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Le mot image: Literality and Image-Mediation in
20th- and 21st-Century French Poetry

By

Victoria B Bergstrom

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the

requirements for the degree of

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in the

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University of California, Berkeley

Committee in charge:

Professor Emerita Suzanne Guerlac, Chair
Professor Michael Lucey
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Abstract

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This dissertation investigates parallel crises of the image in French poetry and in the expanding field of photographic technologies from the 1940s to the present. This latter crisis builds out of the unhinged ubiquity of images in daily life, whose steady advance since lithography inaugurated a new age of image dissemination saw marked accelerations with the advent of television in the postwar years and of digital imaging in the early 1990s. These technological developments and the ways they reshape notions of what an image is (how it originates, where it is located, how it moves) form the backdrop against which a strain of poetic iconoclasm—the aspiration towards a "poésie sans images," a poetics of the literal—takes shape. The movement known as Literalism, a dominant force in the French poetry scene of the 1980s, forms a kind of literary-historical center to this study, as a moment when reflection on the potential of literality to produce a new kind of poetic vision coincided with a vigorous theoretical reckoning with the particular nature of photographic representation. In an effort to situate this literalist turn, I begin with a study of the work of Francis Ponge, a mid-century poet who I read as a significant anticipatory figure in the story of literality, albeit one whose particular interest in reforming the poetic image leads him to work against rather than with the representational model of analog photography. The recently deceased poet Emmanuel Hocquard, a poet-theorist of 1980s literalism, is the subject of the second chapter, which considers how his conception of literality is informed by his conjugated practices of amateur photography and typesetting. Finally, a study of the work of Hocquard's protégé Pierre Alferi shows how this younger poet diverges significantly from the literalist precepts of the previous generation with a poetics that is radically accepting of its function as an infrastructure for the (re)mediation of images, one that is not concerned with flattening out the poetic image (as Hocquard does) but with deploying poetic form in a way that allows him to enact (and think critically about) the mobility of televisual and digital images. The issues at stake in these poets' reimagining of the poetic image can of course be understood in literary-historical terms, as episodes in the ongoing reckoning with the legacy of the surrealist image, or as responses to the perennial "returns" to the comforts of (neo)lyricism that all three of these authors rail against. While this study does take these frameworks into account, my focus is directed instead to the way these poets think the image beyond poetry and, as a result, can be approached seriously as theorists of the image in the broadest sense. By bringing together three authors whose reflection on the technical image is shaped in the photographic, televisual, and digital eras (respectively), I am able not only to underscore the technohistorical situatedness of their particular reconceptualization of the poetic image, but also to make the case for the exceptional potency of poetic thought in the face of image

technologies that demand, by virtue of their technical structure, a conceptual awareness of problematics of concreteness and abstraction, interiority and exteriority, transmission and reception, and the operational nature of visualization.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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I would like to acknowledge the contributions of my committee to the development and completion of this project. I am grateful to Rob Kaufman for his warm encouragement of my scholarship, to Damon Young for boosting what is unliterary in this dissertation (which would most certainly have taken a very different form were it not for his enthusiasm and expertise), and I offer special thanks to Michael Lucey for his unfailingly generous and lucid reading of my work. And, of course, this dissertation would not and could not exist in its current form without the Herculean patience, support and care of Suzanne Guerlac.

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INTRODUCTION

*Pour photographier, on choisit la distance qui
convient. Il y a là une intention. À quelle distance
écrit-on ?*
Emmanuel Hocquard[1]

The title of this dissertation references a mantra of Literalist poetics: "Remplacer l'image par le *mot* image." This prescription, formulated in 1987 by the poet Claude Royet-Journoud, communicates a utopic desire for a poetry devoid of images, a poetry capable of reducing the poetic image to a word that can be taken *à la lettre* (literally).[2] The operation described is one in favor of literality, although not in its typical sense. This is not an injunction to replace the poetic image with a more evidently denotative formulation, substituting one kind or mode of description for another. What it proposes instead still reads, however, as a confrontation between figuration and its opposite: swapping an image produced through figure and analogy (an image that is not *in* the words, per se, but that acquires form in the mind of a reader) for the unambiguous visuality of this typeset word, presented to the eye rather than the mind's eye. An echo of Stéphane Mallarmé's famous line rings out here, with a substitution: "ce n'est point avec des [*images*] qu'on fait des vers, mais avec des mots."[3] Taken "à la lettre," however, the substitution Royet-Journoud proposes brings some practical ambiguities. First, it presumes that the thing referred to as "l'image" is discrete and excisable (the first entry in an executable Find-and-Replace function) and that the *word* "image" is different in kind to the image it would unseat. Whatever content "l'image" might have presented, those elements it brings together to produce a poetic experience in the reader, would vanish, sacrificed to the generality of a noun that simply identifies the kind of thing it is (or was). What this would also suggest is the replacement of something that we would think of as a very particular species of image (a poetic image, an image made solely from language, however vaguely it might be understood), with a word which immediately unburdens it of that specificity as it is cast into the vast and expanding sea of objects, phenomena, sensations, philosophical concepts, etc. encompassed by the "*mot* image." If this substitution is an act of literality, it is not because it reduces any of this word's polysemic complexity, but because it literalizes the very idea of an image made of words (letters; the letters i-m-a-g-e) in a way that directs attention away from meaning entirely and towards the material fact of print.

