
H-France Review Vol. 19 (December 2019), No. 259

Arnaud Despax, *Totalité et poésie au XXe siècle*. Paris: Honoré Champion, 2018. 482 pp. Notes, bibliography, and index. 71.10€. (pb). ISBN 9782745347107.

Review by Michael G. Kelly, University of Limerick.

The poetic subject has been a structuring focus of meta-poetic discourse in the French context for several decades now, informing a multitude of poetic practices and commentaries in a debate with multiple and diverse lines of implication--be these philosophical, psychological or political--and confirming a deep tendency of the French poetic field towards what might be labelled metonymic ambition, whereby the poetic effort assumes a performative exemplarity within the drama of human consciousness and creativity. The entrenched marginality of poetic production within the established economies of wider literary industriousness mirrors this generality of purview. Generic identity is transmuted into modes of theoretical or meta-poetic aspiration, which stabilise what is "at stake" and legitimise the field's ongoing reconfigurations. Within this scenario, the poetic subject is an especially sensitive and thereby fecund site of speculative and practical interest, and Arnaud Despax's departing premise in this densely argued and intellectually ambitious study offers insights in passing as to why that appears to be the case.

Identifying what he calls "l'héritage romantique d'une démiurgie souveraine" [1] at work in a minority of French poetic practices from the second half of the twentieth century, Despax argues that such continuations need to be read as profoundly challenged and modified by the varieties of totalitarian experience characteristic of the period -- and the totalitarian "risk" they imply for any such line of thought and artistic practice. Originating within an imaginary of poetic speech, "totality" here thus re-emerges as a threat to the very forms of individuated consciousness whose horizon it had constituted. As a result, to theorize the poetic subject in these conditions is, in a real sense, to entertain the spectre of totality in all its worrying ambivalence, and this can be seen to begin to account for the intensity of focus and difference around the topic within the field of modern and contemporary French poetics.

Despax's headline topic is, however, totality itself as both all-encompassing and elusive focus of a select set of major poetic oeuvres from the mid-century--the period in which this restatement of the problem becomes unavoidable. Introducing the term, Despax notes a second fundamental duality it contains alongside the darkening of its historical presence. This is a semantic duality: that of "intensive" and "extensive" versions, and their ability to interact in more or less acknowledged ways. The amenability of poetic practice to proceeding by (articulation in) units--the line, the poem, the sequence, the book, the text, the work, the individual--makes the potential attraction of intensive totality (the unit as a whole) very strong. Extensive totality--the sum of

all things--is subsumed in French, Despax points out, under the same term. The *totus* and *omnis* of Latin communicate freely within the *tout*--and the derived *totalité*--of the successor language (p. 1).

The formidable opening challenge for a study grounded on this terrain is that of bringing its object into focus. Despax's extensive introduction develops a historical outline of the term and related aspiration in the French literary context from the sixteenth century onwards, but whose central focus is along the lines of the Romantic and post-Romantic debates of the nineteenth century. Hugo, Rimbaud and especially Mallarmé figure interestingly here, in the specifically French context, while the grand arc of developments in the Germanic space, from the Hegel-Hölderlin tandem binding the fates of philosophy and poetry in the light of the Revolution over the border, to the late-century figure of Wagner and the *Gesamtkunstwerk*, is engaged with and integrated illuminatingly into the account.

The twentieth century is framed by Despax in terms of a continuation and displacement of this "inheritance" (*héritage*), in the face of new figures of totality. "Le siècle dernier est à maints égards celui du monde dans la nouveauté de son appréhension globale" (p. 49)--the new developments Despax takes to illustrate this proposition being the destructive totalisation of the two world wars and the unified perception of the planetary system enabled through space travel. Within this increased pragmatic presence of totality as a parameter of human activity, what Despax calls the *les paradoxes de la totalisation* are seen as part of the structural logic of modern cultural and political realities, and to interrelate directly with the evolution of poetic practice: "De la dévastation inédite à la lucidité chaotique du postmodernisme, les paradoxes de la totalisation en poésie accompagnent les rythmes de la politique et de l'art contemporains" (p. 59). The totality question becomes, then, the site of a chastened interface between poetry's internal self-imaginings and the poetic subject's attentiveness to the world. For the twentieth century, given in particular "l'accaparement nazi de l'idée d'œuvre d'art totale" (p. 67), the point of greatest danger, and hence greatest interpretative urgency in Despax's study, lies in and around the tensions and contradictions of that period.

