
H-France Review Vol. 20 (November 2020), No. 196

Joseph Acquisto, *Poetry's Knowing Ignorance*. New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2019. 224 pp. Notes, bibliography, and index. \$108.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN 9-78-1501355226. \$86.40 U.S. (eb). ISBN 9-78-1501355233.

Review by Robert St. Clair, Dartmouth College.

Poetry's Knowing Ignorance is an expansive, ambitious, and scintillating inquiry into the complexities and productive aporetics of poetic thought in modern and contemporary French discourse on poetry. Joseph Acquisto raises questions about the relation of poetry to knowledge, questions whose implications and resonances he tracks across a range of poets' and philosophers' ever-elusive attempts to pin down the mode of thought, the specific experience of knowing, that "Poetry" seems to render possible. And while the interweave among these questions is a complex one, the impetus behind them--and driving the author's engagement with philosophers ranging from the Iena School to Jean-Luc Nancy, or with poets from Victor Hugo to Philippe Jaccottet--is perhaps best captured in a passage from Paul Valéry's 1937 essay, "Nécessité de la poésie." Valéry notes that: "...on comprend sous le nom de poésie deux choses très différentes qui, cependant, se lient en un certain point. Poésie, c'est le premier sens..., c'est un art particulier fondé sur le langage. Poésie porte aussi un sens *plus général, plus répandu, difficile à définir, parce qu'il est plus vague, il désigne un certain état...à la fois réceptif et productif* (p. 77). Poetry, then, understood as the name of a split, or an allusive indefiniteness (note the lack of *déterminer* in the original French...*Poésie*). On the one hand, it names the particularly linguistic art form with which we believe ourselves to be so adequately familiar, for the question "What is poetry?" requires little more than a tautology by way of response ("...poetry is poetry"). On the other, Valéry suggests, the vocable seems to gesture towards a more general, if conceptually slippery, object of inquiry. An aesthetics in the strict sense: a strange experience of knowingness (*un certain état*) that is at one and the same time material and ideal, or, more precisely, which troubles the thresholds separating the material and the ideal, form and content, word and world, agency/activity and receptivity/passivity. Simply put, "Poetry" in this second sense could be taken as a drive, force or desire to take that which seems so seamlessly self-evident to us as to constitute the very invisible color of everyday life (that is, words) and think it--and the worlds they make possible--differently, otherwise, strangely. What Acquisto thus sets out to show in this series of roving and erudite engagements is that--if we can say anything about it in this latter, more philosophically oriented sense to which Valéry seems to alert us--Poetry is above all a (calling into) question that leaves both word and world "open to new potential meanings" (p. 93).

Whence the three interlarded, mutually generative questions at the heart of *Poetry's Knowing Ignorance*. First, beginning around the end of the eighteenth century (that is, more or less with the advent of Romanticism, with the age of revolutions, and so on) why does poetry so regularly seem to function as philosophy's spectral other, its vexed auxiliary? [1] Second: what does that say about poetry—which is to ask, obliquely: what *is* poetry? It is all the more important to tarry with this latter question—which, as Acquisto argues, runs up against the hard ground of poetry's unmasterability, its infinitely interpretable open-endedness—if we do not take this term, “Poetry,” as reducible to the category of texts that one traditionally reads as poems (that is, the particularly linguistic artefacts referred to in the above-mentioned example from Valéry's essay). For as Joseph Acquisto argues throughout the course of this study, the attempts of poets to pin down the “mode of knowledge” specific to poetry exceed “the metrical arrangement of words on the page” (p. 41). Rather, in the very act of this conceptual delineation—that is, what is poetry, and what does it allow us to know?—poets from Romanticism onwards seem to invariably stray into what Acquisto sees as “far more conceptual territory” (*ibid.*). And in doing so, even or especially when they come up short, “they demonstrate that defining poetry is at the same time [an attempt] to characterize the kinds of knowledge claims it can make” (*ibid.*). “Poetry,” on this view, inevitably outstrips its own generic bounds, resides in excess of itself; and what seems to define it in final analysis is “the impossibility of its being captured by anything we could say about it” (p. 10).