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[1] Emmanuel Hocquard, *ma haie* (Paris: P.O.L., 2001), 152.

[2] Claude Royet-Journoud, *La poésie entière est préposition* (Marseille: Éric Pesty Éditeur, 2007): 11. The phrase "Remplacer l'image par le *mot* image," from his 1987 text "Un métier d'ignorance" and reprinted in the 2007 volume cited, comes to us in what Royet-Journoud describes elsewhere as a "jeu de scène minimal," which is to say with no elaboration or illustration, a fragment among fragments. See "Claude Royet-Journoud. J'aime mieux le mot image que les images," interview with Natacha Michel (*Perroquet* 35, février 1984).

[3] "Mais Degas, ce n'est point avec des idées qu'on fait des vers, mais avec des mots." This line, given in reply to a statement by the painter Edgar Degas, is reported by Paul Valéry in his *Souvenirs littéraires*.

If I open my dissertation with this brief exploration of Royet-Journoud's phrase, it is because it isolates the image as an unequivocal problem for the poet, one that his own—and indeed all—poetics must grapple with. To replace the poetic image with the simple word "image" is to use literality to neutralize the questions surrounding the image that have churned through French poetry with special vigor since Romantic lyric placed the poetic image at the center of its activities. Questions like: where is the poetic image located? what is its source? how does it materialize? what relation does it present to the real or, rather, what version of reality does it seem to index? what relation does it present to its own material medium? If our image is nothing other than this very word, then these questions lose their charge of ambiguity, they cease to open onto the mysteries of the human imagination and its communication and appear instead woefully misguided. The literal image that Royet-Journoud devises to counter the poetic image's illusory abstraction is an image made (literally) of letters; this typographical solution to the problem of the image will, as we will see, find itself buttressed and extended by the alternative solutions offered by images that are literal in another sense: actual, physical images (analog photography most especially), which literalist poets will summon as stand-ins for "l'image" that needs replacing.[4]

Two decades later, Emmanuel Hocquard, a close collaborator of Royet-Journoud's, would publish *Méditations photographiques sur l'idée simple de nudité*, a work in which the idea of nudity is considered in the context of the poet's development of his own photographic nudes. Despite Hocquard's frequent inclusion of photographs in his works (his own photos, or more often those of collaborators), this book does not present, on any of its eighty-seven pages, a single photographic image. What it presents instead—as consolation, or as a joke at our expense—is a page, wedged between the epigraph and the first poem of the volume, printed with a rectangular figure in which the word "photographie" sits—all-caps, sans serif—in high-center position:
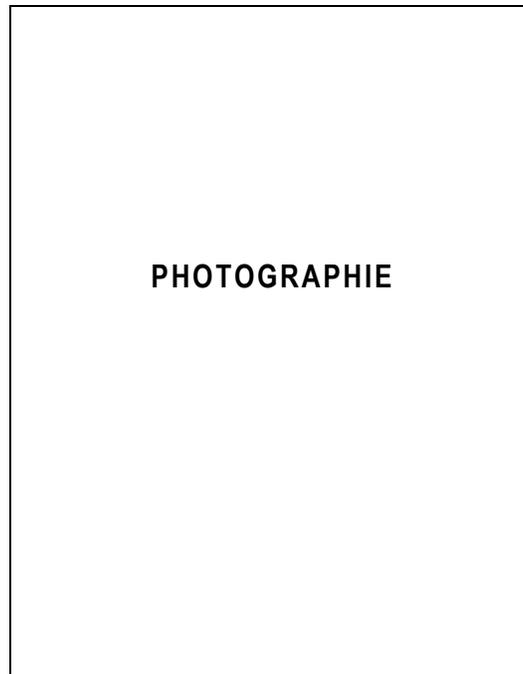
PHOTOGRAPHIE

Fig. 1. Emmanuel Hocquard, *Méditations photographiques sur l'idée simple de nudité.*

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[4] See for instance the use of photographic supports/conceits in: Royet-Journoud, *Autre, pièce* (1975); Jean Daive, *Narrations d'équilibre 3: vingt-quatre images seconde* (1982); and especially, as we will see, Emmanuel Hocquard, *Album d'images de la villa Harris* (1978), *Allô Freddy ?* (avec Juliette Valéry, 1996), and many more.