The oeuvres of Pierre Emmanuel (1916-1984), André Frénaud (1907-1993) and Patrice de La Tour du Pin (1911-1975) are foregrounded from the outset (though, perhaps questionably, not in the book's title) as the conjoined space in which these evolutions and tensions become manifest. The choice of these "trois poètes de la Totalité" (p. 80) is established organically in the introduction on either side of the general historical account. Noting the preoccupation with totality evident in each poet's late major works, Despax sees these oeuvres as exhibiting clear symptoms of attentiveness to the evolution of the totality question: "chez Frénaud, La Tour du Pin et Pierre Emmanuel les démarches de totalisation poétique se heurtent à une double difficulté majeure : tout d'abord, selon l'évidence de la lecture, la dénonciation de l'œuvre totalisante par elle-même ; ensuite, le sentiment de la perte de la Totalité, partagé par les contemporains, perte que l'élaboration de l'œuvre peut ne pas rédimier" (p. 22).

Despax cites Blanchot on René Char and the relations of poetry and sovereignty in the run-up to this statement--thus linking his choice of featured poets to an arguably maximalist version of the problem of poetic sovereignty. Like Char, the lived experience of the three featured poets in and around the years 1939-1945 is unarguably essential to an understanding of the complex and critically transformative ways in which they approach the issue of totality. These are characterised by a lucid performative confrontation in each case with the ambivalence of that

category, reflecting an implicit historical responsibility of the poet yet maintaining an un-co-optable openness in and through the practice of poetry. Drawing, notably, on the work of Lévinas in *Totalité et infini* [2], Despax outlines his synthesis position to come in the concluding lines of the introduction: “La totalité non totalitaire pense non seulement son contraire, mais ce qui échappe à l’identification. Le sujet locuteur devient le lieu de la possibilité de la Totalité, la forme hospitalière de l’altérité” (p. 83).

The subsequent body of the study inhabits almost exclusively the space constituted by the featured oeuvres to chart the movement of the question towards this synthesis position of a totality preserved through a critical and creative neutralisation of totalising violence. The three main parts of the study—respectively titled “Déliance,” “Tyrannie,” “L’humble et l’autre”—engage in extended tracings of this reformed logic of totality in its successive—or contending—dimensions or phases.

The opening figure of the demiurge—“un poète institué en sujet total, identité potentiellement sans limites autres que celles de la Totalité—que tout à la fois il considère et englobe” (p. 85)—allows Despax to bring together diverse tendencies in the works considered as examples of “le nœud de la contradiction énonciative du singulier se voulant universel” (p. 91). Thus, while intimations of a “dépossession par le ravissement de l’Être” (p. 155) are a notable feature of Frénaud’s earlier work, in particular, they join the more standard preoccupations with ordinary speech and the verbal presencing of the origin encountered in *Emmanuel* and *La Tour du Pin*, as examples of poetic practice informed by a more or less residual image of the divine. In this respect, there is a significant element of contextual cultural constraint observable in the modelling of the subject position, a particularly ironic paradox given the maximal openness inherent in the conscious approach of totality. There is also a significant issue of narcissistic energy at play, a feature Despax acknowledges and probes insightfully, and which will continue to inhabit his problematic.

The collective outworking of these tensions and energies becomes manifest under Despax’s second heading, that of *tyrannie*. The Mallarméan “disparition élocutoire du poète” is understood to be radicalised through what he terms “l’homogénéisation intensive de la poésie cosmogonique,” to a point where the idealised compression and hence marginalisation of the poetic speaker potentially merges into a “fantasme dictatorial” (p. 165) with which it has deep psychological and philosophical connections. For poets of the mid-century generation as framed, this property of their theoretical and practical horizons is argued to have been both troubling and, fundamentally, transformative—placing poetic writing within a logic that could be argued to bear comparison with that of a Weberian disenchantment: “Constamment confrontée à l’inexprimable, la poésie est surtout perpétuellement en crise par la conscience de la participation de son entreprise au totalitarisme haï ; se haïssant elle-même, elle est consciente de l’insuffisance de la contrition pour négocier les contradictions éthiques qui la minent. Pas de progrès d’une œuvre à l’autre, mais une répétition de la dysphorie” (p. 247).

