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Emma Wagstaff, *André du Bouchet. Poetic Forms of Attention*. Leyden: Brill, 2020. 229 pp. \$123.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN: 978-90-04-42714-3; \$123.00 U.S. (eb). ISBN: 978-90-04-43288-8.

Review by Hugues Azérad, University of Cambridge.

“Attentif—autant qu’à soi, à l’inattention” (du Bouchet, quoted p. 1) would aptly describe André du Bouchet’s work and how Emma Wagstaff approaches one of France’s most elusive and important poets. In the footsteps of the remarkable studies preceding it (Bishop, Martinez, Layet, Met, Fetzer, De Rijcke),<sup>[1]</sup> her study covers du Bouchet’s entire *œuvre*—the first to do so in English—but this book does not read like a typical work of literary criticism or theory. Even though the reader will find a wealth of elucidations and revealing associations with other poets hailing from French-speaking countries and beyond, schools of poetry across historical periods, and current theoretical debates and disciplines (including Rita Felski’s engagement with critique as practised in academia, Rancière’s proposal for an aesthetics/politics of equality, the attention economy, translation studies, ecocriticism, autobiography, art criticism, intermediality studies), something more profound and lasting is at work here.<sup>[2]</sup> Through her careful and illuminating analyses of du Bouchet’s poems (including those published as *Carnets*), Wagstaff invites us to engage in what she calls “slow reading” or “slow criticism” that dovetails with du Bouchet’s poetic rhythms, which oppose any form of appropriation, of metaphysical postulates, or a hasty interpretation of subjective expression or impression (p. 19). Advocating a closer attention to form, but eschewing a detached, universalistic or hierarchical formalism, Wagstaff’s interdisciplinary approach shows how du Bouchet’s work requires readers “to engage in a measured, open-ended, and unhurried way with the words on the page, and thereby with the world and words in which they are enmeshed” (p. 20). Du Bouchet’s poetic and prose texts “enact and produce attentiveness that resists speed while constantly on the move, and combine with distraction to produce focused alertness instead of harried responsiveness to multiple stimuli” (p. 20). Du Bouchet’s poetry dwells in uncertainty, constantly blurring binary categories, however entrenched they may be, therefore opening up a temporality of reading and writing that tends to be obfuscated by an overemphasis on spatial readings (cf. Joseph Frank’s edicts on the spatialisation of time in Modernism).<sup>[3]</sup> Du Bouchet’s famous recourse to blank spaces and em-dashes (probably inspired by Emily Dickinson but also by Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven, the American Dada poet published by *Transition*) disorients a hurried habit of reading and focuses our attention on the word seen in isolation *and* in tensive relation with other words on the page, lending itself neither to immediate nor deferred meaning. Wagstaff dismisses claims that du Bouchet is artificially unreadable or elitist *per se* in his banishment of anecdotal or personal references and in his patient construction of pared back images; on the contrary, echoing Jean-Luc Nancy’s notion of poetic resistance, du Bouchet is rather “otherwise readable, once it is

viewed as evoking shared experience” (p. 18). Wagstaff lays out her argument across six chapters, comparable to blocks of experience, each evincing one facet of the poet’s alter-readability, whilst interweaving them in a slowly emerging “meshwork” (Clive Scott, quoted p. 105).

