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Bishop, Michael, *Earth and Mind: Dreaming, Writing, Being: Nine Contemporary French Poets--Yves Bonnefoy, Jacqueline Risset, Salah Stétié, Vénus Khoury-Ghata, Tahar Ben Jelloun, André Velter, Marie-Claire Bancquart, Jean-Claude Pinson, Jacques Dupin*. Leiden: Brill/Rodopi, 2018. xii + 154 pp. Notes and select bibliography. €88.00 (hb). ISBN 9789004367661; (eb) 9789004367760.

Review by Hugues Azérad, Magdalene College, University of Cambridge.

In this companion volume to *Dystopie et poëin, agnose et reconnaissance* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2014), Michael Bishop unveils a subtle landscape of poetic creativity in France and Francophone countries that brings to our attention vital aspects of an art form, which is of a piece with its practitioners but also delicately removed and ungraspable. The nine poets under scrutiny here resist theorization and refuse to be subsumed under our contemporary heuristic categories, even though they discreetly intervene in most of them--subjecthood, emotions, ecology, oppression, trauma, precarity, violence, aesthetics. In many ways, this book calls for another form of intervention, one that claims a vital role for poetry as a way of forging a poetic community, stimulated by the same struggle to enact as faithfully as possible the verbal and gestural expression that translates the multitudinous bonds that exist between humans and their environment, between the *mind and the earth*. The nine poets and poems are, of course, not arbitrarily selected, but are perhaps symptomatically chosen, albeit beyond any claim to national or linguistic belonging. Bishop patiently explains via a series of illuminating close readings and metacommentaries, that poetry writing, but also poetry reading, can be a praxis to conduct better lives, without *a priori*, but in accepting the necessity to reengage with diffuse and conflicted ontology--what Bishop terms a "counter-ontology" in his study of Stétié (p. 52). Each poet featured in this volume ushers in unexpected variations on this constant ontology, the "logic of our beingness" (p. 88) at once based on and fuelled by finitude; earth-bound, yet open to extra-subjective contemplation, to what remains nameless yet all the more present in its transient appearances. The poets partake in a similar task that aims, or rather assays, whilst constantly falling short of any attainment, to poeticise and internalise whatever appears to be there, translating it into new subjective forms. This poetic task eschews the dual temptation of relying on decodable meaning and conceptualisation, both being inescapably human and rational, yet guilty of casting an obfuscating shadow on the world of relations teeming between the mind and the earth--what is there to plumb and bring to light onto the surface of the page, language, rhythms, images, voice. The poets attended to in this study represent transmutational individuated *poëin* that plays out the infinite combinations of diffracted "*être-comme*" (Deguy, p. x). Without disregarding other poetic approaches, the author foregrounds poetry that stays connected to lyricism, unmoored from any single tradition or well-defined subject, but cutting across multitudinous cultures and forms, and often veering towards the tragical and the elegiacal.

Poetry is not the realm of the vague and the indefinite, dreamscapes that have no connections to our common realities and sufferings. Rather, these poets, each in their unique ways, yet united in their concerns, lay the foundations of a possible reconnection with what counts and what cannot be stifled: human tragedies, mourning, loss, historical traumas, the Anthropocene, risible failings, the re-enchantment of living and being, as Sylvia Wynter coined it in the 1960s and 1970s.[1]

