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Daisy Sainsbury, *Contemporary French Poetry: Towards a Minor Poetics*. Oxford: Legenda, 2021. xxii + 202 pp. \$110.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN: 9781781888421. ISBN: 9781781888469 (pb). ISBN: 9781781888506 (JSTOR eb).

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Accounts of post-1980s French poetry, from critics and poets alike, describe a field riven by an enduring antagonism between two camps: on the one hand, the poet-grammarians and their text-focused poetics of literality, and on the other, a cadre of poets, emergent in the late 1970s, advocating the rehabilitation of lyrical values of voice, presence, musicality, and in some cases the precise mode of monologic self-expression whose critique has driven poetic innovation for at least the last 150 years. In the words of one observer: “C’était la guerre entre littéralité et lyrisme.”[1] Like all such oppositions, much complexity and diversity is obscured by these terms, which become more often the subject of hyperbolic caricature (“les Robots grammatico-communistes contre les vrais humains”) than satisfactory descriptors for a field in ceaseless flux.[2] What can be said, with little dispute, is that the resurfacing of a recognizably lyrical impulse within a field that many perceived to be dominated by a *poétique du texte* occasions a renewal of the question of poetry’s generic identity: what it looks and sounds like, how it relates to things it is not, what importance or revolutionary potential it might still claim, etc.

In her new book, Daisy Sainsbury attempts to make sense of the world of French poetry from 1980 to the present without training her analysis to the oppositional logic of the literalism/lyricism antinomy. Indeed, *Contemporary French Poetry: Towards a Minor Poetics* is interested in the ways experimental efforts in this field have troubled precisely these oppositions, and recognizes in the diversity of methods, preoccupations and conceptions of the poetic act an invitation to think anew the constitution and analysis of the titular “contemporary French poetry” as an object of study. The analyses assembled here offer a cross-section of a field in which textualist and lyrical impulses mingle with variegated experimental forms such as sound poetry, performance modalities, *dispositif* poetics, and intermedial and web-based poetry. Sainsbury recognizes poetry’s extension into other medial territories—one of the unifying features of this diverse field—as indicative of an increasingly rhizomatic conception of poetic activity, and finds in Deleuze and Guattari’s notion of a “minor literature” (and the major/minor dyad more generally) a theoretical framework that allows her to account not only for the ceaseless undermining of norms and disciplinary hierarchies observed in this contemporary field but also for questions of political and affective efficacy.

To demonstrate the strength of this connection, the book brings together studies of three poets from successive generations whose work is illuminated in striking ways by the discussion of minor literature: Dominique Fourcade (b. 1938), Olivier Cadiot (b. 1956), and Christophe Tarkos (1963-2004). While this is not the first study of these poets to mobilize concepts from Deleuze and Guattari, Sainsbury observes that previous such efforts have been narrower in scope: concerned either with the *problématique* of the subject (and process-oriented critiques thereof) or with a single concept such as the rhizome read in relation to one author's *œuvre*. If Sainsbury reaches instead for the notion of the "minor," it is because the capaciousness and contingency of its theorization allows her to constellate multiple intensive studies of the particular and strange poetics of these very different poets, in a way that does produce a sense of the field. The phrase "Minor Poetics" in the book's subtitle registers Sainsbury's two-pronged theoretical gambit. In addition to isolating the concept of "minor literature" as uniquely suited to the analysis of the multiform "difference-seeking" capacity of recent experimental French poetry, Sainsbury replaces "literature" with "poetics" to signal the unmistakable influence that the question of genre continues to exert on modes of innovation observed within this field (thus exploring what particular status *poetry* might claim within Deleuze and Guattari's analysis).

In chapter one, which serves as the book's introduction, Sainsbury sets up her treatment of the notion of minor literature with a brief account of Deleuze and Guattari's well-known critique of the language system in *Mille Plateaux* ("Postulats de la linguistique"), in which the prescriptive ideology of dominant and homogenized "major" languages is shown to suppress the continuous variation that is the fundamental condition of real language use.[3] Emphasizing the "high coefficient of deterritorialization" that Deleuze and Guattari identify with minor literature, Sainsbury goes on to highlight those deterritorializing practices that feature prominently in her poets' work: the stutter, the subversion of the "native" relation to one's language, agrammaticality, *ritournelle*, and "création syntaxique" (p. 20). While Deleuze and Guattari's theorization of minor literature provides the load-bearing framework for Sainsbury's analysis, the importance of the question of poetry's generic status—which, crucially, has no place in Deleuze and Guattari's rhizomatic conception of artistic creation—occasions the introduction of a secondary theoretical apparatus: Mikhail Bakhtin's differential account of literary genres presented in the essays published as *The Dialogic Imagination*. [4] Sainsbury argues that Bakhtin's analysis of monoglossia (unitary speech which presupposes the existence of only one language, associated with state power) and heteroglossia (a state of linguistic multiplicity associated with social reality, and the locus of revolutionary possibility within language) broadly maps onto Deleuzo-Guattarian categories of major and minor (territorializing/deterritorializing), with the distinction that, for Bakhtin, this analysis forms the basis for an opposition between poetic discourse (intrinsically monoglossic) and novelistic discourse (intrinsically heteroglossic). Sainsbury draws on this distinction as she unpicks how issues related to voice and polyvocalic experimentation enter into her poets' interrogation of poetry's generic identity, arguing that her poets' "minor usage" of their poetic inheritance—especially in the case of Cadiot—makes it a parodic-travesty counterpoint, in Bakhtin's terms, to the "major genre" of poetry, understood as perpetuating "the myth of a unitary language" (p. 34). The doubling of theoretical vocabularies here and the insufficiency of either one to fully account for the most important aspects of these poets' work reflect the inherent difficulty of introducing genre into a theory of minor literature that requires the leveling of such distinctions.