Where the reader might have reasonably expected to find a photographic image, she finds instead the mark of a substitution, not unlike the one prescribed by Royet-Journoud. Indeed, Hocquard evokes his friend's line with such frequency that it is hard not to recognize in the above figure a transposition of that directive into the concerns of this particular volume: "remplacer la photographie par le *mot* photographie." The word image is to the image as the word photograph is to the photograph. The conversion seems straightforward: name the image in the most indisputable way possible instead of re/presenting it; offer a general category noun in the place of the re/presentation of an image in its specificity. What strikes me most in Hocquard's figure, however, given his closeness to Royet-Journoud's thinking and the exclusively textual content of this book, is the possibility of reading this figure not as transposition of his friend's line into the homologous image-context of photography, but as a continuation—a compounding—of its logic. To replace the image with the word image is necessarily to substitute something conventional and copiable (this word, its five characters) for something we tend to think of as partaking of the singularity of invention. The automation of photographic capture rules out invention as a matter of course and offers in its place a different kind of singularity: that of the instant, the contingent play of light coming through the aperture as the shutter clicks. Hocquard, for his part, likes to think of the photograph not in terms of this singularity, but as the replacement—analogous to the one proposed by Royet-Journoud—of something singular with something copiable. What is of interest to Hocquard, in his long reflection on photography, is not so much the contingency of the instant of capture as the hyperbolic non-contingency of the logic of the copy that the photograph inaugurates.[5] If the photograph already belongs to the domain of iterativity, to then replace such an image with the word "photographie" (replacing what would be an indexical sign (the photo) for a conventional, symbolic one (the word)) is to compound the degree of distance between image and text proposed by Royet-Journoud. Through this rectangular figure, Hocquard seems to be insisting on photography's implication within the textual problematic of the image, and I will argue in what follows that such a move also posits the poetic/verbal/textual image as reciprocally implicated within broader technological reflections on the evolving scope of what we mean when we say "image." The problem of the image in a poetic context becomes, in the twentieth century, indissociable from the transformations witnessed in understandings of the image as a result of technological developments in the production and dissemination of images on a mass scale.

The questions I noted above with respect to the poetic image—regarding its location, its origination, its ontological and metaphysical entanglements—are questions of the image *tout court*, questions that have only gained in salience as the referential ground covered by this word "image" has been expanded and transformed with successive developments in image technologies. From where we sit in 2021, inundated with digital images (which have become the default form of the image as such), it is clear that questions of what counts as an image, where it "is" and how it got there have been in a state of ceaseless renewal for the last half-century in particular, as technological innovations speed us from one image paradigm to the next. The problematic that organizes these questions is one of the traffic between exterior and interior in the production and visualization of images. The photochemical image gives exterior form to sensory images that, at the time of its invention in the 1830s, had been the exclusive object of perception, something interior to the perceiving mind. If the externalization of visual sensation in the concrete form of the photograph was central to this technology's initial fascination, a large share of digital's revolutionary character rests, on the contrary, with the abstraction and invisibility of its processes. As contemporary media

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[5] This line of thinking and its elaboration in the pages of *Méditations photographiques sur l'idée simple de nudité* is the subject of Chapter 2 below.

theorists have argued, the digital image is structurally reliant on *internalization* both with respect to its code (the concealment of the digital image's "original" form behind the invisible data of the image file) as well as to its viewing (the role of the human body in the visualization of image data).[6] The history of modern French poetry has also been understood in terms of the problematic of externalization. Laurent Jenny, in his study of poetic avant-gardes from 1885 to 1935, registers the shifts observed in these decades as "l'histoire d'une externalisation progressive de l'intériorité romantique."[7] In this relatively conventional account, the revolutions in the status and conception of the poetic image observed from Romanticism onwards—from the synthetic unity of the romantic image to the radical externalization of the image in concrete poetry to the surrealist reframing of categories of interior and exterior—are understood in literary-historical terms, as literary solutions to literary problems. But as a growing body of critical work has shown, the significance of the development of photographic image technologies in the mid-nineteenth century (and their ceaseless refinement and reimagination since) cannot be underestimated when it comes to evolving conceptions of the particular kind of image-making poetry is engaged in.[8]

