*La photographie sans appareil*, 10).

<sup>120</sup> Forest, *Sarinagara*, 10. The same poem features, in a different translation, as the epigraph to the chapter of Aline Bergé's study of Jaccottet that deals with Far Eastern influences on his work; see *Philippe Jaccottet*, 345.

<sup>121</sup> See Steinmetz, *Philippe Jaccottet*, 37-49.

practiced by Jaccottet in *Airs*) would be the poetic rejoinder to nothingness which Jaccottet had already begun seeking in the *Requiem*.

The opening poem of *Airs* puts into play this poetics of quiet resistance. Two short stanzas, the initial one no longer than the three lines of a conventional haiku, first indicate a hollowness, then counter it:

Peu de chose, rien qui chasse  
l'effroi de perdre l'espace  
est laissé à l'âme errante

Mais peut-être, plus légère,  
incertaine qu'elle dure,  
est-elle celle qui chante  
avec la voix la plus pure  
les distances de la terre<sup>122</sup>

Already moving from “peu” to “rien” within the first line, the poem performs the constriction which the second line dreads. Tellingly, whereas the initial poem in each of Jaccottet’s two previous collections of verse, *L’effraie* and *L’ignorant*, foregrounds the figure of the poet himself (in the 1<sup>st</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> person, respectively), the poem of *Airs* writes him out of the picture altogether in favor of an impersonal “drifting soul,” whose itinerancy is underlined (so to speak) by an absence of punctuation also new to Jaccottet’s poetry. Then a space is left. Not much, *peu de chose*, yet enough for a breath to be drawn and the poem to collect itself before venturing forward once more, this time under the sign of a *mais* that echoes Issa’s *pourtant*. What the voice goes on to name in the time given it is not an *image*, but rather the spaces at once separating and joining the photographable parcels of the visible world. Where the *Requiem* had provided a somewhat uncomfortable frame for the pictures of the Resistance fighters boring a hole in its center, the poems of *Airs*, with their articulation

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<sup>122</sup> Jaccottet, *Œuvres*, 421.

of interstitial space (“Nous habitons encore un autre monde / Peut-être l’intervalle”<sup>123</sup>), slide *in between* images. And unlike the self-contained Vercors photographs, each of these poems is an *openness*, a dilated instant that allows the air to flow through it, pure connectivity. Even before the first poem, the epigraph to the collection, taken from the notebooks of Joseph Joubert, announces as much: “Notre vie est du vent tissé.”<sup>124</sup>

To highlight the scarcity of clearly defined images and metaphors in *Airs* may give the impression that the book is little preoccupied with vision at all, when in fact the opposite is the case. The penultimate poem, the second of three *Vaux*, confirms an equivalence between song and gaze (“Qu’est-ce donc que le chant? / Rien qu’une sorte de regard”<sup>125</sup>) that reverses the conclusion of the *Requiem*, just as the first lines in an earlier poem of *Airs* to which the *Vaux* are responding (“Qu’est-ce que le regard? // Un dard plus aigu que la langue”<sup>126</sup>) invert the *Requiem*’s painful image of barbs piercing the membrane of the eye. It will be pointed out that both of these couplets are themselves metaphorical, to which I would reply that there is an important difference between metaphorizing *things* (as in Saint-John Perse’s paradigmatic conflation of the sea and a fish, which, for Jaccottet, merely has the effect of distorting the reader’s vision) and metaphorizing *gestures*, which allows Jaccottet in this case to suggest that multiple ends are being served by the poetic act. The eye of *Airs* is “une source qui abonde,”<sup>127</sup> the texts a realization of the desire expressed in a note from October 1953: “Poèmes, beaux yeux ouverts.”<sup>128</sup> The poet’s gaze is above all a heightened awareness of presence – a presence without contours, one that is intuited, seen almost

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<sup>123</sup> Ibid., 438.

<sup>124</sup> Cited in *ibid.*, 419.

<sup>125</sup> Ibid., 445.

<sup>126</sup> Ibid., 427.

<sup>127</sup> Ibid., 427.

<sup>128</sup> Ibid., 62.

peripherally (“Ce mouvement presque invisible / sous la brume / comme si là-bas / s’envolaient des oiseaux”<sup>129</sup>). The mists and formless movements set a tone altogether different from the anxious, ghostly atmosphere of a number of the poems in *L’effraie*, where the poet’s reality appears diminished. Here it is enriched, billowing out from whatever locus the eye happens upon (“La terre tout entière visible [...] suspendue à une plume qui monte / de plus en plus lumineuse”<sup>130</sup>). The *tell!* of the poems of *Airs*, which Barthes sees in the haiku, is a *precise imprecision*; the texts signal assuredly toward points in the world that seem to represent a possibility, a potential. In photographic terms, I think one would be justified in speaking of the poems’ *latent images*, visibility waiting to assume some definite form.<sup>131</sup> Daybreak, especially, crystallizes this moment of suspension, and indeed, it lends its name to a full cycle of nine poems in *Airs* (“Lever du jour”), as well as to the following poem, “Aube”:

On dirait qu’un dieu se réveille,  
regarde serres et fontaines

Sa rosée sur nos murmures  
nos sueurs<sup>132</sup>

These lines take place at the meeting of two gazes, and two breaths. The resulting poem is all light and liquid, not *dense* so much as a fleeting instant of *condensation*: “Dire poétiquement? Travailler le langage pour qu’il s’essouffle et que de cet épuisement s’exhale sa limite même, sa limite pas encore massifiée, fugitivement condensée et montrée: une image.”<sup>133</sup>

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<sup>129</sup> Ibid., 441.

<sup>130</sup> Ibid., 434.

<sup>131</sup> “On peut dire que la photographie devient comme l’art de créer des interpositions, de donner des obstacles à la lumière pour qu’elle puisse écrire ou signer son action, la rendre visible. C’est l’univers physique tout entier qui est perçu comme un stock inépuisable et affolant d’images latentes” (Bailly, *L’instant et son ombre*, 46).

<sup>132</sup> Jaccottet, *Œuvres*, 435.

<sup>133</sup> Didi-Huberman, *Gestes d’air et de pierre*, 76.



As Georges Didi-Huberman’s observation reminds us in passing, poetry, even the lightest and most limpid poetry, is work performed within language – and work, what’s more, that has been readied beforehand, often over a significant period of time and even, to a degree, without the poet having prepared consciously for the exercise. Rilke’s *Duino Elegies* and Jaccottet’s *Airs*, however dissimilar in shape and in scope, are both striking examples of poetic pinnacles the alacrity of whose creation seems owing to some sudden miraculous inspiration (Jaccottet’s description of the *Elegies* as “l’afflux poétique dont nous-mêmes ne pouvons cesser d’être surpris”<sup>134</sup> could just as easily be applied to *Airs*), yet both emerged from prolonged creative doubt – and drought – that could only be weathered with obstinate patience. In a note from February 1976, Jaccottet clarifies his conception of this process: “La difficulté n’est pas d’écrire, mais de vivre de telle manière que l’écrit naisse naturellement. C’est cela qui est presque impossible aujourd’hui; mais je ne puis imaginer d’autre voie.”<sup>135</sup> Integral to the mode of living that enables poetry is a sustained reading practice, something alluded to in one of the poems from *Airs*, the last in the section entitled “Monde”:

Monde né d’une déchirure  
apparu pour être fumée!

Néanmoins la lampe allumée  
sur l’interminable lecture<sup>136</sup>

Like the book’s opening poem and Issa’s haiku, the text is built around an opposition of insubstantiality and surer presence, pivoting on what is by now a recognizably Jaccottetian *néanmoins*. The world is seen in the first couplet as a rent in an unnamed fabric, and in the second line vanishes again as so much smoke. Contrasted with this briefest of apparitions is

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<sup>134</sup> Jaccottet, *Rilke*, 147.

<sup>135</sup> Jaccottet, *Œuvres*, 649.

<sup>136</sup> *Ibid.*, 440.

the steady duration of reading; *lecture* is (has) the final word in the unpunctuated second couplet, functioning as an open-ended invitation to continue through the text, or indeed to reread what may have been passed over too quickly to be properly understood. For a cursory glance at this poem might see something of regret or self-reproach in the poet's reference to the interminableness of reading, as though such apparent self-absorption were rendering him oblivious to the ephemeral world around him – but given what we have seen of Jaccottet's reliable use of *néanmoins* as a marker of resistance, the poem ought surely to be read in a more affirmative light. Reading is what underpins the transitory visions of the outside world (quite literally, in this poem's typographical setting); it is what stitches back together in lasting time the *déchirures* of instants. Reading and seeing, far from being incompatible, reinforce one another, and are necessarily intertwined.

The motif of the legible world recurs throughout Jaccottet's work. In an article from 1958 almost exactly contemporaneous with the composition of the first poems of *Airs* (and published in the *NNRF* alongside one of Jaccottet's regular notes for the journal), Maurice Blanchot details the perils of amalgamating world and book:

Si le monde est un livre, le monde est lisible; grande satisfaction pour un homme de lettres. Mais, si le monde est un livre, tout livre est le monde, et, de cette innocente tautologie, il résulte des conséquences redoutables: ceci d'abord, qu'il n'y a plus de borne de référence; le monde et le livre se renvoient éternellement et infiniment leurs images reflétées; ce pouvoir indéfini de miroitement, cette multiplication scintillante et illimitée – qui est le labyrinthe de la lumière et qui du reste n'est pas rien – sera alors tout ce que nous trouverons, vertigineusement, au fond de notre désir de comprendre.<sup>137</sup>

This back-and-forth shimmer is an apt reflection of the world of *Airs*, and offers a useful new way in which to interpret the interstitial space which the book celebrates. Except that interpretation is precisely what *Airs* declines, thereby stepping back from the vertiginous

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<sup>137</sup> Blanchot, *La condition critique*, 258-59.

danger described by Blanchot: “Accepter ne se peut / comprendre ne se peut / on ne peut pas vouloir accepter ni comprendre...”<sup>138</sup> Jaccottet’s *poèmes-discours* of earlier years are characterized by an avid search for meaning, one that can lead to marveling at the world’s mystery, but just as often – particularly in the poems of *L’effraie* – to doubt, and a sense of failure and frailty (as illustrated, for instance, in one of the book’s initial sonnets when the poet hears the stubborn call of a bullfinch, “seul appel / qui ne cesse pas plus que le lierre. Mais qui peut dire // quel est son sens? Je vois ma santé se réduire”<sup>139</sup>). In *Airs*, on the other hand, where “Vérité, non-vérité / se résorbent en fumée,”<sup>140</sup> the filmless flash of the *poème-instant* designates without lingering in excessive questioning either of itself or of the world being designated. Daniel Klébaner writes, “Dans le haïku la merveille est de ne pas poursuivre la merveille.”<sup>141</sup>

Among Jaccottet’s poetic contemporaries with whom he engages in critical dialogue, even those such as Guillevic or Anne Perrier who make a specialty of the short form, their own *poèmes-instants*, Jean Follain is the only one whose work bears justifiable comparison to haiku in Jaccottet’s eyes. As the latter notes in *Une transaction secrète* (with more than a tinge of sorrow, it should be said, after Follain’s untimely death in 1971), “[Sa poésie] est la seule peut-être qui m’ait paru rejoindre aujourd’hui, en France, l’idéal du haïku [...] c’est-à-dire qui approche *modestement*, comme négligemment, et *sans images*, une espèce de centre que je ne peux m’empêcher de situer au foyer de toute poésie.”<sup>142</sup> More so than the texts of *Airs*, Follain’s short poems of daily life could be called *scenes*; Jaccottet comes close to Follain’s

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<sup>138</sup> Jaccottet, *Œuvres*, 439.

<sup>139</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>140</sup> *Ibid.*, 422.

<sup>141</sup> Klébaner, *L’art du peu*, 98.

<sup>142</sup> Jaccottet, *Une transaction secrète*, 246. For a sensitive appreciation of Follain that explores the place of haiku and photography in his writing, see Farasse, *Follain rose et noir*, especially 35-93.

aesthetic in many of the poems constituting 1983's *Pensées sous les nuages*, whose opening sequence, "On voit," finds the author in "photographic mode,"<sup>143</sup> according to one of his translators into English, Derek Mahon. The first poem of the collection sees a progression of Jaccottet's incipits which have been considered thus far, and another variation on adapting a haiku-like approach within French verse:

On voit les écoliers courir à grands cris  
dans l'herbe épaisse du préau.

Les hauts arbres tranquilles  
et la lumière de dix heures en septembre  
comme une fraîche cascade  
les abritent encore de l'énorme enclume  
qui étincelle d'étoiles par-delà.<sup>144</sup>

The *je* of *L'effraie*, having morphed into the *il* of *L'ignorant's* preliminary poem, then into the vagrant *âme* of *Airs*, has now become an *on* at once impersonal and inclusive (which likewise leads into the final two texts of the 8-poem cycle). A soft, prosaic tone, along with an absence of rhyme and regular meter, suit the ordinary moment. It is not difficult to imagine that the speaker is describing a snapshot in an album ("Here, we can see the children..."); the fourth line's temporal precision inscribes the moment within a distinctly human chronology. While the moment is suspended within time like the instants of *Airs* and the sky over the children's heads, I might suggest, going further back, that it is the children of the *Requiem* who have caught up with the poet, though perhaps it would be more appropriate to say that they have caught up with themselves. The poet of 1947 had aspired to fix the children in eternal youth: an impossible wish to preserve them from the fateful – fatal – images he had seen, and one which yielded a temporal dissonance. The children of "On

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<sup>143</sup> Mahon, *Selected Prose*, 183.