The last question with which *Poetry's Knowing Ignorance* seeks to tarry would run something like this: what is at stake in the interrelation of these two prior questions, this strange entrapment of knowledge and unknowability that “poetry” seems to name? What kind of relation to knowledge is produced in the space of poetry, and why? Why, or how, might we take poetry as a kind of model for life? And the reader is tempted here to say, though it is not posited quite so explicitly in this study, [2] that the knowledge in question is twofold: ontological on the one hand and ethical on the other. What, in other words, if anything, does poetry allow us to tentatively grasp or *unlearn* about being, and what is the impact of such knowledge on the way in which we act in the world?

In chapter one, Acquisto seeks to show us how, at two points in his vertiginously long literary trajectory, Victor Hugo grappled with the seeming inability of the poetic verb to “translate” effectively the mystical-transcendental truths of the universe to which the Hugolian corpus alludes, [3] or which it is seemingly capable of intuitively grasping as a presence or truth about the world that is impossible to articulate in language: “Humanity has language but not knowledge, whereas Nature knows all but does not possess language” (p. 33), writes Acquisto in an attentive gloss of the poem “Penser Dudar” (*Les Voix intérieures*, 1837). In 1837, the poet is reluctantly resigned to the impasses of poetic knowledge; resigned to accepting poetry's relation to Truth as ending up in an irreducible dead-end of binaries: Nature/Knowledge versus Mankind/Ignorance. A “more nuanced” lyrical treatment of this epistemic dilemma—one attuned to the dynamic or generative aspect of limitation, failure, misreading, unknowability—will emerge for Acquisto in Hugo's 1856 volume, written in exile, *Les Contemplations* (pp. 25-32). In this return to lyric production, Acquisto sees in Hugo's volume a poetic thought as well as a thematic insistence on the aleatory and the uncertain; a lyric subject-*cum*-prophet self-consciously aware of the fact that, dependent upon language, there can be no immediate access to Truth or revelation (p. 33, p. 37); one who can only “report on” the knowledge yielded by their poetic visions (or, *contemplation*) via a series of imperfect intermediaries or media, which are legible as

so many figurations for language itself: the blind, children, the poor, reading, translation, and so on. (pp. 33-37).

The formal treatment that in this section of several poems from *Les Contemplations* is nothing if not persuasive and cogent from a thematic standpoint. And yet, if we can be permitted a word of mild methodological criticism, it would be this: here as elsewhere, one would have wished on occasion to see more textured consideration of how a lyrical “knowing ignorance” does or does not translate at the level of poetics *stricto sensu*, especially in light of the “dislocations” that Hugo so brashly declared to have introduced into the semiogenetic structures of French verse as such (*cf.*, “Réponse à un acte d’accusation”). If the formal specificity of French verse—especially, but not exclusively, in the nineteenth century—had mainly to do with rhyme and metrical structure; that is to say, if, at the very least, these two linguistic-structural features of French poetry are what set it apart from non-metrical poetic forms and allow it a mode of signification that is not reducible to other generic forms, one can only agree with critics such as Alain Vaillant when he writes that poets such as Hugo would have evidently seen these two aspects of French poetry as irreducibly important sites for the production of meaning.[4] Such non-semantic sites, which are textually specific to poems, reveal themselves, when submitted to analysis, to be crucial, properly speaking *poetic* points of production—and indeed complication—of meaning in a poem, every bit as important as the horizontal axis of the sentence. While not detracting from the compelling analyses put forward by Acquisto, the absence of this formal dimension to the readings is nonetheless occasionally a distracting one.