How, then, is totality retained as a dynamising poetic concern? Despax can be said to have selected well when it comes to the richness of creative response on display, but also in terms of the critical literature on those responses, to which this book is a significant addition. To take a key critical presentation of that poet, for example, Bernard Pingaud articulated the structuring tension in Frénaud’s work in modified Freudian terms that resonate strongly with the logic being developed by Despax: “Ce que décrit cette poésie—il faudrait plutôt dire ce qu’elle manifeste, au

sens où le rêve “manifeste” un contenu latent—, ce sont les avatars d’une subjectivité qui ne peut s’affirmer qu’en éclatant, mais qui se récupère aussi à la faveur de chaque éclatement, la parole étant le double signe de son insuffisance et de sa vérité... C’est pourtant bien d’un engagement qu’il s’agit, et du plus sérieux qui soit, puisque le poème, en brassant les matériaux de l’expérience, ne se propose rien de moins que re-faire, re-produire l’aventure de l’être, et dévoiler, par son mouvement même, l’identité de l’identité et de la non-identité... La souveraineté qu’il [the poetic subject] s’arroge, parce qu’il a, le temps d’un éclair, communiqué avec le Tout, est donc essentiellement précaire. Il n’y a de poésie qu’incarnée, c’est-à-dire, d’une certaine manière déjà, défaite.”[3]

In a passage partially quoted by Despax (258), Jérôme Thélot’s delineation of *poésie précaire* translates some of the same paradoxical structure into a scene of religious aftermath that is also material to the problem of totality as framed in the present work: “Précaire, du latin *precarī*, veut dire: obtenu par la prière, donc permis par une puissance supérieure, donc susceptible d’être retiré, par conséquent fragile et pauvre. *Précaire* est la poésie moderne en ceci qu’elle tient à la prière imprialbe, en ceci, donc, qu’elle est l’essentielle pauvreté d’être défaite de l’oraison.”[4]

This precarious quality inhabits a less frontally religious, but no less essential role in Despax’s construction of his account of the disenchanting poetic engagement with totality. This “de-totalisation” enrolls multiple processes of what he terms “déhiscence” in the poetic text—whereby it is opened out, fragmented formally and discursively, in the direction of an “other” both specific (experience-based) and conceptual (at the level of a poetics), irrespective of the religious identifications of the individual poet. This is a viably open lexical approach to what the chosen poets appear meta-poetically to have in common and invites reflection upon questions which would appear to be gaining renewed relevance in our “post-secular” present, where the challenge is to both recognise differences and explore commonalities beyond the appropriative reach of self-contained thought and belief systems.

Thus, Pierre Emmanuel’s framing of the poetic effort as exemplary of a wider dialectic of creation, in a language that is explicitly but inclusively “Christian,” can be understood as similarly reflective of the tensions which inhabit Despax’s construction of totality. The question of work and its shared, indeed collective, dimension, inhabits the efforts towards a contemplative singular subject position.[5] Meanwhile, La Tour du Pin’s major work, *Une Somme de poésie*, acknowledges in its very structure, as well as in substantive utterance, the “Play” (*Jeu*) between different moments, movements and modes of the subject oriented towards the whole, in an explicitly religious perspective.[6] In this respect, he rejoins the epiphanic, intermittent mode of poetic consciousness manifested differently by Frénaud in particular, but also the ideas of process and the ever-recommencing work of creation which underpin Emmanuel’s verbal architectonics.

In an extended conclusion to his journey through these works, Despax introduces a significant supplementary idea that builds upon the evolution towards philosophical irony already established in full seriousness. That is the idea of humour, seen as a necessary leavening of the relation between the properly humble(d) subject and the “other, “cette distance la plus courte sans doute entre deux êtres pour éviter la bêtise compacte de l’esprit dogmatique” (p. 370). There is arguably some slippage here between the theoretical position of humour or laughter in the squaring of the philosophical circle and an actual humorous content or quality to a diverse range of writings, always in any case a relatively elusive personal judgement. The more generalizable idea at work here seems to be that of “play” (*jeu*) as it is condensed in Frénaud’s line in a 1986

letter to Roger Little, “la poésie est un immense jeu de mots” (pp. 371, 418), which is assimilable to a no-longer-unhappy embrace of contingency, with the underlying *souçon* of ungovernable pleasure and agency it appears to reclaim for the individual *joueur*.