As Rosmarie Waldrop has observed, the writers that came together around the journal *Siècle à mains* (directed by Royet-Journoud, Anne-Marie Albiach and Michel Couturier) were thinking about literality in the context of their search for "new directions in French poetry—directions away from the overwhelming influence of surrealism, hence away from the dominant image, the dominant metaphor."[9] In his recent book, *Experimentation and the Lyric in Contemporary French Poetry*, Jeff Barda emphasizes that while in Anglo-American contexts the critique of lyricism has centered on the role of voice in the production of illusions of presence, "in France, the attack on the lyric is intrinsically linked, ever since Surrealism, to the status of the poetic image, and especially of the metaphor."[10] It is significant that literalist writers at the forefront of poetic experimentalism in the 70s and 80s still understood their work as a response to surrealism. While the surrealist critique of the real and its reimagination of poetic activity as a means for catching glimpses into the unconscious have lost much of their poignancy (with the waning influence of psychoanalytic theory), the surrealist *image* seems to retain a perennial salience within the field of French poetry. The tight association of surrealist practice with photographic technology—via photographic automatism and the epistemology of the flash—is certainly implicated in this persistent influence. Indeed, no literary movement to date has been as intimately and necessarily bound up with an image technology as surrealism was with photography.[11] A camera's ability to document visibilities

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[6] For the relation between the digital image file and its visualization see Boris Groys, "From Image to Image-File—and Back: Art in the Age of Digitization" in *Art Power* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2008), 91; for the recruitment of the body into the visualization of digital images, see Mark B.N. Hansen, *New Philosophy for New Media* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2004), *passim*.

[7] Laurent Jenny, *La fin de l'intériorité* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 2002), 2.

[8] Recent studies in the French context include, for instance, Marit Grøtta, *Baudelaire's Media Aesthetics: The gaze of the flâneur and 19th-century media* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015); Christophe Wall-Romana, *Cinepoetry: Imaginary Cinemas in French Poetry* (New York: Fordham UP, 2013); Anne Reverseau, *Le Sens de la vue: Le regard photographique dans la poésie moderne* (Paris: Sorbonne Université Presses, 2018).

[9] Rosmarie Waldrop, "*Le renversement* by Claude Royet-Journoud," *Books Abroad* 48.1 (1974): 94.

[10] Jeff Barda, *Experimentation and the Lyric in Contemporary French Poetry* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave, 2019), 11.

[11] The art historian Rosalind Krauss has argued, for instance, that photographic technology provides the necessary conditions for the development of surrealist ideology, with its privileging of the sense of vision, its assimilation of visual capture with a kind of writing, and its revolutionary introduction of fully automated (impersonal) image-making. See Krauss, "The Photographic Conditions of Surrealism" in *The Originality of the Avant-garde* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1986).

beyond what the unaided human eye can perceive grants access to what Walter Benjamin terms the "optical unconscious,"[12] and is a key source of inspiration in the theorization not just of surrealist automatism but of the consequences of the revolution of visuality brought on by photography. Through the practice of automatic writing, which André Breton calls "une véritable photographie de la pensée" in an early text,[13] surrealist poetry assimilates mechanical image-making with the act of lyric expression to produce a minimally mediated record of an "interiority" that is nothing other than the unconscious activity of the mind captured in the surrealist image. In this way, surrealism establishes an even tighter association between voice and image than that observed in Romantic lyric, with the crucial difference that the surrealist subject is radically de-personalized, rendered impersonal in part through the appeal to contemporary technologies. The salience of how surrealism binds the poetic image to the technical image, and the role ascribed to photography in its critique of rationalized vision, only gains in significance with the multiplication of image technologies and their increasing centrality to contemporary experience.