<sup>144</sup> Jaccottet, *Œuvres*, 715.

voit,” meanwhile, *coincide* with the poet and with the picture that binds them together; the light of the morning and the night of the stars are united in a moment of plenitude.



The *Requiem*, and its photographic charge, found their echo in *Le cours de la Broye* – and *Airs*, for its part, is answered in a similar way by a much more recent text. *Couleur de terre*, however slim and seemingly insubstantial alongside Jaccottet’s major works, nonetheless holds something of a distinctive place in his *oeuvre* at present. Published in 2009, it remains his only new poetic text whose appearance in book form postdates the chronological boundaries (1946 to 2008) set by his self-selected anthology of 2011, *L’encre serait de l’ombre* (while it is the final text in the main body of the Pléiade edition, leading into the appendices and hence into the *Requiem*). The book thus embodies a certain marginality, a kind of *lateness*, fitting for a “poète tardif” (as Jaccottet alludes to himself in the final poem of *Pensées sous les nuages*<sup>145</sup>). One could discern in the text itself a corresponding lateness of style, in the sense understood by Edward Said. According to the critic, late style is that which, particularly (but not exclusively) in the latter stages of an artist’s life, somehow positions an artwork against the grain of the times in which it is created, rendering it paradoxically all the more essential for its apparent *untimeliness*.<sup>146</sup> *Couleur de terre* by no means heralds a new phase of Jaccottet’s writing; on the contrary, it faithfully reflects the author’s longstanding preoccupations and

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<sup>145</sup> See *Ibid.*, 740-41.

<sup>146</sup> Said appears at first to want “lateness” to imply an artist’s sense of impending mortality which permeates an artwork; over the course of his case studies, the definition broadens to encompass individual figures (such as the young Glenn Gould) and even entire artistic movements (such as literary modernism) whose style clashes radically with the prevailing currents of the times. See Said, *On Late Style*.

approach, which for that matter have always been out of sync with the stylistic ostentation of more prominent contemporaries. All the same, I would argue that it intensifies Jaccottet's questioning of the natural world to a higher degree than ever before, concentrating it in a single image that functions as an impasse around which the text takes a series of poetic detours.

The book opens with a one-sentence paragraph consisting of four nominal phrases: "Chemins, taches rousses des sédums, lianes des clématites sauvages, chaleur du soleil couchant."<sup>147</sup> In many ways these simple observations combine to resemble the haiku-like poems of *Airs*. The alliterative cluster is somewhat more dense, thickening the atmosphere as if to replicate the summer heat, which itself implies the seasonal point of reference obligatory in a traditional haiku. It would only require a modified typographical setting for the sentence to become a quatrain – and to evoke still more strongly one (or, rather, two) of Rilke's *Quatrains valaisans*:

Chemins qui ne mènent nulle part  
entre deux prés,  
que l'on dirait avec art  
de leur but détournés,

chemins qui souvent n'ont  
devant eux rien d'autre en face  
que le pur espace  
et la saison.<sup>148</sup>

Jaccottet has singled out this poem as a particularly fine example of Rilke's French verse, exemplifying as it does the gentle melodic celebration of place and instant which the former so prizes, while managing to steer clear of any images that fix a scene too rigidly in the

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<sup>147</sup> Jaccottet, *Œuvres*, 1273.

<sup>148</sup> Rilke, *Vergers*, 117. (In its brevity, sonority, and invocation of purity and space, the poem also parallels the opening text from Jaccottet's *Airs*, considered earlier.)

mind's eye.<sup>149</sup> The incipit of *Couleur de terre*, though briefer, contains more in the way of precise visual detail, with its sedums in splashes of red and the clematis creeping upward on the vine, but like the paths of Rilke's poem, it leads nowhere, serving solely to record an impression, fleeting yet distinct. The final phrase, "chaleur du soleil couchant," evokes both a physical sensation and an image that doubles as an evident metaphor: the setting sun concretizes the poet's own waning years. Hence, these few lines effectively constitute a self-sufficient poem, whose enunciation fades out at the same time as the object to which it points.

Except that the lines are immediately followed by another short paragraph, another fragmentary pair of phrases: "(Noté d'abord cela, pour ne pas oublier l'intensité singulière de ces instants.)"<sup>150</sup> This parenthesis serves a dual purpose. Firstly, it recasts the preceding lines, which are now seen to be a memory aid, a snapshot to be reexamined over time; and secondly, it thereby has the effect of making explicit the transition into the book's substance, as though the author were preparing an *auto-explication de texte*. Yet as Roland Barthes emphasizes, one cannot extend a haiku or a photograph: "Le haïku ne peut se développer (s'augmenter), la photo non plus (sans jeu de mots, puisqu'on *développe* des photos); vous ne pouvez rien ajouter à une photo, vous ne pouvez la *continuer*: le regard peut insister, se répéter, recommencer, mais il ne peut *travailler*."<sup>151</sup> The remainder of *Couleur de terre* holds true to this principle. It does not add anything, *per se*, to the initial formula; rather, it subtracts from it, detaching a succession of secondary images and explanations in order to cast them aside one by one as inadequate to the poet's experience – a veritable *development of*

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<sup>149</sup> See Jaccottet, *Une transaction secrète*, 150-51.

<sup>150</sup> Jaccottet, *Œuvres*, 1273.

<sup>151</sup> Barthes, *La préparation du roman*, 117.

*the negative* (to welcome the polysemy from which Barthes shies away).<sup>152</sup> “J’aurais perdu mon temps à convoquer des fées, des sorcières, des satyres ou des nymphes [...] Même le passage d’Ariel [...] m’aurait paru factice. Et les anges eux-mêmes, eussent-ils été les plus invisibles et les plus purs de leur ordre, ne m’auraient pas aidé à élucider l’énigme couleur de terre.”<sup>153</sup>

And remarkably, the very first “image” to be introduced and rejected in the same movement is an image inextricable from the haiku and its history: “Le chemin, une sente plutôt qu’un chemin, ‘la sente étroite du Bout du Monde,’ mais justement pas du Bout du Monde: d’ici, de tout près, sous les pas.”<sup>154</sup> *The Narrow Road to the Deep North*, as it is usually rendered in English, is the most famous text by the poet Matsuo Bashō (1644-1694), Issa’s precursor often hailed as the greatest exponent of haiku in Japanese literary history. The text’s weaving together of poetry and prose – in a notebook of sorts, moreover, chronicling the author’s experience of the natural world over the course of his journey – anticipates the literary approach that Jaccottet would take three centuries later. The latter recounts his discovery of Bashō’s work in his own notebook of 1990; it had come, he reveals, in the summer of 1968 via the journal *L’éphémère*, which published *La sente étroite* in the same issue as texts by his friends, the poets Louis-René des Forêts, André du Bouchet, and Jacques Dupin, welcoming the social uprisings sweeping France at the time. Jaccottet’s bafflement at the radical fervor of his contemporaries, so close to him in other respects, and his wholehearted identification with Bashō instead (“je m’étais dit aussitôt, sans plus réfléchir, que cette sente étroite était la seule que j’eusse envie de suivre sans me contraindre, la seule

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<sup>152</sup> Jean-Pierre Richard, writing about *Airy*, refers to “une heureuse traversée du négatif” (*Onze études*, 337).

<sup>153</sup> Jaccottet, *Œuvres*, 1275.

<sup>154</sup> *Ibid.*, 1273.



où je n’aurais pas bronché”<sup>155</sup>), could easily be taken as a sign of retreat from the outside world, the poet sheltering himself in the comfort of past traditions and distancing himself from his own epoch – as Jaccottet appears all too aware, mentioning that Bashō’s text had previously been translated into French as *L’ermitage d’illusion*... So it is all the more striking that down the road, *Couleur de terre* should refuse the identification with Bashō in turn, in what is perhaps a sly riposte to the critics who would reproach Jaccottet his supposed bookish isolationism.<sup>156</sup>

Indeed, right after the misleading parallel with *La sente étroite*, a parenthesis is at pains to emphasize that the experience in question is first and foremost an exterior, immediate one: “(Non dans un livre.)”<sup>157</sup> This is doubtless the strongest negation of all those to be found in these pages, for it verges on an effacement of *Couleur de terre*’s own textuality. The path followed by the poet leads through Jaccottet’s book, and out again, just as surely as it winds away from Bashō. In Fata Morgana’s original edition of the book, pencil drawings of foliage by Anne-Marie Jaccottet surround and interrupt the poet’s words, which thereby assume a greater physical presence; even as the negations accumulate, stretching the experience by specifying what it does *not* consist in, even more adamantly than in “Sur les pas de la lune” more than 50 years before (“Nul besoin d’aller ailleurs, de chercher loin, de gravir quoi que ce soit du genre escarpé, périlleux, sublime. Ni transe, ni extase, ni cri, ni prière, ni rituel; même pas une seconde de méditation. Pas de dépouillement, pas de

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<sup>155</sup> Ibid., 942.

<sup>156</sup> 1970’s *Paysages avec figures absentes* begins by laying out a more explicit defense of the author’s having chosen to take up residence far from the thickest concentrations of social and political activity; the text’s date invites the reader to hear in it a response to the events of May 1968 in particular: “Je crains que l’on ne finisse par me reprocher, si ce n’est déjà fait, d’y chercher un asile contre le monde et contre la douleur, et que les hommes, et leurs peines (plus visibles et plus tenaces que leurs joies) ne comptent pas assez à mes yeux. Il me semble toutefois qu’à bien lire ces textes, on y trouverait cette objection presque toute réfutée. Car ils ne parlent jamais que du réel [...] de ce que tout homme aussi bien peut saisir” (Ibid., 463).

<sup>157</sup> Ibid., 1273.

sacrifice”<sup>158</sup>), they become the material consistency of the steps along the road. The text dilates to encompass “l’amalgame de moi et de ce morceau du monde,”<sup>159</sup> where the *moi* is poet, reader, and traveler in one.

The journey undertaken in *Couleur de terre* has no real destination – or, rather, the destination is given at the outset; in any case, it is certainly not presented as a journey toward eventual wisdom.<sup>160</sup> The familiar Jaccottetian figure of the *ignorant*, even over the course of the text’s few pages, sees himself downgraded to “un vieil homme parfaitement et irrévocablement ignare”<sup>161</sup> – almost as though the poet were setting out to disarticulate the *pas-sage* through the prose of the book. Yet the force of the enigmatic vision is only stronger for its inexplicability; if age has intensified the poet’s ignorance,<sup>162</sup> it has also increased his capacity for jubilation at marvels which are *pre-saged* before they can be expressed. Poetry’s motivation, more so than ever in Jaccottet’s late work, is to preserve the power of these intuitions; in so doing, it takes on a philosophical role, in Bergsonian terms where intuition and dilation meet: “De ces intuitions évanouissantes, et qui n’éclairent leur objet que de distance en distance, la philosophie doit s’emparer, d’abord pour les soutenir, ensuite pour les dilater et les raccorder ainsi entre elles. Plus elle avance dans ce travail, plus elle s’aperçoit que l’intuition est l’esprit même et, en un certain sens, la vie même.”<sup>163</sup>

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<sup>158</sup> Ibid., 1274.

<sup>159</sup> Ibid., 1276.

<sup>160</sup> On Jaccottet’s poetics of ignorance in this and other texts, see in particular Thélot, *L’immémorial*, 233-51.

<sup>161</sup> Jaccottet, *Œuvres*, 1276.

<sup>162</sup> “Plus je vieillis et plus je crois en ignorance, / plus j’ai vécu, moins je possède et moins je règne” (Ibid., 154).

<sup>163</sup> Bergson, *L’évolution créatrice*, 268.

### CHAPTER 3

#### *Taches de sang, tâches du poète*

We have been concerned above all in the preceding pages with a representational paradigm (photography) that would seem to prescribe certain pathways in writing, and to proscribe others. Philippe Jaccottet's poetry and lyrical prose dilate much as the eye does, though the gaze they cast on the world, when it is true, does not aspire to *seize* its object as a photograph seizes something of the real. Put another way, the flash of the poetic act, so important for Barthes in the gesture of the haiku, does not emanate from language the way a flashbulb illuminates the darkness. The poem is a conductor, rather than a producer, of light, as in the final poem of Jaccottet's 1974 cycle *Chants d'en bas*:

Je me redresse avec effort et je regarde:  
il y a trois lumières, dirait-on.  
Celle du ciel, celle qui de là-haut  
s'écoule en moi, s'efface,  
et celle dont ma main trace l'ombre sur la page.