In contrast to what he sees as Hugo’s more explicit foregrounding of poetic (non)knowledge in *Les Contemplations* as a kind of dialectical game of *qui perd gagne*, Acquisto argues that with Baudelaire we shift to what Acquisto sees as more complex textual ground: to a terrain where every question of truth is accompanied by a suspension of the poet’s authority or capacity (their *au[c]toritas*) to settle such questions.[5] Acquisto thus advances through a series of brief but attentive micro-readings of parts of three essays and two prose poems by Baudelaire. Respectively: these are the posthumously published, fragmentary essay “L’Art Philosophique”; the 1857 essay “Notes Nouvelles sur Edgar Poe,” and the *Salon de 1855*, followed by an attempt at tracing the implications of the argument about poetry and knowledge advanced in Baudelaire’s essays through two prose poems (“Laquelle est la vraie?” and “La Chambre double”). As the argument here is a complex one, with considerable stakes, I would like to devote a moment of exegetical attention to it.

At stake in these critical essays from 1855-1860, writes Acquisto, is an argument about the type of relation that binds the subject(s) of poetry to the world. That he is able to persuasively tease this claim out of two of the most infamously aestheticist essays from the poet’s art criticism corpus is nothing if not a testament to the dialectical acuity of the analysis Acquisto brings to bear on the question. For he locates in this cluster of essays something like a Baudelairian poetic philosophy. And while Baudelaire indeed asserts in the first two essays that Poetry must not take aim at Truth—an ostensibly assenting echo with contemporaries such as Gautier, who once contemptuously compared didactic art to a latrine, or such as Leconte de Lisle or even the early Hugo (see especially the preface to *Les Orientales*, a particularly important aesthetic touchstone for poets rallied under the banner of Parnassus in the 1860s)—Acquisto nevertheless seeks to show how what emerges in these texts is an argument about poetry that does not conjure away its relation to philosophical or knowledge claims, so much as it “fundamental[ly] reorient[s] the question of poetry and knowledge” (p. 39). For while Baudelaire does indeed claim in these essays

that poetry must set itself up as its own autotelic object or goal in order to be, precisely, *poetry*, Acquisto astutely notes that to put forth in this manner an understanding of what poetry is—or more pointedly and typical for Baudelaire, *via negativa oblige*, what it is *not*: it is *not* the pursuit of Truth, be it scientific, historic, political, etc.—is by the same token to “presuppose[e] an epistemology whereby poetry can be known” (p. 40). “Knowledge thus does not simply disappear,” Acquisto writes with understated dialectical delight, “when we assert [poetry’s] autonomy: rather, it emerges as an urgent question . . . turned back on poetry itself: what is poetry, and what is its relationship to the . . . reality” from which it at once breaks apart *and* “says something about” in this very act of distancing? (p. 40). Every autotelic turning away, as students of Adorno are wont to underscore, can also *eo ipso* be understood as a turning towards something else. (The ostensible rupture of sheer aestheticism, in other words, can also form the very site where a relation to the world, where something like an aesthetic politics is rendered legible in *l’art-pour-l’art* generally and in Baudelaire, who infamously found himself in hot legal water upon the publication of *Les Fleurs du mal*, particularly.)[6]

It is this larger point that allows Acquisto to argue that the abrupt assertion in “Notes Nouvelles . . .” that poetry nonetheless affords access or insight into higher, metaphysical truths—about the heterogeneity of beauty, about the affect of enthusiasm—is not so much an inconsistency as it is the logical as well as rhetorical consequence of Baudelaire’s initial claim about poetry (it is also very much an index of Poe’s influence): namely, that we are called to think of poetry as a site or discourse whose aim is not the transmission of knowledge (*cf.*, *l’hérésie de l’enseignement*), but where truth is nevertheless at once affirmed or elucidated *and* infinitely interpretable, revisable. Working chronologically backwards, Acquisto locates this Baudelairean “reorientation” of the truth-poetry knot in the 1855 *Salon* essay, where Baudelaire infamously describes philosophical systems as their own special sort of hell: a condemnation to perpetual abjuration, as the poet put it. “The problem . . . with systems,” Acquisto notes, “is their insufficiency in the face of new experiences for which they cannot account,” the basic inadequacy of any system—here understood as a totality, a monoformal whole—to grapple with the heterogeneous and the aleatory, or what Baudelaire calls the “le beau multiforme et versicolore, qui se meut dans les spirales infinies de la vie” (p. 44).