Surrealist thought arises in part out of the revolutionary, emancipatory potential of the visual that the automated photographic exposure brings to light. Organized around the procedure of the capture—the automation of the trace and the de-personalization of image-making that become imaginable with the advent of photography—, the surrealist image can be viewed as a kind of celebration of photography as a technical model and a realization of its emancipatory potential within the domains of language and thought. In this dissertation, I set out to consider what becomes of this relationship between poetry and the technical image as poets of subsequent generations reframe it as critical rather than celebratory. I bring together studies of a trio of twentieth-century poets—Francis Ponge, Emmanuel Hocquard, and Pierre Alferi—who go about rethinking the poetic image in relation to other image-making practices and as a critical tool for reckoning with the broader image environment within which they find themselves. If I open with references to Claude Royet-Journoud and Emmanuel Hocquard, it is because the literalist moment of the 1980s strikes me as a kind of apotheosis of French antilyricism, and one that directs explicit attention to the problem of the image at the heart of this critique. Forty years Hocquard's senior, Francis Ponge is a poet who militates against lyricism at every stage of his 60-year career and can be recognized as a significant force in the imagination and formulation of a specifically post-surrealist antilyricism. If the literalists of the 1980s sit at the climax of a critical antilyricist narrative, Ponge appears as an early catalyst whose contributions shape this narrative's arc. As we will see, Pierre Alferi, a contemporary poet of a younger generation (b. 1963), will emerge as the agent of a significant dénouement in this story as his more technologically expansive understanding of the image motivates a reappraisal of lyric at the dawn of the digital age.

Lyricism vs. Literality

While the response to surrealism is vital to the objectives of Literalist poets like Royet-Journoud and Hocquard, the significance of their more proximate literary environment to the formulation of their poetics cannot be overstated. These poets are elaborating their critique of the image during the 1980s, a period which saw the vocal resurgence of lyricism within the French

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[12] We read in "The Work of Art" essay: "Clearly it is another nature which speaks to the camera as compared to the eye. 'Other' above all in the sense that a space informed by human consciousness gives way to a space informed by the unconscious. […] It is through the camera that we first discover the optical unconscious, just as we discover the instinctual unconscious through psychoanalysis" (Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility and Other Writings on Media*, trans. Edmund Jephcott and Harry Zohn (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2008), 37).

[13] André Breton, "Max Ernst," in *Les pas perdus* (Paris: Idées *NRF*, 1970), 101.

poetry scene and the restoration of voice and image as central features of poetic invention. The contemporary poet Olivier Cadiot recently described the contentious period of the 1980s this way: "C'était la guerre entre littéralité et lyrisme. La guerre des étoiles. Les Robots grammatico-communistes contre les vrais humains."[14] The hyperbole he brings to this description underscores the extreme exaggeration of positions that was seen at that time, sending up in particular the caricatural depiction of literalism as a force working to snuff out those human impulses (towards feeling and self-expression) that lyricism would naturally channel.[15] This period of visible and vocal opposition between lyricism and literality forms something like the literary-historical center of the present study, which juxtaposes the work of authors writing before, during and in the wake of this debate: Francis Ponge, a major mid-century poet whose work prefigures literalist poetics in various ways; Emmanuel Hocquard, a poet-theorist of 1980s literalism; and Pierre Alferi, a protégé of Hocquard's and thinker of post-literalist poetic experimentalism. Each of these poets is engaged in a rigorous critique of lyricism and of the overbearing legacy of the surrealist image, and each pursues antidotes to these tendencies in which literal images—an affair of language on the one hand and photographic image technologies on the other—are made to play a central role.

Beginning in the late 1970s, the field of contemporary French poetry witnesses the emergence of a cadre of poets advocating a revitalization of values associated with the lyric tradition: musicality, monologic self-expression, presence effects, a certain transparency in the speaker's relation to language, and in some cases its theological underpinnings as well. Jean-Claude Pinson, a poet and literary critic who welcomed the re-opening of the contemporary field to questions of lyric expression, gives the following account:

> On a eu recours à l'étiquette de 'néo-lyrisme' pour définir l'émergence, dans les dernières décennies, de poètes qui, par-delà leur diversité, partageaient, en même temps que celui d'échapper aux impasses d'une énième excursion aux limites du langage, un même souci d'une poésie qui soit 'chantante' plutôt que 'pensante.' Une poésie attentive à l'héritage de Verlaine ou d'Apollinaire et pas seulement à celui de Mallarmé. Une poésie qui soit, plutôt que celle […] du *poète-philologue* (soucieux d'abord du langage en tant que matériau constructif et ludique), celle du *poète-aède*, pour qui importe avant tout la question lyrique de la voix, du rythme et du chant.[16]

Here, Pinson describes this resurgent lyricism as a kind of countervailing force in a poetic field dominated by textualist and Oulipian approaches perceived as a regime of logocentric *impasses*, notably with respect to the status of the voice (a pursuit of "une poésie […] 'chantante' plutôt que 'pensante'").[17] Anachronistic though this neolyricist turn may appear, particularly when described