L'encre serait de l'ombre.<sup>164</sup>

In the process envisaged by Jaccottet, the light flows into the poet's eye, through his body and down his arm until it moves the pen – or, rather, what William Henry Fox Talbot, producing the first ever book of photographs in 1844, called the “pencil of nature,” referring to the world's seeming ability to extend itself onto the page with little or no effort required of the transcriber: “Ce qui apparaît sur le papier, ce n'est pas la réalité telle quelle, ce n'est pas l'objet lui-même, ni son double, c'est son ombre, son spectre, son empreinte

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<sup>164</sup> Jaccottet, *Œuvres*, 550.

lumineuse,”<sup>165</sup> as Jean-Christophe Bailly has it. Jaccottet, at times, would just as soon hand over his instrument and let the world write itself: “Si c’était la lumière qui tenait la plume, / l’air même qui respirait dans les mots, / cela vaudrait mieux.”<sup>166</sup> Where Mallarmé’s celebrated call to the modern poet involved “la disparition élocutoire du poète, qui cède l’initiative aux mots,”<sup>167</sup> and where Francis Ponge, in his texts closest to Jaccottet’s heart, could almost be said to leave the final word to *things*, Jaccottet takes a third way, preferring to let *elements* and *forces* be the primary voices of his writing.

So saying, it would be time to transfer our attention from *method* to *motif*, to one of the natural forces which, next to the presence of air, water, fire and earth in Jaccottet’s work, has proved easy to pass over. In one of his foundational essays on the literary imaginary, *L’eau et les rêves*, Gaston Bachelard declares, with typical authority, “Quand un liquide se valorise, il s’apparente à un liquide organique. Il y a donc une poétique du sang.”<sup>168</sup> One ought perhaps to qualify this statement by acknowledging that there exist as many distinct *poétiques du sang* as there are poets for whom blood is a privileged motif; Jaccottet elaborates one such poetics, remarkable for its nuance and deserving of close attention. Despite much of Bachelard’s best-known criticism postdating Jaccottet’s early collections, the poet does not figure in the philosopher’s personal canon of writers often cited – which is not to say that Jaccottet has been overlooked by the thematic criticism that Bachelard did much to inspire: the respective analyses of Jean-Pierre Richard and Danièle Chauvin, as well as Jean-Claude Mathieu’s account of the symbolism of blood in modern literature, have been

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<sup>165</sup> Bailly, *L’instant et son ombre*, 44.

<sup>166</sup> Jaccottet, *Œuvres*, 1245.

<sup>167</sup> Mallarmé, *Poésies et autres textes*, 358.

<sup>168</sup> Bachelard, *L’eau et les rêves*, 84.

especially illuminating in this regard,<sup>169</sup> yet blood in all of its various guises throughout Jaccottet's work has rarely been considered. Dominique Viart sums up blood's multivalent function across the wider canvas of modern poetry: "Le sang a un pouvoir régénérateur, il donne à ce qui est latent dans la parole la vigueur d'une nouvelle profération. Toutefois cette vertu positive n'est pas nouvelle. Le sang est aussi le liquide maléfique ou plutôt le liquide qui ruisselle de la douleur et de l'oppression [...] À travers la poésie contemporaine, le sang garde ces deux valeurs."<sup>170</sup> The following pages will make a final sweep through Jaccottet's corpus – this time, going even further back than the *Requiem* – to explore the ways in which it bears out and broadens this general description.

Beginning a letter to Gustave Roud in February 1945, Jaccottet discovered that he had only red ink at his disposal, proclaiming, "Je suis réduit, bientôt, à mon propre sang, vous voyez."<sup>171</sup> The young poet could readily be ironic at his own expense, ridiculing the trope of the desperate writer inscribing his words in letters of blood. There is nothing ironic, however, in the blood dotting Jaccottet's early poetry, which, on the contrary, verges on the melodramatic. The *Trois poèmes aux démons* accompanying the letter to Roud and published soon thereafter – "petits rites sanglants,"<sup>172</sup> as Jean-Claude Mathieu refers to them – echo the grotesquerie of many of Baudelaire's prose poems besides assuming a similar form. The relatively few critics to have studied the *Trois poèmes* (given the haste with which Jaccottet subsequently rejected his literary débuts) have commented upon the texts' tormented,

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<sup>169</sup> See Richard, *Onze études*, 315-39; Chauvin, *Viatiques*; and Mathieu, *Écrire, inscrire*, 131-54.

<sup>170</sup> Viart, *L'écriture seconde*, 110-11.

<sup>171</sup> Jaccottet and Roud, *Correspondance*, 82.

<sup>172</sup> Mathieu, *Écrire, inscrire*, 146.

dreamlike atmosphere, and on the fact that blood “jaillit à la fin de chaque récit.”<sup>173</sup> In particular, the ending of the first poem in the sequence warrants a closer examination.

A nocturnal scene of mounting disquiet reaches its peak in the final lines of “La ville,” and before the speaker’s eyes, “une femme, encore presque enfant, brisa la vitre de sa main gantée; et dans la nuit soudain totale, mais [où] tournaient encore, jusqu’au vertige, les musiques des carrousels lointains, on voyait luire pâlement un triangle de verre épais qu’elle serrait bien fort dans ses doigts de cuir pleins de sang.”<sup>174</sup> While the poem as a whole anticipates the vague urban malice that haunts certain corners of Jaccottet’s later collection *L’effraie*, the young woman gripping the shard of glass can be thought to figure the poet himself, and his attempt to grasp the jagged, unwieldy contours of the physical world. (The Swiss poet and critic Georges Nicole, in an early article hailing the promise of the *Trois poèmes* and their author, singles out the very same lines for praise, while discerning throughout the three texts “une prose attentive, appliquée à saisir exactement son objet difficile,”<sup>175</sup> but curiously neglects to draw a connection between the book’s project, as he sees it, and the passage in which it is thematized outright.) For a writer whose mature work is so often identified with the *ungraspable* world, who emphasizes how important it is that all poetic forms “laissent à l’insaisissable sa part,”<sup>176</sup> the image is a cautionary one almost in spite of itself. Glinting faintly in the darkness, the triangle of glass in the woman’s hand concentrates the light to which the poet is so attached – yet the tighter one tries to cling to it, the more fragile it proves to be, and the more cuts one inflicts on oneself. So it is with language, which so often ends up obscuring the reality it looks to express. Not only, then, does the poem

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<sup>173</sup> Mathieu, *Philippe Jaccottet*, 23.

<sup>174</sup> Jaccottet, *Trois poèmes aux démons*, 24-25.

<sup>175</sup> Nicole, “Trois poèmes aux démons,” in Vidal, *Philippe Jaccottet*, 143.

<sup>176</sup> Jaccottet, *Œuvres*, 354.

culminate in a violent, potent image; it points a bloodied hand toward the difficulty that thereafter remains at the heart of Jaccottet's writing, and which his subsequent work finds more suitable ways to inhabit.

One might look for more indications of violence than actually appear in the *Requiem*, especially seeing as the epigraph from Dante in Mermod's original 1947 edition places the entire work under the sign of blood. Yet when the text was reedited by Fata Morgana in 1991, the epigraph no longer appeared. Jean-Claude Mathieu suggests that it may have been removed in order that Dante, whose influence permeates the text, not become too prominent a voice and stifle Jaccottet's own.<sup>177</sup> At the same time, by suppressing Dante's initial question ("Qui pourrait dire?..."), Jaccottet no longer allows for his poem to be considered an *answer*, either – a modest and implicit acknowledgment, in other words, that he has been no more able than the author of the *Inferno* to account justly for the quantity of blood he has seen spilled. While the Pléiade edition restores the paratext for the sake of completion, the epigraph's legacy not only reflects an evolution in the poet's stance toward his *oeuvre*, but also hints at blood's symbolic importance and ever-problematic place within it.

Jaccottet avows owing a profound debt as a budding poet to Pierre Jean Jouve, whose collection *Sueur de sang* had been published several years prior. Indeed, the first image of blood within the *Requiem* proper is in a highly Jouvian vein: the opening movement laments, "Ces corps griffés, ces jarres filées de sang, / débris d'orage, ô mère, ce n'est pas lui..."<sup>178</sup> The blood pours out of the victims just as the poet's words seep onto the page, as if

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<sup>177</sup> "Dante est, à la différence des autres, présent comme une atmosphère diffuse et non repérable ponctuellement, comme ces grains étrangers dans une voix naissante" (Mathieu, *Philippe Jaccottet*, 193).

<sup>178</sup> Ibid., 1280. This passage bears comparison to the following lines from *Sueur de sang*, strikingly similar in tone and sonority: "Arbre nu dévorant, ô mère et terre et mort! / Ombre de longue histoire, bouche sanglante" (Jouve, *Les noces*, 151). Jaccottet himself writes, "Je voulais entrer dans cette œuvre, j'ouvris *Sueur de sang* [...]"

to underscore the phonetic equivalence between the *peau* of the body and the *pot* of ink into which the writer dips his pen. Its vessels and lungs emptied, the corpse ceases at once to be recognizable, even human. Blood is repeatedly linked to an animality at once menacing and vulnerable, its current flowing across the invisible barrier beyond which lies “la vieille nuit tigre”:

Ces noyés n’ont-ils pas comme nous des visages  
que la terre dorait? Pourtant, bêtes masquées,  
ils crient,  
des haches d’eau leur tranchent le poignet.  
Leurs derniers bonds ensanglantés se cassent.<sup>179</sup>

In a way, the faceless anonymity of the dead corresponds to the poet’s voice in the *Requiem*, struggling to break away from cherished forebears and long-existing *topoi*. If the work understandably makes blood a key element in its lexical field, the resulting imagery nevertheless remains “aussi malencontreux que sincère,”<sup>180</sup> as Jaccottet himself would later describe the text.

As the war gradually receded into the past, 1953’s *L’effraie* revealed a newfound maturity, the poet returning to a more intimate style and thematic preoccupation after the grandeur of the *Requiem*. Traditional meters and rhymed endings make frequent appearance,<sup>181</sup> and a gentle tone prevails, often prosaic, almost casual, as an occasional spot of blood punctuates banal Sunday routine: “Le dimanche peuple les bois d’enfants qui geignent, / de femmes vieillissantes; un garçon sur deux saigne / au genou, et l’on rentre avec des mouchoirs gris, / laissant de vieux papiers près de l’étang...”<sup>182</sup> Death itself, so

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comme j’étais très jeune, je feignis d’aimer la pesanteur charnelle et dramatique de ces poèmes” (*L’entretien des muses*, 45).

<sup>179</sup> *Ibid.*, 1281.

<sup>180</sup> Jaccottet, *Un calme feu*, 17.

<sup>181</sup> For a particularly sensitive study of *L’effraie*’s prosody and its effects, see Cady, *Measuring the Visible*, 32-37.

<sup>182</sup> Jaccottet, *Œuvres*, 21.



prominently foregrounded in the preceding work, becomes in this volume a quiet yet insistent undercurrent of day-to-day existence. The first of the “quelques sonnets” early in the collection perfectly exemplifies these various aspects of *L’effraie*’s poetics – and blood is very much at the poem’s center:

Tu es ici, l’oiseau du vent tournoie,  
toi ma douceur, ma blessure, mon bien.  
De vieilles tours de lumière se noient,  
et la tendresse entr’ouvre ses chemins.

La terre est maintenant notre patrie.  
Nous avançons entre l’herbe et les eaux,  
de ce lavoir où nos baisers scintillent  
à cet espace où foudroiera la faux.

“Où sommes-nous?” Perdus dans le cœur de  
la paix. Ici, plus rien ne parle que,  
sous notre peau, sous l’écorce et la boue,

avec sa force de taureau, le sang  
fuyant qui nous emmêle, et nous secoue  
comme ces cloches mûres sur les champs.<sup>183</sup>

The opening stanza admittedly lingers, like the *Requiem*, in Jouve-inspired territory, its image of blood only enhancing the voluptuous atmosphere. The “blessure” of the second line is couched between, and synonymous with, “douceur” and “bien”; the fourth line goes on to provide another such association via the internal rhyme of “tendresse,” the opening up of which could be said to resemble a wound. Even though the second quatrain does not extend the blood-related imagery further, it is here that an air of mild disquiet manifests itself and that the precariousness of the speaker’s existence is underlined, the verse itself a provisional, interstitial space within the text. The “heart” of the tercets’ first line anchors the poem’s center, but the calm it embodies is, it is hinted, an illusion; almost imperceptible at first, the

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<sup>183</sup> Ibid., 4.

flow of blood gains momentum over the course of the final lines, until it pounds beneath the surface of the body and the poem, with an animal force reminiscent of the *Requiem*, an unrelenting indicator of mortality. As Judith Chavanne puts it, “le sang semble offrir l'éternité dans l'extase des corps, et se révèle en réalité agent du temps.”<sup>184</sup>

Whatever may be the ominous portent of blood, this sonnet accomplishes the singular feat of making it an agent, not just of time, but of rhythm and melody. In the former respect, at least, the poem typifies much of modern lyricism. According to Marie-Paule Berranger, French poetry after the Romantic and Symbolist eras of the 19<sup>th</sup> century has largely tended to privilege blood's subtle rhythmic potential over the dramatic effusion that had often accompanied its appearance in the past: “Le lyrisme n'est plus cette hémorragie joyeuse ou haïssable du sujet, mais circulation, battement, rythme intime.”<sup>185</sup> The positioning of the heart very near the textual center of Jaccottet's poem allows one to feel the lines that follow as so many beats of a centrifugal pulse: blood and verse follow an identical path.<sup>186</sup> More unusual, though, and no less prominent, is blood's musicality emerging in content and form. Blood's steady throbbing is likened to the ringing of bells, each a forcible temporal marker; furthermore, in the rhyme of “sang” and “champs” there echoes a homophone that is also the term encapsulating the lyric mode in French, “chant.” In the fusion of subject and world enacted by the poem, blood's silent melody pursues its course beneath the surface of the body, then through one feature of the landscape after another, a veritable “chant du monde.”<sup>187</sup>

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<sup>184</sup> Chavanne, *Philippe Jaccottet*, 34.