And life does indeed seem to be at stake where the overlap of art and modernity is concerned for Baudelaire, whether in his 1846 *Salon* or 1861’s *Le Peintre de la vie moderne*, two suggestively echoing texts in which this very signifier (*la vie*) literally has the last word. One wonders how or whether Acquisto would have modified the argument around Baudelaire in light of the thematic fact that many of the latter’s *verse poems*—perhaps nowhere more so than in the *Tableaux Parisiens* section of the second edition of *Les Fleurs du mal*—could be taken as pointing to a potential incompatibility with the argument made in “Notes Nouvelles” (quoted p. 41) that one gains access to truths, whether higher or otherwise, through poetry. Somewhat to the contrary, and perhaps ultimately closer to Acquisto’s larger claim in *Poetry’s Knowing Ignorance*, what seems to be affirmed in many of Baudelaire’s poems is the utter, disorienting unknowability of what Baudelaire refers to in *Mon cœur mis à nu* as questions which ought to excite man’s curiosity to the highest degree but which simply no longer do. Such questions—often dramatically touching on the gap between previously functional hegemonic truth systems and their contemporary *défaillance*, a gap opened up in *life* in the wake of modernity and which seems to be the very material of poetry itself for Baudelaire (*cf.*, “Le Soleil”)—are far from lacking in *Les Fleurs du mal*: they run through texts such as “Les Aveugles” (what are these poor deluded creatures, in whose ranks one might have to count the poet, doing looking for truth in the sphere of the ideal?);

provide the disseminatory structure for a text such as “Le Cygne” (with its infamously open-ended non-ending, its digressive dissipation into further interpretability); or, more achingly, are at the eye of the storm in that first great love poem of modernity (Benjamin), “A une passante,” whose core question, once beautiful glossed by Ross Chambers, could be “simply” read as follows: what happens to us when we disappear, when we are swallowed up by time, by life? [7]

Acquisto leaves us productively lingering with the implications of such questions as he takes his reader through two prose poems by Baudelaire which appear to stage this aforementioned philosophical *défaillance*, before turning to the early twentieth-century poetic avant-garde for a brief if exquisite reading of the way in which a mischievously self-subverting lyric subject in Apollinaire ironically pleads with its readership to forgive its forbearance of that system known as verse—a forgoing or forgetting of poetic tradition, rules or norms that of course unleashes a polyphonic playfulness that subsumes the rules, forms, limits and tropes of that tradition. Here, as in Mallarmé, to whom Acquisto also turns in the final pages of this chapter, the subject of poetry post-Baudelaire is posited as in excess of itself. It preserves at the same time as it annuls its own conditions of possibility (that is to say, the traditional verse forms and norms that will continue to haunt it in the aftermath of post-metrical poetry), foregrounding in the process its own ineluctable, profoundly creative impossibility.