In the first chapter, Wagstaff presents and clarifies du Bouchet’s complex position within the French poetic literary fields, showing how he navigates without adhering to any poetic creed, even if closely immersed in French poetry (notably Scève, Hugo, Baudelaire), German poetry (Hölderlin, Celan), American poetry (Marianne Moore, Wallace Stevens, William Carlos Williams), and the key modernist poets featured in the leading avant-garde journal, *Transition*, to which he contributed in 1948. Du Bouchet is indeed the only poet in the post-war French literary landscape equipped with a bilingual American-French culture. He was deeply engaged with philosophy (Wittgenstein and Heidegger, who respectively inspired the textualist and ontological turns of French poetry since the 1950s), and with the literary and art review *l’Éphémère* that he co-edited with Philippe Jaccottet, Jacques Dupin and Yves Bonnefoy between 1967 and 1972. Reverdy, Ponge and Char provided a lasting influence, and du Bouchet later contributed to the emerging new poetic scene brought about by *Orange Export Ltd.* (Hocquard, Albiach, Daive, Royet-Journoud), but du Bouchet’s work remains marginal yet seminal throughout, constantly evolving according to its own pace and rhythms and to its precise yet intensely resonating use of verse and language, thus maintaining an aura of intimate strangeness and a certain poetics of attentiveness. Wagstaff summarises this poetic trajectory brilliantly: “his work is not principally concerned with presence and absence, but with attentiveness to change over time. That attentiveness enables du Bouchet to investigate the ways and extent to which words can relate to the non-linguistic world as the internal resources of language, and to place subjectivity at the heart of his project while rejecting the expressive poetic subject” (p. 31). This aesthetic attentiveness is also political, as clearly indicated in du Bouchet’s *Sous les pavés la plage*, published in issue six of *l’Éphémère* (September 1968), which is not so much a reaction to the May 68 events as an endorsing recognition concomitant with his own practice of creating breaches, openings, voids, and gaps in language: “L’écart—le nouvel écart—est à trouver—l’écart dont nous voici, dans la parole de nos proches, dépossédés soudain...”; “Cesser d’écrire, un temps et réserver l’emplacement de ce vide—de l’écart ( pour que le vent continue de souffler ) dans la mise en cause générale”; “Que demeure vacante, dans le nouveau déplacement commun, la place de qui, à nouveau, peut-être écrira...” (quoted p. 35, p. 45, p. 46). According to Wagstaff, form is key to the political import of this text, through du Bouchet’s poetics of disruption, mainly found at the level of punctuation (parentheses, em-dashes, ellipses), line and page breaks, blank spaces etc., including the increased use of the future perfect in the revised version of the text published in 1979. Instead of speaking “in place of others” (p. 58), Wagstaff rightly tells us that du Bouchet “offers a renewed means of engaging with the world that he considers as potentially shared in the manner of the ‘partage du sensible’ presented by Rancière, and in line with Rancière’s argument that equality in that sharing is a necessity rather than an ethical goal” (p. 61); one could add that his poetic use of the collective pronoun “nous” is closer to what thinkers like Glissant, Macé and Bailly have problematised in their questioning of the *nous* as instantiation of an impossible yet irrepressible collective people or community, which is not exclusive but always in relation with an outside. It is that very uncertainty and series of constantly changing openings (pointing towards a constitutive yet haunting “dehors”) that are at the core of du Bouchet’s poetry, which “enables it to posit and pursue equality” (p. 60).

Taking us progressively deeper into du Bouchet’s poetry, Wagstaff ushers in an innovative approach that displaces assumptions on the relation between poetry and the environment, but

also on time, duration and the role of poetic images. Without distorting du Bouchet's cryptic images, Wagstaff pays close attention to the pauses and breathing of his verse, the poems being or rather becoming processes of crossings, or "espaces traversants" (Sylvie Glissant's title for a recent cycle of paintings), implying meaningful encounters with the resistive material world, the poetic subject interacting "with the world through the senses without grasping or mastering it." Wagstaff adds: "All of du Bouchet's work grapples with the disjuncture between the mute world of the elements, nature, and the body, and the human capacity for language and thought" (p. 62). In the wake of Bergson, Proust, and preceding Deleuze, du Bouchet upturns static fixities through the process of repetition with variations; form does not reify time, but produces change via its own repetitive structures, caesuras, anticipations, and pauses, "dans les sillons de la parole rouverte" (*Axiales*, quoted p. 62). Du Bouchet's poetry effects both a "démésure de la mesure" and "mesure de la démesure" [4] through its uses of pauses that are "unmeasurable and therefore outside the abstract categorising of thought: they are breaches in time whose power [...] comes from du Bouchet's refusal to pin them down in spatial terms" (Wagstaff, p. 62). Furthering Reverdy's forays into this poetic technique of attention that crystallises the moment of encounter without reifying it, du Bouchet invites "a way of perceiving, thinking and moving that lives time rather than taking it: slowly, with pauses, seeing through surface meanings, adjusting based on experience, and imagining possible futures. Pauses enable embodied encounters with the material world without reducing language to matter, paradoxically opening up ways of truly living time and accepting its passing. Pauses do not reveal depths, but the opposite of revelation is not concealment, it is apposition, being 'à côté' in order to accept the irreducibly mortal condition of the human subject" (p. 96).