<sup>185</sup> Berranger, “Le lyrisme du sang,” in *Le sujet lyrique en question*, 28.

<sup>186</sup> The image is made explicit by Jules Supervielle in a well-known poem from his collection *1939-1945*: “Mes veines et mes vers suivent même chemin” (*Œuvres poétiques complètes*, 461).

<sup>187</sup> The phrase comes from the title of an early novel by Jean Giono, in which the protagonist's visceral attachment to the natural world mirrors that of the speaker of “Tu es ici.”

The perpetual flow of blood is not easily contained, either by the skin or by regular verse. The years immediately following the appearance of *L'effraie* saw Jaccottet experimenting with freer, more supple poetic forms in his 1957 collection *L'ignorant* and the contemporaneous notebooks eventually published in *La semaison*; this prosodic liberation corresponds, tellingly, to a recurring confrontation with the sight of blood overflowing its banks. The rare exclamation that opens the poem “Blessure vue de loin,” makes only too clear the impasse at which the poet arrives when blood imposes itself on the visible world: “Ah! le monde est trop beau pour ce sang mal enveloppé / qui toujours cherche en l’homme le moment de s’échapper!”<sup>188</sup> With each of the concluding phrases “mal enveloppé” and “s’échapper,” the 12-syllable alexandrine integral to *L'effraie* is stretched beyond its boundaries, as though the irrepressible current of blood were indeed escaping, spreading out over a wider surface. From lines such as this and the distress they convey, Jean-Pierre Richard extrapolates to identify in Jaccottet’s poetry a fear of hemorrhages, “sang qui se perd, qui souille, et dont l’épanchement opaque signifie le progrès d’une sorte de négation affreuse et absolue [...] vidange et défection de l’être, expansion vers rien, pour rien, non-sens.”<sup>189</sup> Most troubling, in other words, is the impression of meaninglessness that the recent war had done so much to ingrain in people’s minds, and which the sight of a bleeding body continues to symbolize for Jaccottet. One finds in his work of this period an increasing number of analogies between writer and fighter – inspired, perhaps, as much by his simultaneous translation of Homer’s *Odyssey* as by reflections on recent and ongoing conflicts – but while the poet must assume the role of a “combattant qui se pare de

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<sup>188</sup> Jaccottet, *Œuvres*, 159.

<sup>189</sup> Richard, *Onze études*, 327.

blessures,”<sup>190</sup> to glimpse any one such wound is enough, paradoxically, to bring his trajectory to a standstill.

Bloodlessness, in Jaccottet’s conception, is a quality from which to steer clear in one’s writing whenever possible. George William Russell, the Irish poet better known under the pseudonym A.E. whose rhapsodic book *The Candle of Vision* inspired the initial reflections of *La promenade sous les arbres*, is judged by the end of the latter’s first section to have devitalized the visible world by overexalting its radiance at the expense of its reality: “Pâles, froides, exsangues sont les visions de A. E. en fin de compte, du moins telles qu’il les a traduites, du moins confrontées avec le visible.”<sup>191</sup> The criticism is reiterated and strengthened in a later notebook of *La semaison*, when it applies to an entire generation of “Narcisses exsangues”<sup>192</sup> among Jaccottet’s contemporaries, in whose case a metapoetic tendency effectively closes off their work from the world. On the other end of the poetic spectrum, however, the wounded voice is not an *effet*, not something that can be achieved simply by insistent use of an apparently “wounded” lexicon. Gratuitous images of blood are no less artificial, in the end, than the most abstract imitation of Mallarmé. When blood is referred to in Jaccottet’s later prose and notebooks, most often it is merely for the sake of exactitude and contrast, to demonstrate what a given shade of red discovered in nature is *not*; the poet’s wariness with regard to facile similes and metaphors is particularly keen in the case of blood. Typical of this circumspection is the following passage from “Le cerisier,” recollecting Jaccottet’s elation at the sight of a cherry tree laden with fruit: “Que pouvait être ce rouge pour me surprendre, me réjouir à ce point? Sûrement pas du sang; si l’arbre debout

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<sup>190</sup> Jaccottet, *Œuvres*, 337.

<sup>191</sup> *Ibid.*, 91.

<sup>192</sup> *Ibid.*, 887.

sur l'autre bord du champ avait été blessé [...] je n'en aurais éprouvé que de l'effroi. Mais je ne suis pas de ceux qui pensent que les arbres saignent, et qui s'émeuvent autant d'une branche coupée que d'un homme meurtri.”<sup>193</sup> To conflate the cherries' red with blood is not simply to perpetuate a rather tired literary trope; it is to mistake altogether the nature of the visible world by not heeding its specificity. Blood's color has its own precise set of implications, distinct from those of comparable colors emanating from other sources.

Even the most vigilant of writers do not always recognize their deep-seated associations with certain colors or imagery. Jean-Luc Steinmetz has analyzed the use of the adjective “rose” in Jaccottet's work, revealing its erotic suggestiveness as well as its proximity to the redness of blood, and positing that the poet's predilection for the lighter, more modest hue is emblematic of his reserve; Jaccottet himself claims to have been surprised but persuaded by Steinmetz's assessment of rose's place in his imaginary.<sup>194</sup> Blood's presence can thus be intuited in parcels of the visible world where one would not generally look to find it. Its color is never entirely absent from the spectrum in the poet's eye. Rather, it is among its essential components – very near the surface in the rosy flush of a cheek or a flower, but no less crucial to the sparkling white of a flock of birds admired in a note from November 1995, “blancheur dont on pourrait imaginer qu'elle ne nous toucherait pas tant si elle n'était, plutôt que le refus ou l'oubli des couleurs, leur repliement.”<sup>195</sup> This whiteness, into which all colors have been absorbed, tallies with Roland Barthes's description of color's neutral state,

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<sup>193</sup> Ibid., 747. The passage adapts a much earlier note from February, 1960: “Ainsi même les blessures des arbres n'ont-elles pas l'aspect répugnant, effrayant des blessures de bêtes ou d'hommes [...] Horreur du sang. La sève qui coule n'est guère qu'une larme. C'est pourquoi les rapprochements entre le végétal et l'humain sont incertains – malgré mille métaphores traditionnelles” (Ibid., 349).

<sup>194</sup> See Steinmetz, “La réduction à l'admirable,” in Vidal, *Philippe Jaccottet*, 224-26; for Jaccottet's reaction to Steinmetz's article, see Jaccottet, *De la poésie*, 47-48.

<sup>195</sup> Jaccottet, *Œuvres*, 1013.

its *aporia*.<sup>196</sup> For Jaccottet, as for Barthes, such a color is impossible and, at the same time, thinkable, perceived in the world by the eye of the imagination. Whence the former's finding an equivalent quality of light in the paintings which he most admires, notably those of Rembrandt, where "on entre dans un monde où la lumière est moins une aile qu'un baume. On cherche celle, s'il en est une, qui se mélange au sang et, quand même, éclaire."<sup>197</sup> The poet searches for just such an ever-elusive light in which blood is both present and absent, visible and invisible.

Far from being incompatible, these two dimensions reinforce each other at every moment; discerning them together in the world is always a horizon, the object of a continual refocusing of one's attention. For Jaccottet, the work of art is the space in which this process is undertaken, and the seeing eye trained. A verse from the concluding movement of *Airs*, appropriately titled "Vœux," formulates the desire to reconcile seemingly opposing forces in a single gaze:

Peut-être en mêlant peu à peu  
la peine avec la lumière  
avancerai-je d'un pas?<sup>198</sup>

The voice hesitates, questioning, unsure of itself, yet "peu à peu," line by line, the *poem* advances toward a vision of the world in which the darker and lighter aspects blend into a unified whole. This vision remains distinct from the "aesthetics of ugliness" that Hugo Friedrich identifies in much of modern poetry from Baudelaire onward, and which consists

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<sup>196</sup> See Barthes, *Le neutre*, 84. In an earlier reflection from October, 1962, Jaccottet imagines a whiteness that, like Barthes's vision of the Neutral (which in turn owes much to Maurice Blanchot), would somehow both encompass and exceed life itself: "Blancheur qui est absence de couleurs, ou mort; blancheur qui est essence de couleurs, ou vie dépassée, peut-être" (*Œuvres*, 371).

<sup>197</sup> *Ibid.*, 506.

<sup>198</sup> Jaccottet, *Œuvres*, 444.

of a determination to find beautiful that which would generally be considered hideous.<sup>199</sup> Instead, it is a conviction that the world's beauty "n'est pas une beauté sans tache"<sup>200</sup> – indeed, that it is all the more beautiful for its improbability amidst the ugliness that threatens to overshadow it: "[La beauté] est. Cela persiste contre le bruit, la sottise, tenace parmi le sang et la malédiction, dans la vie impossible à assumer, à vivre."<sup>201</sup>

It took Roland Barthes to synthesize in a single assertion what was powerfully latent in thousands of pages worth of historical narrative; for Jules Michelet, he writes, "le sang est la substance cardinale de l'histoire."<sup>202</sup> Some years later, he could justifiably have made a parallel observation with regard to Jaccottet, whose view of history, clouded by the two catastrophic world wars that preceded his literary career, is even bleaker than that of the already somewhat pessimistic Michelet. Deplore though he might the numerous humanitarian tragedies marking the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries, Jaccottet expresses periodic resignation at their inevitability.<sup>203</sup> He does not subscribe, at least, to Michelet's dated notion (elucidated by Barthes) of different varieties and potencies of blood driving individuals to commit violent acts; blood is instead characterized as an impersonal agent of entropy, "toujours sur le point de jaillir."<sup>204</sup> The consequent horrors across the globe, already difficult to believe in themselves, are rendered still less comprehensible in the poet's eyes by the sterile, even glib way in which they are reported in newspapers and on television. In particular, the notes from the late 1940s and early 1950s collected in *Observations* find

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<sup>199</sup> See Friedrich, *The Structure of Modern Poetry*, 26-27.

<sup>200</sup> Jaccottet, *Œuvres*, 318.

<sup>201</sup> *Ibid.*, 365.

<sup>202</sup> Barthes, *Michelet*, 93.

<sup>203</sup> A note from November 1996 sounds an especially dour note along these lines. With uncharacteristic ill humor, Jaccottet remarks after reading *Les misérables*, "Quelle naïveté dans les espoirs qu'inspire à Hugo le Progrès avec un très grand P! [...] Alors déjà, c'est sur l'instruction obligatoire que l'optimiste compte avant tout [...] Comme si les SS n'étaient pas allés à l'école, et même au catéchisme!" (*Œuvres*, 1040).

<sup>204</sup> *Ibid.*, 62.

Jaccottet chiming in with the sentiment, increasingly prevalent among artists and philosophers in the years following the war, that the world had become an absurd place in which to live: “Les journaux sont déposés dans les boîtes et lus à la hâte; et les ‘superstitions’ des peuplades primitives, ces rites obscènes ou sanglants dont sourient les hommes de progrès, paraissent raisonnables à côté des articles que nous lisons alors.”<sup>205</sup> Blood is continually weighed in the metaphorical scales that represent one of Jaccottet’s preferred poetic tropes – yet whereas in a poem such as “Blessure vue de loin” it tilts the balance decisively to one side,<sup>206</sup> when it comes to the day-to-day news cycle, blood is always already present on both sides of the equation. Because it is impractical, not to say dangerous, to detach oneself completely from quotidian reality – and Jaccottet’s later narrative *L’obscurité* highlights the perils of such an attempt at evasion – the poet has no alternative but to try and “tenir tête,”<sup>207</sup> at the risk of paralyzing his impulse to write.