The triadic structure of this ambitious study can be both difficult and laborious to handle in the actual reading, the text becoming dominated with the distinctions between the ways in which the featured bodies of work handle these major issues. For this approach to be sustainable and fully worthwhile for the reader, the pertinence and completeness of the architectural choices need to be especially strong. We are entitled to ask not only, “what is these poets’ shared or singular exemplarity?” but also, “how is this conjunction of their exemplarity sufficient for a treatment of the meta-poetic fundamentals?” On the whole, Despax answers the first question satisfyingly. Emmanuel, Frénaud and La Tour du Pin all emerge as poets of great humanity and complexity (although, as the study presupposes a deep familiarity with these bodies of work, this is unlikely to be news to an actual reader), and their conjoined study enhances this sense. But the specific value of this study is arguably less as a guide to the three individual featured oeuvres than as an exhaustive illustration of a meta-poetic hypothesis that is somehow both narrow and broad. The second question is thus a more challenging one, for a study whose remit is so apparently large. It might be possible to imagine many more configurations of extensive totality—thereby problematizing the question of representativity—that would have significantly altered the complexion of this work. Is it even coherent to confine a study of this type within a particular national poetic field? Are there issues of historical (and geographical) experience other than those foregrounded—issues of race, gender, class, individual trajectory (e.g. cultural or physical displacement), for example—which might have opened the problem up in significant ways? One could note, in this respect, the increasingly recurrent references to the work of Édouard Glissant in the concluding stages of the study—where they are pertinent, but also somewhat beg a larger question. Given the acknowledged oppressive potential of totality in the given century, these are legitimate queries.

A further question might concern the framing of poetry as a theoretically-driven cultural phenomenon. It is not a question of misreading the stated and implicit preoccupations of these individual oeuvres, but—inevitably—that of all that finds itself omitted in an approach of totality as it relates to poetic practice as (variably) distinct from meta-poetic (self-)theorization, and, indeed from other artistic and textual practices.[7] Perhaps this only goes to underline the self-division inherent in all cosmogenic enterprises, a study of this amplitude included. As Pierre Emmanuel writes, in his late *Grand-œuvre*: “Depuis toujours la terre est divisée contre elle-même / Depuis toujours l’homme est divisé contre lui-même / Moi-même bien avant le germe je le suis / Moi qui écris ceci.” [8]

NOTES

[1] Quoted from the back cover of the book under review.

[2] Emmanuel Lévinas, *Totalité et infini: essai sur l’extériorité* (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1961).

[3] Bernard Pingaud, “Préface,” in André Frénaud, *Il n’y a pas de paradis (Poèmes 1943-1960)* (Paris: Gallimard, 1967), pp. 5-14, 10-12.

[4] Jérôme Thélot, *La Poésie précieuse* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1997), p. 9.

[5] “Aujourd’hui, nos plus beaux édifices sont en passe de devenir des musées. Nous habitons encore, pour combien de temps ? sous les voûtes géantes de certains grands textes. Pourtant la tension subsiste, la sérénité du sans fond n’a pas changé. Leur rapport, qui est la foi, échelle de Jacob de la certitude, est le même qu’il y a deux mille ans. Il n’y a rien autre à faire, comme toujours, que d’élever sur la ruine apparente de l’homme la même unique certitude de l’homme. Rien à faire, que de créer.” Pierre Emmanuel, *La Vie terrestre* (Paris: Seuil, 1976), pp. 235-236.

[6] The poet dramatizes “l’alternance du chant et de la réflexion, orientés vers le même mystère,” seeing the “intervalles” (temporal, become spatial in the extension of the book) between these modes as they occur as “traversés de haut en bas par ce qui descend continuellement de Dieu: ce qui monte de l’homme tend toujours à le cacher ou à l’étouffer. Mais ce qui descend pèse et fait descendre avant de s’insérer dans la vie montante et, une fois entré, l’incline régulièrement pour de nouvelles remises, et l’attente d’une nouvelle lueur.” Patrice de La Tour du Pin, *Petit Théâtre Crépusculaire (Une Somme de Poésie, Tome III, Première Partie)* (Paris: Gallimard, 1963, quatrième de couverture).

[7] A potentially very rich vein, as instanced, for example, by Jean-Yves Debreuille, ed., *La Voix et le geste. André Frénaud et ses peintres* (Geneva: La Baconnière, 2005).

[8] Pierre Emmanuel, *Le grand œuvre. Cosmogonie* (Paris: Seuil, 1984), p. 339.

Michael G. Kelly
University of Limerick
michael.g.kelly@ul.ie

Copyright © 2019 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for redistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of H-France Review nor re-publication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on H-France Review are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies.

ISSN 1553-9172