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Deborah M. Hess, *Palimpsestes dans la poésie. Roubaud, Du Bouchet, etc...* Paris : L'Harmattan, 2011. 226 pages. 22,50€ (pb). ISBN 978-2-296-55353-8.

Review by Michael Bishop, Dalhousie University.

Despite the rather carefree subtitle that omits to detail the full count of authors examined, we have here a study of some seriousness and real textual application for which we can offer our thanks to Deborah Hess. This is not to say that certain reservations may not be reasonably harboured, but it remains that *Palimpsestes dans la poésie*—the poetry, that is, of relatively contemporary France and parts of the francophone world (Morocco, Martinique, Québec, arguably Egypt)—constitutes a careful discussion of the thesis the author sets herself, namely the degree to which the literature at hand is characterised by its intertextual interweaving and overlaying, by a complexification that emanates therefrom in various modes and manners, at once formal and, for want of a better word, thematic.

One may argue that this is not a new phenomenon but one that has been at the root of the literary gesture from time immemorial—one may think of Plato, of Shakespeare, of Corneille, of Cocteau, of Joyce and so on—and, although Hess's argument seeks to widen our conception of the palimpsest in seeing it as a machine of expansion and proliferation of not merely strictly literary text, but cultural interchange, symbolic representation, philosophical concept, and what one must deem to be psychological gestalt in the face of contrastive “scenes” of existence, yet all of this too has always been, via an infinity of textual voices, an integral part of the literary and perhaps more subtly of the poetical. In effect, all writing may be said to involve a “scratching clean” or erasure of some “original” text in order to inscribe a new “original.” Language thus moves through its endless others in an ongoing contemplation, meditation, rewriting and overlaying of itself, its infinitely malleable units of sense and form. Language, poetry (*poiein*: doing, making, creating), in this perspective, are fatally—if freely—intertextual and palimpsestic. All poetry: the parchment tirelessly erased to allow new doing-making-creating to lay itself down in the archaic site of self-inscription.

It is certainly feasible to see Hess's argument for Tahar Ben Jelloun's lexical debt (in a single poem, “Une maison”) to Baudelaire, a debt in which almost all French or francophone writers may feel themselves to live, largely in highly indirect ways, but, that said, such traces may be said to remain outweighed by many other more powerful factors in his considerable (and largely neglected) poetic oeuvre. The chapter devoted to Jean Daive's *America domino*, one of many poems in his *Narration d'équilibre*, deals with what are termed “cultural palimpsests” deemed, with Daive, to be reductive transcultural marks whereby the newly inscribed vision of Manhattan and New York, and the USA more broadly, corresponds only in a very limited and distorting way to the teeming culture the city of the other in fact—and quite naturally—generates. The poem thus unconsciously confesses its partiality and the immense (if not impossible) complexity of tracking and speaking the intercultural.

Édouard Glissant's *Grands Chaos* is then scrutinised as a sample of the palimpsest functioning in the “scenic context” (91), with manifest reference to place lived, urgent and strangely exiling. Baudelaire is once more invoked given the centrality of the poetic experience of Paris in the two oeuvres. Such an appreciation of palimpsestic function and logic is, here, undoubtedly subjective, the argument grounded

in an intuitive reasoning difficult to anchor in a firm textual way. If the experience of place were to be held to generate palimpsestically, such generation would involve almost all pre-modern poems and a vast number of contemporary poems despite the frequently *éclaté* mode of the latter. This is not to discount the good analysis Hess provides, but merely to say that one could argue that, unless strict textual, citational or quasi-citational elements are discernable and rendered critically valid, then speaking of Paris may be deemed to be only in the vaguest of ways a clear overlaying of one text/context upon another. Language upon language, yes; this poem upon that precise poem or oeuvre, not really.