At a closer level, Michael Bishop proffers compelling, original and disciplined readings of Yves Bonnefoy's *La Grande Ourse* (2015), Jacqueline Risset's *Les Instants* (2000), Salah Stétié's *L'Être* (2014), Vénus Khoury-Ghata's *Le Livre des suppliques* (2015), Tahar Ben Jelloun's *Que la blessure se ferme* (2012), André Velter's *L'amour extrême* (2000), Marie-Claire Bancquart's *Tracé du vivant* (2016), Jean-Claude Pinson's *Alphabet Cyrillique* (2016), and Jacques Dupin's *Le Grésil* (1996). Each chapter focuses on the most recent publications of each poet, all published very recently or within the past twenty years, both in a wider context, national and international, and in relation to the poet's entire *œuvre*. Reprising Anne Sexton's line "Give me a report on my soul" (quoted p. ix) and Wallace Stevens's injunction that every poem is "an act of the mind" (quoted p. x), Bishop plunges into the depths and layers of poets whose presence across the arts, languages and media reverberates across all cultures. Bonnefoy's "voice-poems" (p. 7) harbour a complex theatricality of beingness, always anchored yet never fixed, uniquely concerned with what gets obscured by concepts and instrumental reason, the infinitely rich gamut of "seeing and dreaming" (p. 9) that the din of the world dissipates at our peril. Communication and dialogues set in poetry get reenchanting, giving their full ethical measure to the texture of voices that keep expressing the wonders of being, pushing open the doors of the seeming outside, or the *dehors-dedans* (outside-inside) of emotions, thoughts and dreams. Revisiting Bonnefoy's presence, which John Jackson memorably defined as "le mode sur lequel l'unité de l'être ou du monde se révèle, en deçà ou au-delà de la saisie conceptuelle que le langage peut en faire" (quoted p. 17), the author shows that this experience of finitude is heuristic without being conceptual, cognitive yet constantly surprising, diffracted yet undivided. Poetry, following Bishop's exacting reading of Bonnefoy's later poems, allow us to "caress the mystery of presence" (p. 19), piercing through the "congealments of existence" (Bonnefoy, quoted p. 19). Poetry is the irrepressible foundation of alliances between listening, memory, language that maintains our striving towards being, from which we cannot be separated.

If Risset's poetic *Instants*, her final volume of poetry, renews our confidence in immediate sensation, as if scholarship and love were one and the same, Stétié's *L'Être* yields little respite and ends in a counter-ontology, a radical dismay, yet able to draw on the poetic and sensuous imaginary to confront inescapable nothingness. Constantly weaving unknowing and meaning, Khoury-Ghata's *Suppliques* attest to poetry's own disempowerment when faced with a nation at war, whilst remaining a painfully "proffered gift" (p. 70); Ben Jelloun's riff on the great Sufi poetry leads to intense reflexions and an elegy to the innocent who are sacrificed, to the fate of exiles, passionate in its condemnations of injustice as well as in its visions of love, where "joy and woe are woven fine" (Blake, quoted p. 85). Ben Jelloun's *Blessure* cannot heal, but plunges us in its great inner turmoil: "la poésie n'est pas dans les mots; elle est dans l'acte d'entrer dans le tourbillon de ce qu'on ne maîtrise pas" (quoted p. 86). However gruelling, a poem will be found to express this paradoxical bewilderment; perhaps poetry heals in its tending to the wounds of the world, and in its new folds: "l'espoir a ses quartiers" (quoted p. 89). Then, from Velter's poetics of errancy, itself a site of energetic movement and tensional "excess" (Nancy) (or "ontological movingness," p. 102), we are directed to Bancquart's last volume of poetry, a searingly moving testament to the radical honesty of poetry, neither *desolatio* nor *consolatio*, in absolute sync with

the impalpable purity of the real, of deeply felt experience, of the earth (Bishop quotes Keats's "The poetry of earth is never dead," p. 108).<sup>[2]</sup> Bancquart's poetry almost ceremoniously conjures up a symbiosis of opposites, exploring the full gamut of modes of being, chimerical or not, but always authentic, traced within the poetic space of the poem, which the author interestingly names an "unspace" or "non-lieu" (p. 109). H(a)unting poet and poetry that courageously seek, "articulated flowing and ebbing cadencies" (p. 118), "dans le grand lit du monde, sans entrave" (quoted p. 118). Penultimately, the author brilliantly shows how Pinson's *Alphabet cyrillique* evinces the poet's fabulous knowledge of poetry and (po)ethical engagement with the present, in a seemingly playful "autobiopoiesis" that meshes with a socio-political critique that is also a *mise en abîme* of itself and of the world. It offers a vertiginous post-Deleuzian abécédaire, or poetic *azbouka*, between Chris Marker and Svetlana Alexievich, Pessoa and Leopardi, Isou and Roche but always unmistakably Pinsonian in its deeply committed and embodied gaze and tone. Before segueing into his concluding remarks, Michael Bishop briefly revisits *Le Grésil*, a late volume of poetry by one of France's key poets, Jacques Dupin, which seems to encapsulate some of the most vital concerns that have occupied French poetry since Ponge, du Bouchet and Char, whose edicts still resonate today ("les poètes sont les ambassadeurs du monde muet" (Ponge, quoted p. 145)). Dupinian "échecs constellants", "illuminations de l'échec" (quoted p. 140) unearth what Bishop names a Jungian *pleroma*, "the sign of the marriage of the void and fulness [...] finitude and infinity, nothingness and wholeness" (p. 140). Perhaps, one could add, this recalls some of the quasi contemporaneous poems of poetic despair and resistance of Sophia de Mello Breyner Andresen and Jorge de Sena filmed in Rita Azevedo Gomez's *Correspondências* (2016), which evoke the never-obtained yet striven-for alliance—or is it an insoluble suspension?—of the absolute void and of a total community; or, as Dupin wrote, "Écrire à l'écart, le rien qui sait, qui comprend tout..." (quoted p. 141).