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

[15] This antinomy is couched in a way that makes it plainly legible as one episode in the perennial cycle of oppositions that has churned through much of French literary history, famously tracked in terms of Terror vs. Classicism in Jean Paulhan's *Les Fleurs de Tarbes*, and registered elsewhere as an opposition between a poetics of effort/technique/form and a poetics of inspiration. See Jean Paulhan, *Les Fleurs de Tarbes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1947); Suzanne Guerlac, *Literary Polemics* (Stanford, CA: Stanford UP, 1997); Pierre Alferi and Olivier Cadiot, "La mécanique lyrique," *Revue de Littérature générale* 1 (1995).

[16] Jean-Claude Pinson, *Habiter en poète* (Seyssel: Éditions Champ Vallon, 1995), 55-6.

[17] Pinson is thinking here of poets such as Lionel Ray, who after several years of avant-garde experimentalism abandons what he calls, in Paulhanian terms, "le terrorisme linguistico-théorique," to return to a "poétique du chant." Lionel Ray, *Partout ici même* (Paris: Gallimard, 1978), 8—cited in Pinson (56).

in terms of the ancient Greek *aède*, this neo-lyricism comes on the heels of a far more consequential shift towards a more lyrical orientation in the early 1950s with the work of Yves Bonnefoy, André du Bouchet, Jacques Dupin and other associated poets of the journal *L'Éphémère*.[18] Through the 1960s, these poets were subject to aggressive criticism from the part of poets associated with the journal *Tel Quel* who saw in their work an unacceptable anachronism that could only be viewed as reactionary.[19]

Efforts are made, on the part of Pinson as well as other poets and critics, to assert this turn not as a wholesale return to traditional forms (a *neo*-lyricism), but rather as the emergence of a *new* lyricism (or "lyrisme critique") that would maintain a critical distance from the features of traditional lyric deemed irrecoverably passé: idealism, a psychologized conception of the expressive subject, sentimentality (*mièvrerie*). For his part, the poet and leading theorist of this new lyricism Jean-Michel Maulpoix sees this turn as pursuing the unfinished business of lyric inquiry: "le lyrisme constitue une errance dans les périphéries du sujet. […] Voué à une infinie partance, le sujet lyrique continue plutôt de regarder en soi se dissiper la figure de l'homme 'comme à la limite de la mer un visage de sable', mais en cherchant, cette fois, de nouveaux liens, par où retrouver un visage.[20] With his emphasis on continuity in the function of the lyric subject, Maulpoix stakes out a position common to proponents of lyric revitalization. From this perspective, the term "lyrisme" and its association with certain Romantic values regarding subjectivity and expression, would not primarily refer to a historical phenomenon (which has come to an end), but instead to the essence of poetry itself.[21] The understanding of lyric that Maulpoix expresses in the above passage is effectively ahistorical ("le sujet lyrique *continue*…"). As such, the choice to cite the concluding statement of Michel Foucault's *Les mots et les choses*, a work which takes as its object the historicity of intellectual orientations, seems baldly (and misguidedly) polemical. Maulpoix replaces Foucault's evocation of the dawning of a posthuman episteme—with the hypothetical supposition "on peut bien parier que l'homme s'effacerait, comme à la limite de la mer un visage de sable"[22]—with a transparently

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[18] In terms of lineage, this could be considered the Reverdian branch of postwar French poetry, a line of influence rightly noted by Michel Collot to have been "occulté par le surréalisme." Michel Collot, "Lyrisme et littéralité," *Lendemains* 38-39, 134-5 (November 2009): 20.

[19] In just the most notable example, *Tel Quel* editor Denis Roche titles the introduction to his 1968 volume *Éros énergumène* "Leçons sur la vacance poétique," a blistering reference to the collection *Dans la chaleur vacante* by André du Bouchet, founding editor of and frequent contributor to *L'Éphémère*. In this introduction, Roche rejects this lyricism in which he sees nothing more than a "nostalgie de l'espèce de transcendance immédiate qu'on attribue avec tant d'empressement à la création poétique" (*Éros énergumène* (Paris: Seuil, Collection "Tel Quel," 1968), 12).

[20] Jean-Michel Maulpoix, *La poésie comme l'amour* (Paris: Mercure de France, 1998), 125.