In the second chapter of *Poetry’s Knowing Ignorance*, Acquisto seeks to square an apparently paradoxical circle: namely, how might one resolve a contradiction reaching back to the earliest Romantic definitions of poetry as an absolute (in the somewhat grammatical sense of an intransitive)? How might one square the circle of poetry as an experience of the world, such as the twentieth-century poets Pierre Reverdy and Paul Valéry see it, with an aestheticist conception of poetry as a sheer, worldless end-unto-itself—a view fairly wide-spread from the mid-nineteenth century on and which is perhaps best captured by Novalis’ dictum, “Poetry is poetry,” to which Acquisto returns repeatedly throughout the Introduction and second chapter. In a move that functions as a micrological *mise en abyme* of the book’s larger claims and methodology, Acquisto teases out of this tautological assertion of self-identity of poetry with itself a series of differences and revisions that allow us to think of “Poetry” as also pointing to the discourse about poetry, to the heuristic *tâtonnements* that generate inquiry and interpretation rather than closure masquerading as self-evidence. By this very auto-telic maneuver, in other words, poetry “necessarily ... opens itself up” to further “plumb[ing of] the implications of the tautology ... that require[s] moving into language” (p. 81). “Poetry’s way of knowing the world” (p. 81 and *passim.*), Acquisto goes on to note, is located in this movement into language, into the negotiation and creation of *meaningfulness* (*signifiance*) that we call thought, or perhaps more simply, that engaged mode of remaining puzzled that we call: reading. And even the ostensibly purest poetry imaginable leads not to an ineffable experience of immediacy with knowledge, but, as Acquisto proceeds to show in the remaining chapters, further out into language. The experience of not knowing if something is sayable—or of knowing if the attempt to say what a thing is can successfully bridge the gap between sign and referent (*nota bene*: it cannot and does not: the very nature of language renders illusory such immediacy), or whether it will simply send us spiraling circuitously into the meanders of the chain of signification—is not an experience of sheer negativity for Acquisto. It simply constitutes the unavoidable limit to which we are bound as creatures of language. It is indeed this same productive ignorance which generates sense and understanding, our commitment to meanings, however uncertain or tentative. What Acquisto refers to as “[p]oetic knowing” (p. 83) in this chapter’s commentary on Valéry could thus be understood as a kind of process by which the contours of the perceptible, effable, and thinkable

are modified, however slightly, by the sorts of estrangements or deterritorializations of the familiar which we encounter in poetry. (*Mutatis mutandis*, we could think of it as something similar to what philosopher Jacques Rancière—to whom Acquisto will turn in his study's final chapter on literary community—terms an “aesthetic politics,” a reconfiguring of the *partage du sensible*. [8]) Above all, it is a form of knowing that “emerges from the process, or experience, of what is said, or negated, or affirmed as sayable or unsayable” in poems (p. 83).

While freely zigzagging through a range of contemporary critical voices on poetry in its opening moments (Angela Leighton, J.M. Gleize, Barbara Johnson), chapter three pursues this line of thought across the works of several contemporary poets and theorists, in order to pick up its strand in the essays of Georges Bataille and Maurice Blanchot, two of the most innocuously influential literary theorists (and authors) of the post-war period in France. Both were particularly attentive to the sorts of limits (to thought, to speech) that poetry makes perceptible and, indeed, for Acquisto are among the first figures in twentieth-century criticism to explicitly knot together the strands binding poetry to knowledge and ignorance (p. 96). In a discussion ranging across several of Bataille's essays on language, poetry, and the notion of the sacrificial, Acquisto shows Bataille to be a thinker with a “non-systematic, complex” conception of poetry (p. 104). One regrets a certain lack of theoretical contextualization in this section—how to separate, for instance, the concept of sacrifice in Bataille's critical oeuvre from the rupture with surrealism, the ebullient Hegelianism of the Latin Quarter in the 1930s, or the anti-fascism of Bataille's work in the same period, to say nothing of its renegade Marxism, both of which are helpful for understanding the question of “work,” upon which Acquisto also touches here (p. 106)?—though the end result is an informative outline of the way poetry intersects with the experience of limits, transgression, and unworking for Bataille. Acquisto then turns to the work of Blanchot to consider how poetry, for the latter, “encourages us to think about how [it] engages the larger domain of thought” or indeed how poetry—the “question that escapes” philosophy's attempts to pin it definitively down—might be taken as “synonymous with philosophical thought itself” (pp. 108-109). Here, as in chapter 2, Acquisto sees poetry as designating for Blanchot that which evades absolute certainty or definition and, in so doing, generates discourse about itself, something like a knowledge inextricably linked to a bedrock of undecidability, ambiguity (p. 112-114); it charts a path between these two alternatives that Acquisto judiciously proposes to think of in terms of Blanchot's notoriously recalcitrant ontological concept of “the neutral” (p. 115). To put it in abusive short-hand form, that which escapes totality, which points towards a word or an idea's non-identity with itself.