The next two chapters explore, firstly, two poems from Marie-Claire Bancquart's 1995 *Énigmatiques* and, secondly, two further poems from Nicole Brossard's 1992 *Langues obscures*. Bancquart's poems are held to centre around their use of "symbolic palimpsests," while Brossard's would generate "philosophical palimpsests." Once again, the analysis offered has a good deal of pertinence in that it provides helpful readings of the four poems selected. Where one may feel somewhat obliged to *rester sur sa faim*, is, firstly, the fact that the symbolic and the philosophical are intertwined concepts and so to separate them out as if a given palimpsest could be so easily distinguished and characterised remains an uncertain enterprise; secondly, one may properly argue that all utterance is symbolic and indeed philosophical to the degree that it seeks, directly or indirectly, a knowing, a "wisdom," ontological "meaning," orientation, *sens*, this by virtue of its struggle with language itself in the latter's own tussle with (the essential question of) human "presence to the world," as the poet Gérard Titus-Carmel has it; thirdly, if the symbolic or philosophical dimension of the palimpsest is at stake, all attention might be expected to weigh, visibly, in that direction, this not quite being the case here—despite, I emphasise, much sound general explication.

The three remaining chapters move from Edmond Jabès to André du Bouchet to Jacques Roubaud, a bold and often well-handled undertaking to the extent that, once again, thoughtful textual analysis is undoubtedly in evidence. The pages devoted to Jabès and Du Bouchet both insist upon similar features, arguing, firstly, that Jabès's work consciously generates a "puzzle" (chapter nine), while Du Bouchet's, to be read adequately, requires a sensitivity to its "pluridimensionality" (chapter ten). One could—I certainly should—take exception to the notion that the vast, fragmented, interwoven character of Jabès's poetry comes about in order to deliberately complicate and produce a textual riddle of sorts. All of contemporary poetry tends to be complex, multilayered and delicately imbricated in its deployment of its forms and meanings, so that, to the extent that the palimpsest is a metaphor for these characteristics, it is an insight of a highly generalised order into modern and contemporary poetics. One need but think of Pound, of Char, of Tellermann, of Pessoa, of Stétié, of Césaire, for example. In short, yes, Jabès's writing subtly interlaces thought in ways that are freely though often untraceably intertextual or palimpsestic, this in a vague if persistent echo of rabbinical exchange; and, yes, to read André du Bouchet's work is to plunge into a teeming swirl of language's multifaceted potentialities. But this is clearly so for many major poets in the French or francophone or other traditions. Hess's sense of one poem's insertion into another, like Russian dolls, is a shrewd one, but this clearly results from obsession, *ressassement*, ongoing meditation of central emotions and perceptions.

Jabès's work certainly displays this best from one volume to another, just as André du Bouchet is right to insist on the fact that all of his work constitutes one single sentence, a feeling poets such as Michel Deguy and Gérard Titus-Carmel clearly share—so that the language of their work becomes a vast palimpsestic field, whose real challenge then transforms into coming to terms with the endless knots of meaning endlessly tied, untied and retied. (One might add that to hear Du Bouchet reading his own poetry reveals a man highly attuned to the unified rhythmic nature of any semantic and structural pluralities articulated.) Roubaud's poetry—the few texts dealt with—is well appreciated and, of course, this in the context of their Oulipian, hypertextual manner. What might be rather more developed, however, is the very purpose of such a manner and the essential remaining *fond* that floats upon its *forme*, for Roubaud is a writer not just playing "analogically" with a computer and offering tantalising

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networks of sound and structure; he remains a lyrical poet in many ways, now smiling, now discreetly wincing, and a poet generating felt meaning.

Deborah Hess is fully aware of certain of the mild qualifications I have made, but in broad terms offers us a study of fair weight and insight. If it would have been perhaps productive to engage other pertinent criticism in the body of the study rather than elliptically in the notes, just as it would perhaps have created a more subtle stylistic continuity to have resisted a certain quasi listing of factors at play in a given analysis, and, of course, if a (very) few *coquilles* linger here and there, this being the contemporary norm we are all aware of in publishing and editing today, it remains that none of this should detract in any especial way from the efforts of a critic of some genuinely serious intent.

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