[21] This is a position advanced most emblematically by Friedrich Schlegel in his *Philosophical Fragment* 116: "…the romantic kind of poetry is still in the state of becoming; that, in fact, is its real essence: that it should forever be becoming and never perfected… The romantic kind of poetry is the only one that is more than a kind, that is, as it were, poetry itself: for in a certain sense all poetry should be romantic" (cited in Peter Osborne, *Anywhere or not at all* (London: Verso, 2013), 67). Twentieth-century critic Frank Kermode remarks that this term 'Romantic' is "applicable to the literature of one epoch, beginning in the late eighteenth century and not yet finished" (cited in Forest Pyle, "The Romantic Image of the Intentional Structure," in *Releasing the Image: From Literature to New Media,* eds. Jacques Khalip and Robert Mitchell (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2011), 187).

[22] Michel Foucault, *Les mots et les choses* (Paris: Gallimard, 1966), 398.

individualist vision of the lyric subject whose work it is to redouble the pursuit of the human (the self and its face) as its most essential preoccupation.[23]

Lyric Mediation

The primary feature of lyric poetry is generally understood to be the voice. It is the voice that binds poetry to its origins in song, recalling by way of meter and all manner of sonic effects its metonymic relation to the lyre, and it is through developments specific to Romantic lyric that the voice becomes the explicit vehicle for the consolidation and expression of a lyric subject.[24] Paul de Man has famously noted that "[t]he principle of intelligibility, in lyric poetry, depends on the phenomenalization of the poetic voice," and in his recent book *Theory of the Lyric,* Jonathan Culler advances the enunciative apparatus (which he prefers to think in terms of "effects of voicing" rather than a phenomenalized voice) as the primary quality of lyric poetry.[25] Glenn Fetzer, speaking explicitly to the French poetic tradition, underscores that the activation of effects of voicing in lyric poetry communicates an "unquantifiable overabundance of meaning, an excessive state, or enthusiasm translatable by a particular disposition of the subject to language."[26] Because the critique of subjectivity has been one of the most central theoretical projects of modernism (via psychoanalytic, structuralist and poststructuralist theory), it should come as no surprise that the primacy of the voice in poetic expression has been a (if not *the*) privileged site of opposition and experimentation in modern French poetry. From Rimbaud's "je est un autre" and Mallarmé's "disparition élocutoire du poète" to Apollinaire's eavesdropped conversation poems, surrealist automatism and onward, the question of "who speaks?" in a poem has been a potent driver of poetic innovation.

I have been intrigued to note that poetry of the Romantic period seems to be of special interest to media theorists—chief among them Friedrich Kittler—who recognize in the expressive paradigm it inaugurates a clearly articulated system of mediation. For Kittler, this kind of expression is structured around the explicit project of transferring images from the poet's imagination to that of the reader, with the poet's language acting as a channel. Describing the action of the Romantic poet, Kittler notes that the intertwined topoi of Nature, Love, and Woman—terms he notes were "synonymous in the discourse network of 1800"—"produced an originary discourse that Poets tore from speechlessness and translated. It is technically exact," he specifies, "to say that language in such a function can only be a channel. If language had its own density and materiality, its own

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[23] As if in direct response to the above citation from Maulpoix, contemporary author Nathalie Quintane offers a diagnosis: "Le problème du poète 'lyrique' [contemporain], c'est qu'il travaille ante Deleuze, ante Foucault, ante Derrida, ante Perec […il] travaille avec ce qui précède la période 'structuraliste': il a décidé que cette période n'avait existé que dans l'esprit fumeux de quelques imposteurs […]. Lui, il est obligé de travailler avec Descartes, puisqu'il veut pouvoir continuer à travailler contre lui (au feu Descartes! Je sens donc je suis!), et quand on lui explique que Descartes, ça y est, c'est intellectuellement mort, ça l'agace, parce que l'intellect, vous comprenez, c'est l'esprit, et que moi je sens" ("Monstres et couillons: la partition du champ poétique contemporain," October 19, 2004; modified by the author March 2012, https://www.sitaudis.fr/Incitations/monstres-et-couillons-la-partition-du-champ-poetique-contemporain.php).

[24] In the French context, Lamartine is credited with reimagining lyric expression as a channel for the communication of an effusive subjective interiority.

[25] Paul de Man, "The Lyrical Voice in Contemporary Theory," in *Lyric Poetry: Beyond New Criticism*, eds. Chaviva Hošek and Patricia Parker (Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 1985), 55; Jonathan Culler, *Theory of the Lyric* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015), 35.