Yet what is perhaps most curious in this section devoted to Blanchot, which is at times brimming with riveting insights, is the way in which Acquisto also shows how the link that Blanchot asserts between thought/philosophy and poetry in works such as *Faux Pas* or *L'Écriture du désastre* or *L'Espace littéraire* also depends on sustained attention to those textual objects that are words—however formally or sequentially they may be arranged so as to flag the way we experience less the close-circuits of meaning than the sensuously semiotic experience of meaningfulness itself—on a page. Poems, in other words. For Blanchot, “la signification poétique est ce qui ne peut être séparée des mots...” (p. 111). Simply stated: one wonders at times just how methodologically sustainable it can be to separate out “Poetry” *qua* philosophical abstraction—which is rightly of such keen interest here—from the actual(ized) objects that make the former perceptible as a question to begin with. Blanchot's work on language, writing, the neutral or death, for instance, are so interwoven with his readings of poets such as Mallarmé or Rimbaud (as Acquisto rightly notes) that the absence of the latter becomes somewhat notable as the chapter unfolds. One

invariably wonders to what degree the many glosses in *Poetry's Knowing Ignorance* on "Poetry" as the name (or perhaps metaphor...) for the experience of an infinitely expansive realm of the thinkable and sayable, for the non-coincident heterogeneity of an idea or thing over itself, might be bolstered by further attention to what Valéry referred to as the "certain point" (p. 77) at which the two ("Poetry" and poems) necessarily converge or diverge.

It is doubtless for this reason that Acquisto turns to the works of two contemporary Francophone poets, Philippe Jaccottet and Jean-Michel Maulpoix, in chapter four. Both grapple, as Acquisto shows, with the limits, possibilities and meanings of the so-called return to lyric in contemporary European letters. And they do so in ways that allow their poetic and critical work to form a kind of "prolonged meditation on the relation of poetry to ignorance, and on the way in which the lyric subject can or should persist in an age where the very notion of the lyric... is called into question" (p. 122). This new--or reimagined--lyric would be less literary genre than (also) a mode of thought;[9] one irreducibly bound up with perplexity, with the belatedness of knowledge relative to experience that Maulpoix tentatively puts under the heading of a "critical lyricism" (p. 162). Poetry as an "interrogative mode," if not indeed as ethical paradigm. That is to say, Poetry as an example of what it might be like for us to not come undone at the point of contact with uncertainty, with unknowability, with the otherness of language and being. A way of writing that ultimately may help us--all of us, for the question of community, of being-with, is evocatively raised here in relation to Jaccottet's poetics--to imagine what Acquisto refers to, in a splendid scolia on the ecopoetics of apostrophe in Jaccottet, as "a 'poetic' way of life" (p. 127). That is to say, a way of life in which we are able to "embrac[e] and mov[e] within" the open-endedness of the provisional, within the unstoppably recursive meandres of uncertainty, to dwell collectively within the creative impasses of "questioning rather than move beyond it" (p. 162). For Poetry's role, if we can be allowed to put it this way, is perhaps to show us, as does Acquisto in a magnificent gloss on one of Jaccottet's *Airs*, how every apparently conclusive moment, every gesture towards closure, is in fact pursued by an opening out--by an aperture into further other readings, into difference and further questions. Every ending is accompanied by a "nevertheless" rather than a "therefore" (pp. 141-143).