Scattered throughout Jaccottet’s work are many admissions of mental blockage in the face of current events and the seeming impossibilities of modern life, conveying less and less confidence in his ability to work through the difficulties as the years go by. From even the direst of such crises, however, are born notes, poems, and statements of aesthetic purpose that articulate the impasse while at the same time seeking a way out of it. The “observation” cited above, from early 1951, continues as follows, the author failing to digest a newspaper article discussing advances in mechanized warfare: “Assis à cette table, sachant bien l’inutilité de toute parole, de toute poésie, et leur caractère dérisoire en face de ces abstractions

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<sup>205</sup> Ibid., 26. Such an expression of moral relativism sounds uncannily like a paraphrase of Montaigne’s celebrated essay “Des cannibales”; Jaccottet does indeed discuss this text, but only in a much later note from February, 1993, without any indication that he had encountered it before. See Ibid., 968-69.

<sup>206</sup> “Il arrive aussi que soit suspecte la balance / et quand je penche, j’entrevois le sol de sang taché” (Ibid., 159).

<sup>207</sup> Ibid., 25.



monstrueuses qui coûtent des litres de sang, je ne peux pas ne pas m'accrocher à des choses."<sup>208</sup> The steady concreteness of *things*, as opposed to current technology's intangible menace on the one hand and the resultant bloodflow's unnerving flux on the other, lead the young Jaccottet to "prendre le parti des choses," much in the manner of his older friend Francis Ponge, who set out on his own artistic path having glimpsed firsthand the awful spectacle of World War I. The work of both poets aspires to a certain *sangfroid* in order to offset the frightening instability of their era, epitomized by the constant shedding of blood. Jaccottet's texts are resilient, I would suggest, precisely at the point where their author himself can no longer be.

Jaccottet has nevertheless been at some pains now and again to distinguish his poetic approach from that of Ponge; Aline Bergé has convincingly demonstrated in addition that Jaccottet feels less of an affinity with *Le parti pris des choses* than with other, later volumes in Ponge's work.<sup>209</sup> The firmness of his friend, both on and off the page, was as intimidating as it was heartening for Jaccottet, reinforcing persistent doubts as to whether he could sustain his foothold in the heart of the Parisian literary scene, and eventually proving a factor in his decision to relocate to the southern countryside in 1953. His writing, meanwhile, remained at some remove from Ponge's intensely object-focused work, while not succumbing for all that to the lures of the more conventional lyric subjectivity, at times self-indulgent in his estimation, which runs through the work of other major poets of the age. Nothing illustrates this aesthetic, which steers between the poles at either extreme of postwar poetic practice, better than the increasing preponderance of dream narratives in the published notebooks of *La saison* and its continuations. The more limpid Jaccottet's finished poems become on the

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<sup>208</sup> Ibid., 26.

<sup>209</sup> Bergé, *Philippe Jaccottet*, 78-79.

one hand, and the more they tend to isolate themselves from the bloodiness of contemporary history, the more obscure his nocturnal adventures appear on the other, in contrast; their obscurity is heightened by Jaccottet's refusal to analyze his dreams in search of psychological explanations. A note from September of 1967 strongly hints that this refusal springs at least in part from the same natural *pudeur* to which the sight of blood in the physical world is repellent: "Au fond, la matière des rêves est celle des journaux, des 'mauvais' journaux. Sexe et violence. [...] Par le rêve on rejoint cette matière commune, basse, dont l'histoire aussi est faite, aujourd'hui comme jamais."<sup>210</sup> There can be no doubting the deeply personal nature of such an admission, with its unambiguous condemnation of modern times that takes up the almost identical refrain from the *Observations* – yet as Pierre Pachet points out, the dreams themselves that are described here have at their center an *impersonal* figure in place of a lyric subject, and that figure's experiences are at once singular and universal, strange and uncannily familiar: "Il y aurait dans la 'matière' des rêves, dans ce qu'ils semblent privilégier, quelque chose qui n'est propre à personne. Sexe et violence, nommés ainsi, ne renvoient pas à un sujet, mais à ce qui, dispersé dans les journaux, concerne tout le monde, et personne."<sup>211</sup>

Tellingly, the dreams that appear in Jaccottet's published notebooks, while marked on occasion by a subdued sensuality and prone to confusion and anguish, manage to avoid almost entirely the violence and blood for which the above passage from *La semaison* has prepared the reader. The poet instead favors less sensational, subtler narrative sequences, often involving mysterious encounters and incongruous conversational exchanges. I would venture that this tendency to keep the lurid details at bay is a further way for Jaccottet to

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<sup>210</sup> Jaccottet, *Œuvres*, 414.

<sup>211</sup> Pachet, *La force de dormir*, 147.

distance himself from those very elements that had been so present in the troubled, dreamlike atmosphere of the *Trois poèmes aux démons*, and from the stylistic pitfalls that went with them. One could thus see the announcement of sex and violence, the gloomy tone of which reconfirms the obstacle that such things represent to the poet, as a kind of false alarm, a cul-de-sac that points to a possible textual direction and proceeds to lead nowhere. The passage remains a crucial one all the same, for it acknowledges the invisible undercurrent of blood that supports the world of dreams, just as its all-too-visible counterpart conducts the course of history. The presence, hidden but implied in subsequent texts, of “this common, base material” serves to put into relief all that is marvelously *uncommon* in the dream narratives that Jaccottet provides.

Two small books published by Jaccottet within recent years, in many ways companion volumes, have seen the miseries of contemporary history leave the pages of the notebooks, where they had been largely confined hitherto in his published work, and assume a much more prominent place – almost as if to give the lie to critics such as Hervé Ferrage, according to whose early work Jaccottet wages a “*pari de l’inactuel*.”<sup>212</sup> *Israël, cahier bleu* (2004) and *Un calme feu* (2008) recount two trips undertaken to the Middle East, the first to Israel in 1993, the second to Lebanon and Syria in the fall of 2004. Although the poet’s purpose remains above all to pay homage to the beauties of the region, its literature, and to the kindness and generosity of his hosts there, both volumes are animated “*par la tension qui régnait presque partout, par le sentiment, justifié, qu’à tout moment une explosion pouvait se*

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<sup>212</sup> The phrase is the subtitle of Ferrage’s important, often overlooked study of Jaccottet’s work. The first of Jaccottet’s two volumes in question here was composed before Ferrage’s book (which the poet himself has praised), but did not appear in full until four years after the latter’s publication; both the composition and the publication of the second volume postdate Ferrage’s work. See Ferrage, *Philippe Jaccottet, le pari de l’inactuel*.

produire, quelqu'un crier, perdre son sang, s'effondrer."<sup>213</sup> This tension cannot remain latent forever, and sudden outbreaks of violence interrupt the writing itself in morbidly parallel fashion. "(Le lendemain du jour où, à deux ans et demi de ce voyage, j'avais noté ces réflexions, Itzhak Rabin était assassiné par un étudiant juif.)"<sup>214</sup> "Le 12 décembre de l'an dernier – 2005 –, alors même que j'essayais de donner forme à cette relation de voyage, Gébrane Tuéni, le fils de notre hôte, rentrant de Paris, était assassiné non loin de chez lui."<sup>215</sup> In each case, a paragraph comprising a single sentence suffices to record the atrocity, bringing a longer passage to an abrupt (and, in the first instance, parenthetical) close, the absence of further commentary conveying only too well the author's numbness and regret. The positioning of these moments in the text, their seeming inescapability, recalls the frequent occurrence in Jaccottet's early verse of the word "déjà" signaling a poem's *chute*, and with it, the feeling that one has been caught up by time at long last. The older writer's prose finds different rhythmical devices to adapt to circumstance, but they prove no more able than regular poetic meter to keep back the tide of blood ever pushing events forward.

Like his visits to other countries, even those as close to home as Austria or Italy, Jaccottet's experience of the Middle East is filtered through his varied readings; the latter may not date from recent times, or necessarily concern the locations at hand – and so much the better for the traveler's purpose, for they broaden his frame of reference and allow him to forge intuitive connections between multiple layers of history and culture. His trip to Israel notably finds him discovering the 16<sup>th</sup>-century poet Agrippa d'Aubigné, the devastating religious wars of whose era invite comparison with the present-day conflicts

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<sup>213</sup> Jaccottet, *Israël, cahier bleu*, 24-25.

<sup>214</sup> *Ibid.*, 29.

<sup>215</sup> Jaccottet, *Un calme feu*, 16.

tearing the Middle Eastern region apart: “Cet homme, comme la plupart de ses contemporains, avait été immergé tout entier dans la réalité la plus concrète, la plus brutale; il savait ce que c’est que l’ordure, la puanteur, le sang lorsqu’il cesse d’irriguer un corps, de lui prêter son plus tendre incarnat, pour s’écouler hors de lui et souiller la poussière ou rougir les eaux les plus limpides.”<sup>216</sup> Jaccottet marvels at d’Aubigné’s fortitude, at the unflinching stance of his epic poem *Les tragiques*, which does not spare the reader from graphic details of his contemporaries’ struggles.<sup>217</sup> His admiration stops short, however, at d’Aubigné’s tenacious religious conviction – a belief, worthy in Jaccottet’s mind of fundamentalists and fanatics, in what he calls “une Vérité aussi évidente et rigide qu’une grille de prison ou un gourdin.”<sup>218</sup> That such a view should be expressed poetically only compounds the problem; from an inflexible position springs inflexible verse – exquisitely crafted, perhaps, but trapping the reader in a sealed textual space where the mind’s movement is constrained. For Jaccottet, then, d’Aubigné’s designated path through the morass of blood – and the equivalent path of any poet who adheres blindly to a dogmatic ideology – leads only to another impasse, all the greater for being of the poet’s own choosing. *Israël, cahier bleu* and *Un calme feu* in some ways articulate most clearly Jaccottet’s alternative poetics of recent history, one that offers no readymade solution, public or private, to the challenges of his time, but which instead remains at the very heart of the darkness without going so far as to embrace it, and trusts that the precariousness of such a position is precisely what constitutes its worth.

As we have seen over the course of the previous pages, the motif of blood throughout Jaccottet’s work, far from being treated one-dimensionally, proves crucial to a

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<sup>216</sup> Jaccottet, *Israël, cahier bleu*, 68.

<sup>217</sup> In his study of the symbolism of blood in late 16<sup>th</sup>-century French poetry, James Sacré devotes an important chapter to d’Aubigné, while focusing primarily on works other than *Les tragiques*. See *Un sang maniériste*, 71-90.

<sup>218</sup> Jaccottet, *Israël, cahier bleu*, 69.

multiplicity of poetic moods and modes, from the sensual to the horrific, from the impersonal to the most intimate. Ultimately, though, and from writings as early as the *Requiem*, blood's primary connotation is that of death, the definitive obscurity encompassing all others. It therefore comes as something of a surprise that critics, including those who have discussed the importance to Jaccottet of blood, have dwelt relatively little on the prose piece at the heart of 1961's *Éléments d'un songe* in which this connection is developed in the greatest detail. "Devant l'ombre maltraitée" narrates the poet's overnight encounter with a middle-aged man who suffers an accident in the street and is taken to hospital in a pitiable state. Jaccottet's consequent reflection, as he keeps company with the victim, not only crystallizes numerous aspects of the former's poetics, but also provides an ample basis on which to consider the fundamental question: *for whom* does Jaccottet write in the first place?

The flow of the prose in "Devant l'ombre maltraitée" is interrupted practically as soon as it has begun, faltering from the first lines as the speaker evokes a barrier that he has no hope of crossing: "Sur ce seuil, je me suis toujours arrêté avec effroi, avec gêne. Faute d'expérience, ou parce qu'un commencement d'expérience m'avertissait qu'il y avait là une porte verrouillée, un obstacle impossible à franchir, dont il m'était difficile, en tout cas, de parler."<sup>219</sup> The slightly disjointed syntax, as well as the insistent alliterative effects ("Sur ce seuil," "arrêté avec effroi") strengthen the impression that one is repeatedly coming up against an immovable obstacle, a confrontation with which has now become the text's principal stake. This stumbling block soon takes the form of the unfortunate stranger struck by a passing van, whom Jaccottet accompanies to hospital in the absence of anyone known to the victim; the former is deeply disturbed by the sight, and by a sure sense of impending

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<sup>219</sup> Jaccottet, *Œuvres*, 298.

death, without, however, being able to wrest his eyes away, as though some force impelled his gaze to remain fixed in contemplation. A calmer reverie ensues, the poet recalling the words of the 16<sup>th</sup>-century Spanish mystic Saint Teresa of Àvila as a model of tranquility in times of distress, before his attention is recalled to the man beside him, and the full measure of the experience acknowledged, summed up by a single mark of blood:

Je crois que la mort d'un homme restera longtemps pour moi cette tache de sang sur un oreiller d'hôpital, cette tache dont l'extension féroce signifiait l'accroissement de l'obscurité et de la faiblesse, cette tache de toutes manières dégoûtante, mais cette nuit-là vraiment menaçante monstrueuse, impénétrable. Sans aucun doute, elle s'étendait alors pour moi bien au-delà de ses limites réelles, cela devenait je ne sais quoi d'intolérable et d'innommable qu'il serait beaucoup trop élégant de comparer même à la plus ténébreuse, à la plus longue nuit; cet innommable, plus qu'aucune nuit, prenait la place du jour, l'effaçait moins qu'il ne l'altérait, l'intoxiquait. [...] Là encore, il m'avait paru que je pouvais continuer d'avancer, que rien ne pesait, qu'avec un peu de courage [...] Non. C'était cette seule tache, en fin de compte plutôt petite, pas plus grande que la main en tout cas, cette tache innommable qui était le dernier obstacle.<sup>220</sup>

The symbolic weight of the stain on the pillow is all the greater considering that, as the text later reveals almost offhandedly, Jaccottet does not remain present for the man's death, which might not even have come about in hospital after all. Such is blood's anticipatory power.<sup>221</sup> Such, too, its stimulus to the imagination: in the subsequent movement of the text, the poet invents the victim's possible life story as if the latter were telling it himself, a singular gesture for a writer who claims that "[il] ne pourrai[t] pas raconter des histoires."<sup>222</sup>

The narrative can indeed only improvise a detour around the bloodstain that lies at the literal

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<sup>220</sup> Ibid., 303-4.