The next two chapters develop Wagstaff's concepts of tensional relations and of slow reading and slow criticism through the prism of translation and criticism, two "parallel" activities often found in French poetry (notable examples being Baudelaire, Mallarmé, Bonnefoy and Dupin). It is surprising that du Bouchet's translations and writings on translation are not part of the core curriculum of translation studies, for they bring a crucial new angle to the art of translation, and what it tells us about cultural identity, the native and the foreign. Du Bouchet translated Shakespeare, Donne, Faulkner, Riding, Dickinson, Joyce, Hölderlin, Celan, and Mandelstam, often choosing lesser-known or particularly difficult texts or sections of longer works, a selection that reflects the poet's profound yet discreet affinity with authors that seem vastly different yet share a same concern with gaps and pauses, but also perhaps with trauma or the unsayable. Crucially, Wagstaff unravels what makes du Bouchet's unorthodox approach to translation and cultural identity: "languages and cultures are not separate entities that the linguistically and culturally able traveller can cross, and subsequently mediate for an audience on one side of the divide, but rather enmeshed through individuals' complex ties and trajectories. [...] [T]ranslation [...] is a practice that enables [du Bouchet] to present and perform his sense that the notions of 'foreign' and 'native' are untenable" (p. 97). Making a fruitful comparison between Glissant's theory of translation (based on a poetics of relation (multilingual and open) itself relying on the irreducible opacity of cultures (as resistance to transparency or assimilation) and of difference, and du Bouchet's own approach, evidenced in his translations of Celan (but not only), Wagstaff shows how du Bouchet's ethics of translation can contribute to contemporary political debates on the vital necessity of an ecology of languages and cultures to preserve the chaotic energy of the diverse. Clive Scott's notion of "meshwork," inspired by Glissant, enriches other foundational theories of translation (developed by Benjamin, Hölderlin, Berman, Ricœur, Bonnefoy, Cassin and Risset), as well as bringing some correctives to more transparent or pragmatic approaches: "meshwork' encourages various kinds of promiscuity, lines bending or

deviating to take account of associative mechanisms, variations and continuities, morphings from one language to another, fluid interactions” (Scott, quoted p. 105). Instead of bringing the foreign within the native language through translation, translation displaces the native from within, maintains a tensional (Glissant would call it “fugal”)[5] interaction that resists ossification: “il me reste encore à traduire du français” (du Bouchet, quoted p. 107); “langue étrangère, c’est la langue étrangère dans la langue” (quoted p. 107); “mais traduire est une séparation aussi. traduire/ la séparation” (quoted p. 113).

Even though Wagstaff sees a difference between du Bouchet’s poetics of translation (relation, opacity within) and his critical writings on poetry and art (distance, indirectness, non-descriptiveness), a similar method emerges, albeit unsystematically. Attentiveness, slow reading, and a constant displacement of expected responses remain at the core of his aesthetic, turning direct opposition or engagement into a form of reading otherwise. In a style that is evocative of Proust and of Woolf, du Bouchet unveils his own theory of reading and criticism to Alain Veinstein, in his famous *Entretiens*: “Le vrai lecteur serait peut-être celui qui fait confiance aux mots, qui se fait confiance à lui-même dans le temps de sa lecture, qui, ouvrant un livre, se trouvant face à une page de ce livre, n’oublie pas qu’il est là. Une page le ramène à l’instant où il lit, donc à lui-même, à ce qu’il apporte dans le temps de sa lecture, plutôt que de constituer un divertissement qui l’entraînerait ailleurs. En ce sens, le vrai lecteur n’est pas différent de celui qui se trouve impliqué dans un rapport avec quelqu’un d’autre. La différence, c’est que le lecteur est seul avec les mots qu’il a en face de lui” (quoted p. 130). Du Bouchet’s writings on and collaborations with artists (*livres d’artistes*) such as Tal-Coat, Giacometti, Bokor, Héliou, de Staël, Asse, and Van Velde have been well documented and analysed in other studies, including Wagstaff’s two previous monographs,[6] hence the emphasis given here to his *method* of reading and writing about verbal and non-verbal media. Du Bouchet’s aesthetics of attention, analysed in parallel with recent works by Macé, Felski and Bailly in particular, sheds a salutary light on current literary and theoretical debates, inside and outside universities and across disciplines.