It was with the political implications for this basic proposition on relationality that poetry enacts/performs in mind that Acquisto draws this study into its final chapter on the place of poetry and the creation of community (*chaque fois unique*, so to speak) in the political-aesthetic work of philosophers Jacques Rancière and Jean-Luc Nancy. Acquisto perceptively argues that both Nancy and Rancière converge in their thinking of poetry as modeling a kind of political principle and form of community--namely, democracy: that political form which resists the closure of any *arkhè* save that of equality (Rancière), and which eludes organicity as much as it does totality. "Poetry," remarks Acquisto, "affirms the impossibility of realizing any of the goals it may set for itself, and it reshapes that impossibility as itself a kind of goal" (p. 173); or again, in an especially perceptive treatment of Nancy's *Inoperative Communities*, Acquisto suggests that the kind of community metaphorically modelled by poetry would be, essentially, that of democracy: "defined by a kind of difference to itself, a potentially constant transformation...in opposition to...definitive knowledge, or truth" or, one might further add, fantasies of identitarian essence or completion (pp. 178-179).

It is this last point that, to my mind, makes *Poetry's Knowing Ignorance* not merely a fine example of scholarly erudition, but a book with an important lesson for us--as scholars of literature in the Humanities, of course. But as citizens of an increasingly fragile democratic polity as well. One

might object that the question of relationality is not, precisely, coterminous for either Nancy or Rancière with that of the political. (For Nancy relationality is not so much a-political as it is the pre-political, ontological substratum of Being as such; Rancière could be said to characterize relationality in a somewhat analogous fashion—that is to say, as an irreducible given as susceptible to mobilization by inegalitarian logics every bit as much as by a logic of the political.)[10] And while this might not be an unreasonable quibble, it would be missing something of the point raised by this timely book. For Acquisto’s closing move towards thinking the political stakes of community, stakes which he has pursued obliquely throughout this study under the guise of “Poetry”—including: our status as readers of beings at once Singular and Universal, beings-in-common with one another; the presupposition of an equality of intelligences that writing requires; the axiomatic principle of dialogue and responsibility (for/to the Other, for “co-munus” etymologically refers to the taking up of a charge, a taking into hand of the other) called for by the scene of reading, and so on—is as convincing as it is urgent. Poetry may just be, *nevertheless*, a kind of safeguard against the dangers of falling for the illusory temptations of easy answers and rigid certitudes that conjure away the uncanniness and frustrations of not-knowing (what to say, whether one’s understood, whether one has anything to say to/about the poem), as Acquisto argues throughout this essay. A frail object of hope allowing us, to harken to Blanchot’s reading of Kafka, perhaps not to despair even of that which deprives us of hope.

NOTES

[1] It should nevertheless be noted that this split within Poetry is not the result of some neat rupture chronologically brought about by Romanticism. Gérard Genette once noted, for instance, that European treatises on poetics dating as early as the seventeenth century (for example, Francisco Cascales’ 1617 *Tablas poeticas*) defined the subject of the lyric not as plot, but as thought itself. What Acquisto is seeking to pursue here is a fuller understanding of how, or why, more or less coincident amidst the historical-cultural and epistemic transformations we refer to in shorthand as “modernity,” poetry no longer seems to play the role of antagonistic other for philosophy, but rather its “complément supérieur” (p. 33)—an auxiliary which (to continue to echo Mallarmé) philosophically compensates for a lack situated at the heart of language (a lack constitutive, therefore, of our experience of the world, others and ourselves). There is, of course, a millenarian philosophical-critical tradition stretching back at least to Plato’s *Republic* (a text that one could take as both the inaugural instance of utopian literature in the West as well as one of the earliest instances of literary criticism) which posits poetry as the site of a politically as well as metaphysically dangerous ungovernability, in some respects for the very reasons that are of interest to Acquisto in this study. Why, for instance, are poets banned from the perfectly ordered city if not for poetry’s capacity to call into question or abeyance certain axiomatic values or absolute certainties (is it really best to die a hero for the *polis* if, as even Achilles laments, even a hero in hell envies a pauper in life)? Likewise for its capacity to make the ethnic or gendered or social other appear—the wild uncivilizable other or the “naturally” inferior subject of the *oikos* (the home, the economic)—as potential alter ego with whom one might commiserate (*cf.*, *Persians* or *The Suppliant Maidens*). From a certain, long-standing philosophical viewpoint, in other words, the problem with poetry has always been its capacity to put under suspense the self-evidence of the given, to push us towards unknowing what we have learned by heart, to *know* that we have relinquished our claims on knowing (Derrida) and to produce fictions that point to an elsewhere or an otherwise of being. Or, as Valéry puts it in a passage that Acquisto reads beautifully: “la [poésie], c’est notre vie. Nous vivons continuellement en production de fictions.... Remarquez bien (j’y insiste) que toutes ces fictions se rapportent nécessairement à ce qui est; en