<sup>221</sup> It so happens that a similar premonition involving a drop of blood marks an iconic moment in the anecdotal history of lyric poetry. The story is widely told of John Keats, in the late stages of the tuberculosis that was to prove fatal, examining his own blood after a fit of coughing and pronouncing to his close friend Charles Brown his medical opinion that the blood had come from an artery and consequently signaled his approaching death. Familiar with Keats's life and work from an early age, thanks in large part to the translations of Pierre-Louis Matthey, Jaccottet would quite possibly have come upon this story by the time of writing *Éléments d'un songe*. See Bate, *John Keats*, 636.

<sup>222</sup> Jaccottet, *Œuvres*, 61.

and figurative center of the text; the stain itself signifies that which is beyond the reach of language, a hole that can be circumscribed but never named.

If it is no more than coincidence that one can hear the word “Malte” in the title “Devant l’ombre maltraitée,” then it is a fitting one, for although the text belongs to a series of variations on a theme by Musil, the presence of Rilke – and the eponymous protagonist of *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge* – comes across here even more forcefully.<sup>223</sup> The reflective, troubled tone, the somber atmosphere of the Paris streets and the hospital, the moribund figure all recall the opening pages of Rilke’s novel. More specifically, as Jaccottet himself points out in his book on Rilke, Malte is haunted above all by the prospect of anonymous death, others’ as much as his own.<sup>224</sup> A similar worry, I would argue, vexes the narrator of “Devant l’ombre maltraitée,” and prompts him to supply the unknown stranger with a past and a face in order to cover the gap left by his anonymity. Many years earlier, Jaccottet’s *Requiem* had already manifested a desire to bear witness to those victims of war whose abrupt deaths, in Rilkean terms, left their lives unfulfilled, unclaimed; the young writer’s precocious effort to *reclaim* some part of them had fallen short in his estimation, given both the scope of the tragedy and the insufficiency of his poetic technique. But by the time of composing *Éléments d’un songe*, he had found his voice. The accident victim reawakens the same compulsion to bear witness; the looming death of a solitary individual represents no less an obstacle to the poet than the numerous dead honored in the *Requiem*, yet the personal encounter with the former enables the poet to respond to it in a manner more in keeping with the intimacy of his aesthetic – and that response is catalyzed by the sight of blood. “Il y a en nous une puissance de regarder le sang et d’en avoir horreur qui nous fait

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<sup>223</sup> See Rilke, *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*.

<sup>224</sup> Jaccottet, *Rilke*, 74.



avancer au-delà de nous-mêmes (ou du moins nous en donne l'idée),”<sup>225</sup> he writes in “Devant l'ombre maltraitée,” recalling the incipit of *La semaison* discussed earlier. However distressing the blood ebbing out of a dying man, in other words, the scene's sheer force projects one out of oneself in the same way as do the flight of a bird or the features of a landscape at other moments in Jaccottet's work. Out of the self-generated impasse of sterile introspection, the poet emerges to be confronted by an irreducible enigma posed by the outside world – “injonction plutôt qu'inspiration,”<sup>226</sup> in the phrase of poet Claude Dourguin – for which the text must then account.



The role of blood in Jaccottet's corpus varies according to its manifestation. When spilled, dispersed in stains (*taches*) throughout the visible world, it obliges the poet to the task (*tâche*) of assimilating it into poetic experience; when concentrated and interiorized, it pushes poetic articulation forward, dilating the veins of verse and prose in order for the language to flow. As such, it incarnates perfectly the *entrediction* that I have attempted to trace through Philippe Jaccottet's writing.<sup>227</sup> What begins as the *interdiction* of the apparently inexpressible (whether it take the forbidding form of a bloodstain or a photograph, or, in a different register altogether, that of a simple dash of color in the roadside undergrowth) then *enters* into a diction that must find its way between (*entre*) silence and eloquence, music and speech,

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<sup>225</sup> Jaccottet, *Œuvres*, 307.

<sup>226</sup> Dourguin, *Ciels de traîne*, 93.

<sup>227</sup> While the term *entrediction* seems to have existed in Old French, the only contemporary rehabilitation of it I have come across is in a remarkable essay by Jean Pierre Faye on Georges Bataille; see “Éclats,” 209-10.

poet and reader.<sup>228</sup> Jaccottet's *entrediction* is what dilates the poem, maintaining its porosity in the interstice it occupies: "L'entre-deux, l'enclos ouvert, peut-être ma seule patrie; le monde qui ne se limite pas à ses apparences et qu'on n'aimerait pas autant s'il ne comportait ce noyau invisible qu'un poème [...] fait rayonner."<sup>229</sup>

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<sup>228</sup> "L'oscillation de la diction entre *parler* et *chanter* est un effet de la précarité de la poésie" (Mathieu, *Philippe Jaccottet*, 417).

<sup>229</sup> Jaccottet, *Œuvres*, 1108.

## APPENDIX

Interview with Jean-Christophe Bailly, Paris, June 2013

**Q:** Merci, Jean-Christophe Bailly, de m'accueillir chez vous pour parler de quelques aspects de votre œuvre. Dans l'un des textes de votre livre *Le parti pris des animaux*, que vous venez de sortir, vous citez une phrase qui a guidé votre travail. C'est une citation de Novalis, et puisque vous terminez ce texte-là avec cette citation je pensais que peut-être on pourrait commencer par là: "La Nature est cette communauté surprenante où nous introduit notre corps."

**R:** Oui, c'est une phrase que j'ai redécouverte, parce que je connais assez bien l'œuvre de Novalis, mais là je n'avais pas repéré cette phrase, et je la trouve extraordinaire. J'ai vérifié l'allemand: c'est bien *wunderbare Gemeinschaft*, donc c'est vraiment "communauté surprenante, extraordinaire, merveilleuse, où nous introduit notre corps." Et (comme souvent avec Novalis d'ailleurs) il y a une espèce de bond: c'est ce jeune homme qui est presque emblématique, presque caricatural à la limite, d'une certaine imagerie romantique – qui meurt jeune, qui est dans une dimension d'idéalisme intégrale, etc. – et en même temps, non, puisqu'il était capable d'une vision extraordinairement concrète et d'une modernité très sidérante. Et c'est le cas avec cette phrase-là, puisque le rapport des romantiques à la nature, qui est une chose avérée, célèbre, presque devenue rhétorique, est caractérisé là d'une manière extraordinairement dynamique, et justement comme un rapport, comme une relation. Et cette relation, elle est décrite à la fois comme une communauté à laquelle on appartient et à laquelle on n'appartient pas vraiment, puisqu'on entre en rapport avec elle. Et par quoi? Pas par la pensée, pas par la rêverie: par le *corps* – c'est-à-dire le geste, les gestes du

corps, les gestes involontaires, comme le premier, qui est de respirer. Et donc c'est toute cette porosité entre l'homme et l'univers qui l'entoure, qui est la plupart du temps brouillée, masquée, depuis et avant le *cogito* et depuis tout ce qu'on a dit avec, c'est-à-dire: "Je pense, je suis, mais étant celui qui pense *je suis*, je suis au sein de quelque chose qui me dépasse, m'entoure, me surpasse, m'accueille aussi." Et cette dimension-là, c'est le deuxième pas, on peut dire: au-delà du *cogito* il y a ça. Mais c'est tout à fait étonnant de voir que chaque mot là compte.

Donc, la *Nature*. Je suis toujours agacé quand je vois comment aujourd'hui des gens qui se croient à bon dos philosophes parce qu'ils ont lu trois lignes de Michel Foucault, disent: "La nature, c'est fini." J'ai toujours trouvé cela assez grotesque. Et la nature change de nom: elle a été la *phusis* des Grecs, elle a été la *natura naturans*, *natura naturata*, aujourd'hui disons l'ensemble des forces qui conduisent l'univers, forces sur lesquelles l'homme peut intervenir mais de façon extrêmement marginale (hélas, déjà beaucoup trop à mon goût). Mais disons que ça existe quand même, mais pas comme quelque chose de perdu, ou qui serait une simple altérité: c'est une *communauté*. Et cette communauté, elle est comment? Elle est *surprenante*, elle est *wunderbar*, ce qui veut dire qu'elle est composée de toute une série d'éclosions d'existences différentes de la nôtre, dont la caractéristique est qu'elles fabriquent de la surprise. Et donc nous sommes dans une communauté de la fabrique de la surprise, et ce qui en fait l'expérience, c'est notre *corps*. Autrement dit nous-mêmes en tant que nous sommes purement et simplement vivants. Voilà comment on comprend cette phrase, et je la trouve éblouissante de simplicité, de radicalité.

**Q:** Et cette surprise qui vient avec la rencontre de la nature et des animaux, pour vous elle est très souvent mêlée à la joie.

**R:** Mais c'est *toute* la nature, les animaux étant évidemment, comme ils sont très vifs et mobiles, un peu les émissaires de cette surprise. Et oui, il y a une joie évidente pour moi à constater l'immensité de toutes ces différences, de toutes ces existences. Mais justement, l'idée de la communauté merveilleuse, ce n'est pas la communauté d'un assemblage fusionnel ou d'une identité allant se dissoudre dans quelque chose de communiel. Au contraire, c'est la communauté des distincts. C'est en tant que chaque être est distinct, que chaque existence est distincte, qu'il y a communauté merveilleuse. C'est cela qui est à penser continûment.

**Q:** Cette joie est-elle teintée parfois de mélancolie lorsqu'il s'agit d'espèces en voie de disparition?

**R:** La mélancolie, elle est plus ample que ça. Là, c'est une tristesse plutôt qu'une mélancolie. Une tristesse politique, quand on voit la rage avec laquelle des hommes (depuis longtemps, mais spécialement depuis qu'ils le peuvent par des moyens technologiques de plus en plus puissants) s'acharnent à puiser dans les ressources et à détruire ce qui les entoure, et justement à ne pas prendre en considération cette communauté merveilleuse, mais simplement à s'en servir comme d'une sorte de réserve, de garde-manger – enfin, à piller le monde. Là c'est une tristesse, et même le sentiment d'absurdité, d'injustice est tel que, disons, c'est un sentiment politique de révolte qui vient. La mélancolie, pour moi, je la réserverais à autre chose. La mélancolie n'est pas du tout un sentiment négatif. Une vie sans mélancolie serait une vie épouvantable. La mélancolie, c'est juste la phase de résonance qui suit la découverte. La découverte, dans l'immédiat, est joyeuse, c'est comme un surgissement. Mais immédiatement après, il y a une réaction: "Mais que fait cet autre qu'est cet animal que je vois, ou cette plante très belle qui pousse devant moi? Qu'est-ce qu'elle est venue faire ici,

et qu'est-ce que je suis venu faire là? Et nous nous rencontrons, et que va donner notre rencontre, et qu'en restera-t-il? Et pourquoi je ne suis et il n'est (ou elle n'est) aussi que de passage, et comment se fait-il qu'il y ait ce passage, si bref?" Et alors on pense à la possibilité de tous les autres passages, de toutes les autres rencontres. Et donc chaque grain d'existence est pour ainsi dire pris dans le bain d'une mélancolie qui est liée au caractère passager, mortel, éphémère, de tout ce qui compose les plans d'immanence de tout ce qui apparaît. Et tout ce qui apparaît, c'est aussi tout ce qui disparaît. La mélancolie, c'est là qu'elle a son établissement, son siège. Mais le fait que des occasions de rencontrer des différences deviennent de moins en moins nombreuses, à cause des modes de vie qui sont les nôtres aujourd'hui, ça, ce n'est pas de la mélancolie, c'est de la tristesse.

**Q:** Dans ce livre vous rouvrez, pour ainsi dire, la question de l'Ouvert, qui est une notion qu'on associe à la poésie et la pensée de Rilke, parmi d'autres – mais pour vous c'est quelque chose de beaucoup plus actif que chez lui.