Michael Bishop's study embodies an ethics of writing and scholarship which is always attentive to the nuanced and all too easily neglected contributions of the poets he chooses to present. Refusing any form of exclusivity, any intrusion of peremptory judgement, the author constantly weaves a compelling network of voices, techniques and poetic notions that cut across world poetry, shuttling back and forth between periods and cultures, focusing on the here and now of recent publications, yet making strong connections with Herrick, Keats, Blake, Thoreau, Mary Oliver, Anne Sexton, Melville, the *Upanishads*, Mallarmé, Ashbery, Crane, Cummings, Yeats, Woolf, Wordsworth. This weaving and unweaving of forms and rhythms, scrutinised in often scintillating close readings, sometimes through the optic of philosophy (Nancy in particular), does critical justice to this wealth of poetic creativity, of perpetual and demanding invention. There is still a place for literary criticism that espouses the cause of poetic figures and gestures, without shutting them away into neatly organised categories, all too finite perhaps. Poetry exerts no power other than that it gives to the totality of the real, and its thinking is never detached from our quotidian exertions, however mundane; all the more so in fact—ever so fungible, perishable and brushed off. The fact that many of the nine poets featured in this study recently passed away makes such work all the more poignant, but also all the more alert and cautionary. Michael Bishop, one of the most knowledgeable and penetrating critics of French and world poetry and art, invites the reader to plunge into those poets again, as freely as possible, to engage with what is surely an exercise in democratic freedom as well as an enchanted intellectual and emotional pathway that cannot be supervised or instrumentalised, but which makes you see and feel again, afresh. This is what literary criticism at its best can achieve, beyond academic feat or prowess: make the reader take a revolutionary *pas de côté* (sidestep) in simply re-engaging with poetry.<sup>[3]</sup> It is not a coincidence that one of the recurring poets in this study, often alluded to

by Bishop, is Pierre Reverdy, the still poorly understood surveyor of the real, whom poets refer to when in need of comfort, of renewed confidence in approaching the most exacting, the most demanding task. It is not a coincidence that the notion of Beauty keeps appearing in each chapter—each poet giving her or his riff on Beauty, its ephemeral and tantalising, “hautaine” presence (p. 143). Only a careful engagement with this study, alongside its companion piece(s) or on its own, will afford a more subtle understanding of poetry in French and further discoveries— other overlapping factors in interpertinency and equipollency (p. 142). The study succeeds in providing a reassuring yet questioning and challenging path that students and readers will want to pursue, as they still keep doing from all regions of the world, as they keep mulling over the same provisional question that is also its own answer: “Je ne voudrais pas que le langage/ se referme sur soi/ je ne voudrais pas que le langage se referme sur moi” (du Bouchet, quoted p. 143).

## NOTES

[1] Sylvia Wynter, *On Being Human as Praxis*, ed. Katherine McKittrick (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015).

[2] Jean-Luc Nancy, *Résistance de la poésie* (Bordeaux: William Blake & Co., 1997), cited in Bishop, p. 102.

[3] cf. Jacques Doillon, Alain Resnais, and Jean Rouch, directors, *L’An 01* (1973).

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