outré, chose curieuse, c'est *ce qui est* qui engendre *ce qui n'est pas*, et c'est *ce qui n'est pas* qui répond constamment à *ce qui est*" (pp. 78-79). See also, Gérard Genette, *The Architext: An Introduction*, trans. Jane E. Lewin. Foreword Robert Scholes (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and Oxford: University of California Press, 1992), pp. 23-36; and Jacques Derrida, *A Derrida Reader: Between the Blinds* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), p. 219.

[2] Acquisto does come quite close to stating things thus in the book's rather brilliant second and fourth chapters, as well as in its conclusion, noting that: "Michel Deguy has also written about a notion of poetry that implicates an epistemology and ethics..." (p. 164).

[3] One might modulate somewhat the sweep of this argument, if only due to the surreally bulimic output of the poet/author/dramatist/statesman over the course of a public life that stretched nearly over the entirety of the nineteenth century. The reconciliation with unknowing that one encounters, for instance, in the high lyricism of a poem such as "Ce que dit la bouche d'ombre" is entirely absent—perhaps necessarily so—from the virulently politically-engaged poetic fury unleashed in *Les Châtiments*, published just three years prior to *Les Contemplations*, but in which the poetic subject adopts the impersonally omniscient view of History in order to condemn the crimes at the heart of the Second Empire.

[4] Alain Vaillant, *L'Art de la littérature: romantisme et modernité* (Paris: Classiques Garnier, 2016).

[5] One detects in this shifting of hermeneutic responsibility from author to reader, or perhaps indeed to the function of the text, a faint yet distinct echo of Barthes' "death of the author".

[6] On this question, see especially Ross Chambers, *The Writing of Melancholy: Modes of Opposition in Early French Modernism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993).

[7] See Ross Chambers, "The Storm in the Eye of the Poem," in Mary-Ann Caws, ed., *Textual Analysis: Some Readers Reading* (New York: MLA Press, 1986), pp. 156-166.

[8] Jacques Rancière, *Le Partage du sensible* (Paris: La Fabrique, 2000).

[9] A similar insight is also at the core of Paul de Man's insuperable essay on "Anthropomorphism and Trope in the Lyric" in *The Rhetoric of Romanticism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984), pp. 239-262.

[10] For Jean-Luc Nancy, see *La Communauté désœuvrée* (Paris: C. Bourgois, 1986) in addition to his more recent *Politique et au-delà* (Paris: Galilée, 2011), and for Jacques Rancière, see especially *Aux bords du politique* (Osiris, Bordeaux: 1990), *La Méésentente* (Paris: Galilée, 1995), and *La Haine de la démocratie* (Paris: La Fabrique, 2005).

Robert St. Clair
Dartmouth College.
Robert.A.St.Clair@Dartmouth.edu

Copyright © 2020 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 edistribution/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 republication 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