**R:** Oui. Justement, c'est un mot qui me pose beaucoup de problèmes. Jean-Luc Nancy m'a dit: "Finalement, ce que tu appelles 'l'ouvert,' c'est ce que d'autres appelaient Dieu." Alors, je lui précise bien que non (et il est d'accord, d'ailleurs). Mais déjà, pour moi il n'y a pas de majuscule. Ce n'est pas "l'Ouvert," "the Open," avec un "O" gigantesque. L'ouvert, c'est justement ce qui reste ouvert. C'est-à-dire que ce n'est pas un domaine, ni un territoire: c'est ce qui, dans tout domaine, dans tout territoire, laisse la porte ouverte à un "plus X" qui peut entrer. Et donc, en fait, c'est le plan vivant même dans lequel on se trouve. Mais les vies sont organisées socialement de telle manière que cet ouvert n'est absolument pas perçu, pas perceptible. On vit fenêtres fermées sur l'ouvert. Pourtant elles donnent sur lui, mais on ne le sait plus, on ne le voit pas. Et c'est un terme qui peut avoir une connotation d'idéalisme

poétique, dans le sens négatif du mot. Je me souviens d'ailleurs: c'était à New York, une discussion à partir de la traduction américaine de *Le versant animal* (*The Animal Side*), et il y avait là une amie que je connais bien, une philosophe américaine, qui m'a dit: "Fuck the open." Et je lui ai répondu: "Just try." [Rires.] Parce qu'en effet, je voyais bien ce qu'elle voulait dire: "Fuck the open, laisse tomber cette histoire." Mais je l'ai pris au sens littéral, et j'ai dit "just try," puisqu'on ne peut pas le baiser, il est imbaisable, d'une certaine manière: il est toujours déjà disparu au moment où on y accède. C'est-à-dire que c'est le toujours-déjà-disparu, le toujours-déjà-ré-ouvert... On pourrait dire de l'ouvert qu'il est la structure qui permet à la vérité d'être errante, l'ensemble des conditions qui maintiennent la possibilité que la vérité soit insaisissable, donc existante. Donc c'est quelque chose de très précis qui, par exemple, dans des domaines bien déterminés d'écriture, se confond presque à des questions techniques: comment faire pour ne pas occulter cette ouverture, l'ouverture à l'ouvert?

**Q:** Pour choisir un autre mot qui pourrait, non pas résumer votre pensée, mais en suggérer plusieurs pistes à la fois, j'ai pensé que ce serait peut-être le mot anglais *wake*, parce que quand c'est un verbe ça veut dire "éveiller, réveiller," mais quand c'est un nom ça peut vouloir dire "une veillée" ou "un sillage": "The wake of a boat" – le sillage d'un bateau, par exemple. Et vous dites dans votre livre que la plupart du temps, ce qu'on voit des animaux dans la nature, c'est leur sillage.

**R:** Je ne savais pas que *sillage* et *éveil*, d'une certaine manière, étaient le même mot en anglais. C'est formidable – merci de m'apprendre ça. Mais en effet, l'éveil, ce serait un peu la proue du navire, si on garde cette métaphore, mais il ne peut pas y avoir de proue qui avance sans qu'il y ait aussitôt et simultanément un sillage. Donc on pourrait dire que le sillage, c'est le tracé, ou la trace, de l'éveil. Et on peut développer ça, toute une série d'histoires, de récits,

qui sont des récits de lignes qui passent. Ce peut être un scénario très condensé, comme dans “A une passante” de Baudelaire, ce poème magnifique: deux sillages, et deux éveils, qui se croisent, et l’un devient sillage pour l’autre (l’autre, non, parce qu’elle ne se retourne pas, elle). Cela me fait penser, d’ailleurs, à un passage des *Anneaux de Saturne* de Sebald, où au début il raconte que dans un petit musée qui est au bord de la mer il trouve le livre de bord d’un pavillon dans lequel on observe le mouvement des navires, et donc on a là un répertoire de sillages dans le sens le plus strict, c’est-à-dire que tel jour est passé tel bateau, à telle vitesse, etc. C’est magnifique dans un livre, le livre des passages – *Passagenwerke* – mais le *Passagenwerk* de presque rien, du disparu.

Et la notion même de passage, d’ailleurs, est pour moi fondamentale. Pas au sens de l’objet-passage tel qu’il a été étudié par Benjamin dans l’espace urbain, mais passage au sens: “Le temps passe, c’est un passage... Par où on va? On peut passer par là, on n’avait pas vu...” Et aussi m’intéressent les passages les plus brefs. Par exemple, pour revenir aux animaux, c’est assez extraordinaire de penser, lorsqu’on voit un papillon – *butterfly* –, qu’on partage un instant avec lui. Évidemment, la conversation n’est pas très riche, sans doute, mais on peut faire autre chose que converser, parler: on est devant quelqu’un qui n’est là, sur terre (sous cette forme, en tout cas), que pour quelques jours. Quelques jours! Et il passe. Quand on pense à ça, on voit le vol des papillons déjà tout autrement, comme celui d’un visiteur qui n’a pas beaucoup de temps. Hop! il disparaît. Et ça devient presque sublime. Puis, à l’inverse, il y a ce qui passe en restant, les fleuves, le fleuve d’Héraclite qui correspond à n’importe quelle petite rivière: il ne fait que passer, mais en même temps il reste là. Et un passage, c’est probablement très connecté à ce que je viens de raconter sur l’ouvert. C’est-à-



dire que c'est ce qui maintient l'ouvert, mais justement pas comme un énorme sanctuaire. C'est le contraire d'un sanctuaire; c'est même à la limite ce qui ne peut pas être sanctuarisé.

**Q:** Vous avez évoqué quelques éveils – mais en même temps, les animaux qui *dorment* semblent vous intéresser beaucoup dans ce nouveau livre.

**R:** Oui. Le sommeil m'intéresse énormément. Non pas que je dorme beaucoup, j'ai quelques problèmes d'insomnie, mais ce n'est pas non plus à cause de ces problèmes d'insomnie que je m'intéresse au sommeil. J'adore voir dormir, voir les êtres endormis. Parmi les humains, cela ne fait pas beaucoup de monde. C'est ce qui est très troublant, aujourd'hui, dans les villes (beaucoup plus en France qu'aux Etats-Unis), avec tous ces gens qui vivent par terre, dans la rue. On les voit couchés, mais on ne les voit pas vraiment dormir. C'est comme une intimité à soi-même d'un retrait si profond. Et en même temps, voir dormir, c'est comprendre tout de suite que celui qui dort est abandonné, d'une certaine manière, dans un mouvement vivant qui est d'abord affaibli, en veilleuse, qui est donc le contraire de l'éveil, par définition, mais en même temps qui en est la garantie. C'est comme l'oubli à la mémoire: la mémoire habite l'oubli, elle est contenue dans l'oubli. Et le *wake*, il est contenu dans le sommeil. Le sommeil est une énorme protection. Imaginez un monde où les hommes ne dormiraient plus. Déjà ils sont assez bruyants, mais là ça deviendrait terrible! [Rires.]

Et quand on voit les animaux dormir, évidemment il y a ceux qu'on peut voir fréquemment, comme un chat, par exemple (qui dort beaucoup, en plus). Mais la relation qu'on a avec un animal qui dort... c'est très difficile à dire, parce que ce n'est pas qu'on ait confiance en lui, mais on entre immédiatement dans une dimension où l'on comprend qu'il est en train d'expérimenter (pas de façon consciente, puisqu'il dort) quelque chose qui est totalement en phase avec ce que nous connaissons. Le sommeil rassemble les dormeurs et,

en même temps, chacun est dans un voyage, avec ses rêves. Mais disons que c'est comme un énorme lac au bord duquel chacun repose – chat, vache, corbeau, homme de Philadelphie, homme de Tombouctou... La consistance du lac de sommeil a quelque chose qui incarne, d'une certaine manière, cette communauté surprenante. Elle est là. La *wunderbare Gemeinschaft* est encore plus présente dans le sommeil, étrangement. Et le sommeil est évidemment un moment d'existence particulier du corps.

**Q:** Au début de votre livre *Le versant animal*, vous racontez une rencontre nocturne avec un chevreuil qui est assez extraordinaire, parce que c'est le fait même de vouloir tenir compagnie, en quelque sorte, à cet animal, le fait de vouloir prolonger cette rencontre, qui le fait fuir...

**R:** Lui, il fuit de toute façon – mais c'est ainsi avec les animaux, sauf si on a la chance de tomber sur un animal profondément endormi. Dans l'ensemble – en tout cas dans le monde sauvage, là où ils sont – ils s'enfuient quand ils nous voient. C'est la structure de notre rapport. Et quand un animal qui nous voit ne s'enfuit pas, c'est extrêmement étonnant. Ça m'est arrivé avec des chevaux sauvages en Irlande, où ils viennent vous voir. Et c'est très étonnant, puisque d'habitude ils s'en vont. Même les animaux domestiques comme les moutons. Peut-être qu'il y a un bélier qui va venir voir, résister, mais la structure, c'est la fuite, quand même, c'est la cachette. Donc, nos relations, nos rapports à ce monde-là sont de l'ordre du furtif. Il y a un sillage, mais il est vite effacé. Mais justement, ça rend l'espace du partage beaucoup plus vif, beaucoup plus acéré, presque rien. Mais ce presque-rien est fondamental. Quand j'ai rencontré ce *deer*, ce chevreuil, il n'y avait pas le désir de l'embêter, mais de le voir un peu plus longtemps. Mais de toute façon il s'en va, il n'a rien à faire avec moi. C'est normal.

**Q:** Donc, l'écrivain qui tombe sur ces sillages et ces traces, serait-il comme un chasseur bienveillant?

**R:** Oui, c'est un chasseur bienveillant, bien sûr. J'espère, enfin! Le but, en l'occurrence, n'est jamais de tuer. Mais de toute façon, c'est vrai que sur le plan imaginaire, sur le plan des dispositifs de regard, d'attente, la chasse est assez extraordinaire à étudier, et que le rapport qui s'est constitué pendant des millénaires entre les hommes et les animaux par la chasse a été l'apprentissage intellectuel de l'humanité. L'homme est passé par là, c'est-à-dire par l'observation des indices, des moindres détails, et la connaissance est venue par là, j'en suis sûr. En même temps, cet aspect furtif, fragile, de tout ce qu'on peut attraper ou saisir, c'est fondamental, puisque c'est comme ça qu'on apprend que justement, la vérité, fût-ce celle de l'instant, est évanescence, insaisissable, éphémère.

**Q:** Concernant cette forme d'attention particulière que l'écrivain prête au monde, j'ai repéré une phrase de Philippe Jaccottet, qui parle d'un problème qu'il rencontre parfois. Il écrit dans *La semaison*: "Il se passe, à peu de chose près, ceci de détestable, d'exaspérant au moins, que l'attention au monde encouragée par un certain travail poétique aboutirait après quelque temps à altérer, sinon à détruire la capacité d'émotion." Dans votre propre expérience, est-ce que vous vous surprenez parfois à "attendre l'imprévisible"?

**R:** Oui, mais c'est très compliqué. Cela me fait penser à cette phrase de Benjamin, qui dit, dans ses textes de jeunesse, que la vérité est la mort de l'intention. C'est-à-dire que quand quelque chose qui apparaît comme étant de l'ordre de la vérité se présente, l'intention disparaît. On pourrait considérer le travail d'écriture (poétique, philosophique, peu importe) comme un processus d'aménagement des conditions du non-intentionnel, qui libère la possibilité de la surprise. Mais sans qu'il y ait à cela de techniques extrême-orientales ou

autres, on peut dire que cela correspond à des démarches quasi mystiques, à un mouvement de dépossession. Là il y a cette idée de ne rien faire d'autre que d'être attentif. Et en ne faisant rien d'autre qu'être attentif, évidemment il ne faut pas, par exemple, trop focaliser, il ne faut pas trop attendre, ou trop *en* attendre. Donc, ménager l'espace de l'irruption surprenante, c'est très compliqué, c'est une question de stratégies, de petites tactiques locales. D'ailleurs, quand on écrit, par exemple, on sent très bien comment on est en train de transformer le sillage en quelque chose qui n'a plus de vivacité, qui peut s'installer dans des postures, dans des cheminements forcés. C'est d'autant plus retors et difficile qu'il y a toute une imagerie à laquelle les poètes notamment sont sensibles, de l'impossible, de l'inatteignable, presque ridicule par certains aspects. Des attitudes qui, reliées à la blancheur, à l'attente, impliquent pour les mots un advenir étroit et solennel – alors que pour moi ils sont vraiment, là au sens strict, comme des animaux qui fuient – fourmis, souris, lions, n'importe qui.