Chapter two offers an extensive analysis of the work of Dominique Fourcade, a giant of contemporary French poetry who has been active for over sixty years. Centering her analysis on

Fourcade's mature work, from the 1980s onwards, Sainsbury identifies in this poet's experimental syntax, reflection on the stutter and linguistic foreignness, and systematic confusion of generic and disciplinary distinctions, an exemplary case-study in minor poetics. In many ways, and as Sainsbury emphasizes, this poet's predisposition to deterritorializing poetic practices is a matter of biography: if his texts stutter, it's because he did too; if he approaches French as a foreign language, it's because an alienating maternal relationship left him estranged from his mother tongue. Still, Sainsbury's attentive close readings show how these predispositions bear out textually and take on force as key structuring features within Fourcade's poetics. For instance, the stutter is directly represented (in English) in the text *Il* ("the wowowoman man" [5]) but its influence manifests elsewhere in the decomposition of words into free-floating syllables or phonemes, in frequent toggling between short agrammatical lines and more fluid discursive statements, and in Fourcade's obsession with the role of the body (lungs, glottis, breath) in vocal articulation. Sainsbury associates this kind of dispersed influence with the Deleuzo-Guattarian figure of the rhizome and enumerates Fourcade's engagement with a range of extraliterary forms (film, sound recording, dance, painting) to emphasize multiplicity, simultaneity and heterogeneity as the core principles of his poetics. Throughout, Sainsbury emphasizes those features of Fourcade's poetry that defy the lyricism/literality opposition, arguing for instance that his textualist interest in the materiality of the signifier is inseparable from his reflection on the materiality of the body engaged in the event of enunciation. Fourcade emerges here as a poet profoundly motivated by lyrical concerns--the fact or possibility of first-person speech, and especially the relation to the real.

Chapter three introduces readers to the work of Olivier Cadiot, who is the least likely of Sainsbury's three authors to accept the designation of "poet." Indeed, Cadiot refers to his first book, *L'Art poétique*, as a "livre de poésie," but the very next one (*Futur, ancien, fugitif*--a "roman par poèmes") initiates his abandonment of the form.[6] This chapter, which reads this early poetic (and poetry-adjacent) work alongside more recent experiments in sound composition and musical collaboration, mobilizes Cadiot's ambivalent relationship to poetry and pursues, more directly than in other chapters, the question of genre. *L'Art poétique*, a versified "cut-up" composed of language lifted from grammars, dictionaries, and famous passages from the Western literary canon, is recognized through its direct and literal action on silos of major discourse as "a prototypical example of Deleuzo-Guattarian deterritorialization" (p. 13). Sainsbury's treatment of Cadiot zips back and forth between this work, *Futur, ancien, fugitif* (which imagines a shipwrecked and amnesiac Robinson reconstructing his identity from the linguistic detritus of his previous life that happen to wash up on the shore), and collaborations with the composer Rodolphe Burger in which recordings of minority language speakers are sampled, spliced and drawn into a "cacophonous collage" that "transform[s them] into pure music" (p. 100). Emphasizing Cadiot's clear attraction to generic hybridity, Sainsbury draws heavily here on Bakhtin's analysis of literary genre as she argues that the polyvocalic quality of Cadiot's poetry (and musical collaborations) resulting from his exuberant use of readymade linguistic materials deploys heteroglossia as an explicit strategy of generic subversion, displacing the monoglossia of poetic expression along with all the ideological baggage it entails.