The final chapter of Wagstaff’s study similarly elucidates the endless debates on life-writing, chronology, (self-)referentiality and sources, by patiently peeling back the different layers of key texts (*Tumulte* for instance) and numerous *Carnets*, frustrating a unilinear summative of teleological reading: “his writing project is one of paring back which is in itself concrete in that it builds up over the course of a writing life to produce work that offers an account of the passing of time. In so doing, it shows that time is not experienced at *chronos*, but as repeated returns through which the past is understood differently in the present, and it is possible to project ahead to a time in the future when the present will appear differently. [...] *Tumulte* [...] [is] an exemplary work in which du Bouchet produces process: a volume that shares features with the rest of his output, while embodying—in part through a focus on the human body—the paring back that his practice of rewriting had also aimed to achieve” (p. 184). Du Bouchet’s attentiveness to the work of others, other media, the sounds and rhythms of language, and the natural world remains dynamic throughout, as exemplified by his practice of rewriting, probably not so different from Proust, placing time at the core of language, whilst making sure it remains “unpossessed” and therefore, never instrumentalised by any tradition (as was also the case with Reverdy and Ponge, the other “arpenteurs du réel” as Glissant called them).

Wagstaff’s conclusion is in fact a vital opening, constituting a stand-alone essay or manifesto on the importance of slow reading and slow criticism that will reverberate through academic and non-academic spheres. As she wraps up her coruscating analyses, she engages with ecocriticism

(Posthumus, Guattari) and attention theories (Newport, Kahneman, Citton, Gefen, Lanham, to whom one could have added Jenny Odell), but it is du Bouchet's work that is now segueing into Wagstaff's own theory of reading, which in turn is the best way of attending to critics' lack of engagement with temporality in du Bouchet's writing. Wagstaff's plea for further engagement with du Bouchet's writings is also a profound advocacy for poetry's voice to obviate attention-driven, indifferent and exploitative practices and help *everyone* concentrate on the transformative joys of paying attention to language and the non-linguistic world, at a pace of their choosing: "What poetry can do is make time in the sense that it makes readers aware of time. It sets up times of reading that demand attentiveness over a certain period of time, often through complex rhythms that cannot be hurried. It reveals the complexities of the human experience of time, and heightens the readers' sense of the present of reading [...]. Poetry's capacity to draw attention to time, and to produce new times of reading, makes it a clear candidate for enabling both reflection on attentiveness and attention itself" (p. 206). Emma Wagstaff's study *cum* essay or manifesto is truly transformative, but without assigning any mandate to du Bouchet's poetry, whose gaps and resistive spaces are meant to be shared and experienced. This is where du Bouchet's playful preoccupation joins up with Wagstaff's precise analysis; "poetry, but what for?" one always asks or hears, to which du Bouchet quietly replies: "Elle n'a jamais eu un rôle, et c'est ce qui en fait de la poésie. Mais c'est la forme de communication singulière qui est, je crois, la seule réelle. Si vous voulez, le fait de ne pas parler pour les autres dans le langage des autres fait que, de temps en temps, un autre est atteint réellement, et réellement touché" (quoted p. 208). With a force that will resonate and speak to many, Wagstaff draws on du Bouchet's understanding of attention in order to set out her own decisive approach to attentive reading, which she describes "as sustained, but not exclusive to a single object; resistant to being co-opted into economic or productive exchange; an attribute of the individual but directed towards the collective; of the everyday without enumerating detail; embedded in its time but offering a perspective relevant beyond a particular historical context [...]" ; attentiveness, moreover, "is a vital human capacity that is nurtured by time spent in the natural world, with others, and by reading: it is distinguished by its ability to discern what is important from competing imperatives, and it enables a fulfilling acceptance of the passing of time" (p. 208).

## NOTES

[1] Michael Bishop, *Altérités d'André du Bouchet*, (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2003); Elke De Rijcke, *L'Expérience poétique dans l'œuvre d'André du Bouchet* (Brussels: La Lettre volée, 2013); Clément Layet, André du Bouchet, 'Préface', in Clément Layet (ed.), *Une lampe dans la lumière aride. Carnets 1949–1955* (Paris: Le Bruit du temps, 2011); Victor Martinez, *André du Bouchet: poésie, langue, événement* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2013); Glenn W. Fetzer, *Palimpsests of the Real in Recent French Poetry* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2004).

[2] Rita Felski, *The Limits of Critique* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2015); Jacques Rancière, *La méthode de l'égalité* (Paris: Bayard, 2012).

[3] Joseph Frank: *The Widening Gyre: Crisis and Mastery in Modern Literature* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1963).

[4] Édouard Glissant, *Anthologie de la poésie du Tout-monde* (Paris: Galaade, 2010), p. 16.

[5] Id., *Traité du Tout-monde, Poétique IV* (Paris: Gallimard, 1997), p. 28.

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[6] Emma Wagstaff, *Provisionality and the Poem. Transition in the Work of du Bouchet, Jacottet and Noël* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2006); ead., *Writing Art: French Literary Responses to the Work of Alberto Giacometti* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2011).

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