Ils sont extraordinaires, les mots, puisqu'ils sont les outils par lesquels on essaie d'attraper la vérité, et en même temps ceux qui incarnent sa fuite à la même minute et au même instant. Et c'est ça qui est bien. S'ils n'étaient que la fuite de la vérité ce ne serait que désespérant, mais s'ils étaient des outils purement et simplement efficaces ce serait peut-être encore plus désespérant et produirait quelque chose de terrible. Mais à la minute même où on se sert d'un mot pour attraper, pour se saisir d'une vérité, ce mot incarne sous nos yeux la fuite en avant, hors d'emprise, de notre vérité. Mais si, en disant ça, j'élabore quelque chose qui irait plus loin et qui conceptualiserait l'Insaisissable avec un grand "I," là à nouveau je tomberais dans un piège. L'Insaisissable ne peut pas être saisi par le mot qui le nomme, l'Innommable ne peut pas être attrapé par un mot, etc. Il faut vraiment réfléchir à ce qu'on

dit. Et l'Insaisissable, l'Invisible, l'Innommable... malheureusement pour beaucoup de poètes, c'est une rente et j'ai une grande distance envers eux. Ils ont tendance à croire qu'il y a un domaine, dont on peut avoir les clés, que ça y est, on est du côté de l'Invisible. Mais non: dans l'Invisible on ne voit rien.

**Q:** Vous avez évoqué l'Extrême-Orient, et Jaccottet est un grand amoureux du haïku. Dans *La préparation du roman*, les cours que Roland Barthes a faits au Collège de France, Barthes compare le haïku à une espèce de photographie sans appareil, qui à la fois capterait le monde et le laisserait échapper. Est-ce que vous trouvez qu'il y a certaines formes d'écriture qui s'apparentent à la photographie, à cette capture, plus que d'autres?

**R:** J'ai beaucoup réfléchi là-dessus, notamment en me promenant pour écrire *Le dépaysement*, puisque je le faisais avec de petits carnets. Ce que je fais toujours, mais là c'était beaucoup plus actif: ces petits carnets étaient vraiment là pour ce travail précis de notation en vue du livre. C'est-à-dire que je n'y mélangeais pas tout, comme le petit carnet que j'ai là sur moi, où il y a l'adresse d'un tel, une idée qui m'est venue, la liste des courses... Mais là c'était vraiment des carnets de préparation. Je sais, quand je prends ces carnets, que je n'écris pas, que je ne produis pas l'écriture qui sera celle du livre. Mais n'écrivant pas vraiment, on est pourtant au contact du site, du *wake*, du sillage. Il y a dans la notation une qualité qui de toute façon sera perdue – qu'il faut savoir perdre, d'ailleurs, peut-être. Et l'idée du haïku tel que je le comprends, et tel que Barthes permet de le comprendre dans ce texte qui est remarquable, c'est que justement, ce serait un condensé entre la notation et une intensité du sens produite par la notation, mais pas produite automatiquement. Ce serait d'avoir la capacité de saisir l'essence de ce qui est noté sur l'instant – donc, en effet, une idée d'instantané qui est assez proche du photographique.

Je me demandais toujours, quand je faisais ce livre (*Le dépaysement*), pourquoi je n'utilisais pas la photographie. J'ai peut-être pris cinquante photos pour faire le livre, dont je me suis servi comme une documentation personnelle, et pas du tout avec une arrière-pensée artiste. J'ai trop de respect pour le travail des photographes pour penser qu'on puisse faire les deux simultanément. Dégager le plan d'immanence de l'intervention photographique, c'est un travail à plein temps. De même, c'est un travail à plein temps de faire ces notations d'écriture. Donc ils se contredisent mutuellement, et d'ailleurs l'attention qu'on porte à l'un tue la possibilité pour l'autre d'advenir, de se déployer. On peut prendre une photo comme ça, *clic*, comme un appoint – de même qu'un photographe peut, lorsqu'il a pris sa photo, dans son carnet, noter qu'il était en face du moulin de ceci, donc il marque "Moulin de ceci, 13h18." Mais il ne va pas en écrire plus; s'il écrit davantage, ça le regarde, mais ce sont des actions complètement différentes. En tout cas je pense que la photo-graphie et la notation ont quand même beaucoup à voir. Sur le mode argentin on peut dire qu'écrire, ce serait à ce moment-là *développer* – développer la "photo" qui a été prise par la notation. Ce n'est qu'une manière de parler, parce que la notation est beaucoup moins précise que la prise photographique, à cause de ce qu'est le langage. Le langage est toujours trop riche, comme on dit qu'un aliment est riche. La photo, elle, est assez pauvre, elle n'en rajoute pas, elle est là, elle vient, elle se pose, elle est cette espèce de surface obstinément muette, et donc comme écrivain on peut en venir à être jaloux de cet aspect. Mais en même temps on sait qu'on manipule un outil beaucoup plus lourd que celui de l'image. Et donc vient cette idée de mettre en tension le langage par rapport au silence de l'image. C'est toujours conducteur, que ce soit l'image que j' imagine possible dans l'appareil photo, surtout que maintenant les appareils photo sont gros comme des boîtes d'allumettes ou toute autre forme d'image. Ce

n'est pas l'unique moyen d'écrire: on peut écrire en restant à la maison, on peut écrire évidemment si on a un propos théorique et alors on n'a pas besoin de tout cela. Mais disons qu'il y a cette base de fonctionnement. Et pour moi, c'est toujours très fondamental, très important.

Je n'imagine même pas sortir de la maison sans carnet. On ne sait jamais. Je n'aime pas Paul Valéry, qui est pour moi un peu une caricature de grand écrivain – mais dans la célèbre anecdote que l'on raconte à propos de sa rencontre avec Einstein – on dit qu'il aurait montré à Einstein qu'il avait sur lui un carnet pour noter ses pensées, ses idées, et qu'alors Einstein lui aurait dit: "Ah, vous avez de la chance, moi des idées je n'en ai eu qu'une." Là je trouve que Einstein a tort. Et qu'il confond la pensée avec l'émission d'un schème conceptuel unique ayant une validité universelle. Or la pensée, ce n'est pas ça. Ça peut aboutir à ça, mais ce n'est pas ça. Il faut imaginer un scénario: X ou disons Valéry voit passer un cheval, ce qui le fait penser à quelque chose, qu'il note, puis il ajoute dans un coin: "Voir Léonard de Vinci," et ainsi de suite. Ça se bâtit plutôt comme ça, la pensée. La pensée, ce n'est pas vérifier, c'est sonder. On sonde, et on ne sonde pas par rapport à quelque chose qui reposerait sur une grille déjà établie: ça, c'est ce que font justement les experts. Eux, ils ont la grille, puis ils viennent sonder: "Ah! il y a moins. Ah! il y a plus. Ah! il y a un problème." C'est idiot. On sonde sans savoir ce qu'on sonde, c'est ça qui est étonnant. Et c'est à partir d'un certain nombre de coups de sonde donnés dans l'inconnu qu'on arrive à configurer un petit fragment de paysage. Mais *rien* n'est jamais déjà connu, c'est faux. Ceux qui croient ça... C'est eux qui gouvernent le monde, d'ailleurs, mais ils ne savent pas dans quoi ils sont.

**Q:** Pour faire le contraste avec Valéry – il y a d'autres éléments de *La préparation du roman* qui rejoignent votre pensée, il me semble, et celle de votre ami Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe,

notamment cette idée de la vie en forme de phrase dont parle Roland Barthes. Alors, pour Lacoue-Labarthe, et pour vous aussi, j'ai l'impression que la phrase atteindrait son point le plus haut justement au moment où l'écrivain n'adopterait pas la pose poétique.

**R:** Oui, j'en suis intimement persuadé. Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe avait quasiment une haine de la pose poétique, ce qui fait que quand il ne voulait pas qu'on l'appelle philosophe, il aurait encore moins aimé qu'on l'appelle poète. Donc, on ne savait pas, on ne *sait* pas comment l'appeler, d'une certaine manière. Mais ce qu'il appelle la phrase, c'est en effet ce qui se produit dans la parole dès lors qu'elle n'est plus au service d'une conformité à un plan de définition malgré tout restreint (philosophie, poésie, etc.) On peut voir, comme ça, toute une série de poses, de postures, et la pose poétique, c'est en effet ce qui acclimate la phrase à un régime de parution qui, au fond, est prévisible. Or, il ne s'agit pas de l'Imprévisible comme tel (à nouveau une majuscule!), mais d'un étonnement, ou de quelque chose qui est à la limite de l'oubli, de ce qui est en train de s'éteindre. Par exemple, je n'ai jamais eu l'occasion d'en parler avec lui, mais il y a une chose qui m'intéresse beaucoup dans la musique d'Extrême-Orient. Il y a en elle une notion magnifique, c'est une pratique, c'est ce qu'ils appellent "le son disparaissant," qui est très net, qu'on entend dans la musique chinoise. *Tanggggg!* [Il imite le son.] Ça s'en va. Et pourquoi? C'est parce que c'est quand ça s'en va que l'on sait ce que l'on est en train de perdre. C'est-à-dire que la vérité, ou l'essence du son, est donnée par le moment où il s'efface. Je trouve cela extraordinaire – extraordinairement juste.

Le langage est tellement volubile, tellement performant, tellement éloquent. C'est quand même extraordinaire, ce que les hommes arrivent à faire avec lui dans toutes les langues et dans toutes les versions, de l'avocat au chanteur en passant par Marcel Proust.



C'est incroyable, cette volubilité-là. Et en même temps on a l'impression souvent que la vérité d'un phrasé qui serait totalement abandonné dans l'ouverture à l'ouvert, ce ne serait pas un phrasé éloquent: il ne peut pas être dans l'éloquence, il ne doit être dans rien, pas même dans le balbutiement feint. D'où, peut-être, l'échec, d'une certaine manière, de Gherasim Luca, puisque lui, il a installé le balbutiement. Il a eu une idée magnifique, et en même temps au bout d'un moment ça ne fonctionne plus. Peut-être pourrait-on même critiquer Paul Celan de ce point de vue – quoique... Mais c'est très compliqué. Comment attraper, saisir?

Ce sont des considérations qui ont l'air de relever de l'éthique, mais en fait ce sont d'abord des considérations techniques. Elles ont à voir avec une conscience du prosodique, avec la libération d'une certaine quantité sonore qu'il faut savoir calmer. Enfin, c'est très délicat, très difficile. Mais par exemple, en tout cas pour moi, les écritures, quelles qu'elles soient – que ce soit dans la philosophie, la narration, ou dans la poésie –, qui n'ont aucune tension prosodique, n'existent pas. Elles existent, bien sûr, je peux les lire – mais elles ne laissent aucun sillage. Ça ne veut pas dire que pour qu'il y ait sillage il faut qu'il y ait rime, ou un rapport conscient ou voulu au son – mais le prosodique, à ce moment-là, c'est aussi la conscience, tout bonnement, qu'on ne doit jamais parler pour ne rien dire. Et dire quelque chose, c'est forcément faire fonctionner une certaine amplitude de diction. Les mots sont en tension physique avec l'univers qui les entoure. Et là, le modèle absolu, au fond, de la littérature, ce n'est pas la photo, c'est l'écho. Quand on est petit et qu'on entend un écho, on en est bouleversé. L'écho répète ce que j'ai dit: ce n'est pas moi qui répète ce que j'ai dit, c'est lui, c'est l'écho, c'est-à-dire quelque chose dans la nature, quelque chose ou quelqu'un dans la *phusis* (on ne le dit pas comme ça quand on est petit!), qui reedit ce que j'ai dit. Et donc la

source, pour la littérature, c'est l'écho qu'elle ne parviendra jamais à rejoindre. Pour moi c'est comme ça. Et parfaire l'écho, ce serait ça le travail. Echo et mimésis, il y a quelque chose qui se dirait comme ça – mais on voit bien en quoi l'écho qui serait la perfection du mimétique en même temps n'est pas mimétique. C'est ça qui est extraordinaire. Donc là, chapeau, c'est l'écho qui est le meilleur. Et il me semble que ce serait facile de démontrer comment l'écriture poétique, par exemple, est beaucoup plus à la recherche de cette dimension d'écho, c'est-à-dire de faire que le langage soit l'écho du sens, et non pas sa production.

**Q:** Ça m'amène à ma dernière question. Il y a une citation de *Le dépaysement* qui m'a toujours beaucoup plu: "Ce qui rend un pays vivable, quel qu'il soit, c'est la possibilité qu'il laisse à la pensée de le quitter." Et je me demandais si on pourrait dire quelque chose de comparable du poème: "Ce qui rend un poème lisible, c'est la possibilité qu'il laisse à la pensée de le quitter." Le poème a-t-il une charge utopique?

**R:** Oui. C'est aussi qu'il se quitte lui-même, justement. Il quitte lui-même un chemin d'inscription qui le réinstitue, le réinvestit. Et le poème est sans arrêt menacé, non seulement par la pose, mais par l'institutionnalisation, en lui, du poétique. Non seulement on peut quitter le poème mais c'est lui-même qui doit se quitter. On trouve des choses comme ça dans la poésie objectiviste américaine, lorsque par exemple Zukofsky introduit brusquement la lettre d'un type qui est à la guerre, ou bien part dans une colère politique, puis revient, puis écoute Bach, puis va à la fenêtre... Enfin, il y a une liberté de la conduite poétique dans certains aspects de la poésie américaine qui va dans le sens de cette possibilité de fuite et d'évasion. Et en règle générale, pas assez dans la poésie d'ici, mais ça viendra, c'est en train de venir...

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