Christophe Tarkos, the subject of chapter four, appears here as a singular voice in recent French poetry, whose *œuvre*--vast despite his having succumbed to a brain tumor at the age of 41--develops a conception of language and an approach to poetic invention that make his work difficult to place within available critical paradigms. Tarkos's work manifestly carries forward the metalinguistic and experimental concerns of the textualist orientation, all the while

welcoming “a return of the real in the poem” (p. 14) and reinstating the “je” as the undisputed center and source of his expression. In her accounting of the minor quality of this poet’s work, Sainsbury points to the rhizomatic cropping up of figures across his *œuvre* and especially the role of repetition and *ritournelle* in lending Tarkos’s texts an uncanny quality in which the unmarked language of everyday interactions is made strange through frenetic repetition—an operation that carves out a minor language from within the rule-governed confines of the major language. Sainsbury’s reading embraces the profound weirdness of this poet, thinking with him as she explores his monistic belief in the common materiality of language and the outside world, and his anti-Saussurean conception of language as “pâte-mot” (p. 138), an unformed doughy mass that speakers can shape momentarily. Remarking the stylistic and thematic unity of his many published works alongside the assertive presence of his first-person pronoun, Sainsbury considers the monologic analysis Bakhtin might offer of Tarkos’s work, arguing to the contrary that his poetry is internally diglottic, “with its syntactic and rhythmic effects offering variations on an absent but implicit norm” (p. 166).

This book has many strengths, not least being Sainsbury’s lucid and well-paced prose. Her studies make heavy and effective use of close reading, tacking confidently between detailed analysis of primary texts and the ongoing discussion of the applicability of the term “minor” to the processes and products described, which builds a striking dynamism into the unfolding of her argument. Even so, there is an exhaustiveness to these analyses that can at times become tedious—enumerating every aspect of the texts mentioned that might invite a Deleuzo-Guattarian (or Bakhtinian) analysis.

In terms of the book’s theoretical gambit, this reader was left unconvinced by the inclusion of the Bakhtinian framework. Often called upon as representative of a theorization of poetry in terms of fixed generic properties (monoglossia, specifically), Bakhtin seems to serve primarily as a strawman, advocating an equation of poetry with the unified poetic voice which has been systematically undermined by experimental poets—French or otherwise—since at least Mallarmé. The resurgence of lyricism in the 1980s did indeed bring some more traditional poetic postures back to the fore, but Sainsbury seems intent on not centering the antinomies of that moment within her analysis, and therefore does not draw on this aspect of the historical context as a justification for this theoretical support. Within her argument, the look to Bakhtin seems most useful in the framework it provides for locating the value of multiplicity over and above the unitary (key for Deleuze and Guattari, and key to the deterritorialization of literary practice recognized in authors of *littérature mineure*) within a discussion of generic distinction, but the version of poetry Bakhtin proposes in order to shape his critique is so far from what we see in the work of these poets that it becomes a distraction. That said, the problem may be that Sainsbury limits her engagement with Bakhtin to two essays from *The Dialogic Imagination*, rather than reaching for his subsequent—and increasingly influential—work theorizing speech genre, which would allow her to address genre not in terms of fixed properties but as emergent within a pragmatic framework.

Finally, for a project centered on the subversion of homogenizing, territorializing forces, it is regrettable that this book does not convey more self-awareness about the homogeneity of its corpus. We know that the minor-ness of any literary object does not flow from the minoritarian identity of its author but rather from the processes of deterritorialization it sets in motion; even so, it remains striking to encounter a study of “minor poetics” that is exclusively concerned with the work of white men. As a book that purports to speak to the state and stakes of the field of

contemporary French poetry, it would have been appropriate (as well as interesting and productive) to hold some space within this analysis for the question of how the distribution of social power expresses itself within this field and favors the reflexive acceptance of white/male dominance therein. Sainsbury's intervention would have been well served, in my opinion, by taking into account what diversity does indeed exist within this field (albeit derisively), looking for instance to the deterritorialization of normative syntax in the work of Anne Portugal, or indeed to the postfrancophone multilingualism of poets like Salah Stétié or Habib Tengour.

Such criticisms aside, this book is largely successful in the work it sets out to do with respect to these authors: resisting the temptation to reduce the complexity of their *œuvres*, Sainsbury deploys the notion of minor poetics as a flexible framework that allows her to account for and articulate the significance of precisely those facets of their work that pull them out of dominant narratives of post-1980s French poetry, like so many escape hatches or lines of flight. The book's most significant scholarly contribution lies here, in its resolute upending of binary thinking in its critical orientation and the model it presents for what an alternative orientation might look like.

NOTES

[1] Olivier Cadiot, "Réenchanter les formes," interview with Marie Gil and Patrice Maniglier, *Les Temps Modernes* 5, 676 (2013): 9.

[2] Cadiot, "Réenchanter les formes," p. 9.

[3] Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Mille plateaux* (Paris: Minuit, 1980).

[4] Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination. Four Essays by M.M. Bakhtin*, ed. by Michael Holquist and Caryl Emerson (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981).

[5] Dominique Fourcade, *Il* (Paris: POL, 1994), p. 61.

[6] Olivier Cadiot, *L'Art poétique* (Paris: POL, 1988); id., *Futur, ancien, fugitif* (Paris: POL, 1993).

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