[26] Glenn Fetzer, "Jean-Marie Gleize, Emmanuel Hocquard, and the Challenge of Lyricism," *Studies in Twentieth & Twenty-first Century Literature* 29, 1 (Winter 2005): 29.

dead spots and transmission lapses, there would be no question of an all-encompassing translatability."[27] (This is the same scholar who will be one of the first to theorize the kind of "all-encompassing" intermedial translatability that the digital revolution would bring.[28]) The mediation thus described is necessarily transparent, requiring the absolute submission of medium to message: "language's own materiality" must remain unremarked or suppressed *so that* this fulsome translatability may become possible.[29] Citing Heidegger, Kittler emphasizes that the early nineteenth century is not a period in which poetry is "defined in terms of language as language" as Symbolism will initiate and subsequent avant-gardes will carry forward, but rather is viewed as a form that "leads through language onto something else," setting it up as a kind of idealized medium whose transmissions generate, ironically, very little noise.

If I draw attention to Kittler here, it is because the paradigm of transparent mediation he ascribes to Romantic lyric (in which language serves as a channel for the transmission of images) is precisely what I see my poets laboring against. While the caricatural association of lyric with confessional self-expression draws frequent jibes from our poets, Ponge most especially,[30] the more fundamental critique for these authors has to do with lyric assumptions about the medial properties of language. Francis Ponge, well-known as the poet of things, is a rigorous thinker of language as a material medium. The materiality of language registers for him not merely in terms of sonic properties or the visual aspect of letters and words, but in relation to what he identifies as language's "épaisseur sémantique," in which a word's etymological origins and its accreted histories of use are asserted as fundamental to any consideration of language's material dimension.[31] The prose poems he devotes to humble everyday objects take on a solidity of their own as the words that compose them are made to conjure their own semantic density. While Ponge's poetry is highly figural, full of analogies and invitations to think an object with and against others, the images that populate his texts tend to issue more from language itself than from any well of subjective imagination. In his *Parti pris des choses* (1942), by far his most read and commented work, we find example after example of analogies that make no secret of this origin. The poem "L'Orange" is structured around a comparison between this fruit and "l'éponge," an encounter that seems to be motivated first of all by the words' orthographic resemblance (the -nge, which is also observed in the author's surname). Elsewhere in this volume, we encounter descriptive developments inspired by the presence of a circumflex in the word "huître," the word "cageot" apprehended "à mi-chemin entre cage et

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[27] Friedrich Kittler, *Discourse Networks, 1800/1900*, trans. Michael Metteer, with Chris Cullens (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1990), 73.

[28] See *Gramophone, Film Typewriter*, trans. Geoffrey Winthrop-Young (Stanford, CA: Stanford UP, 1999). "Once movies and music, phone calls and texts reach households via optical fiber cables, the formerly distinct media of television, radio, telephone, and mail converge, standardized by transmission frequencies and bit format" (1).

[29] Contra Marshall McLuhan's famous dictum "the medium is the message," this model of transparent mediation relies on a conception of medium as that which gets in the way of message, and posits the possible reduction of medium's salience as a way of guaranteeing the primacy of the message. See McLuhan, *Understanding Media* (New York: Ginkgo Press, 2013 [1964]).

[30] He has described his own conception of poetry as "absolument contraire à celle qui est généralement admise, à la poésie considérée comme une effusion simplement subjective, […] comme, par exemple, 'je pleure dans mon mouchoir ou je m'y mouche' et puis je montre, j'expose, je publie ce mouchoir, et voilà une page de poésie" (*Entretiens de Francis Ponge avec Philippe Sollers* (Paris: Gallimard, 1970), 25).

[31] Indeed, Ponge registers this thickness as language's third dimension: a depth that figures, crucially, the relationship to time of the two-dimensional written word (just as the fourth dimension does for three-dimensional space). Ponge's idiosyncratic conception of poetry's temporal dimension is of central concern in my first chapter, below.

cachot," and a reflection on "escargots" that begins by distinguishing it, qualitatively, from the "escarbilles" (specks of burning coal) that happen to precede their dictionary entry.[32] Language for Ponge is emphatically not a "lieu de passage," through which to communicate ideas and images that precede their formulation. Rather, as in the example of "cageot," language is figured as an autonomous landscape cut through with pathways that do not direct us towards the extralingual but instead mark out the complex network of relations internal to language (the French language) as such.

Emmanuel Hocquard, for his part, thinks language's opacity through his theorization of literality. Despite the association of the term "literality" with a certain kind of first-order denotative meaning that would be contrasted with figurative usages, for Hocquard literality has nothing to do with the straightforward, undebatable description of real events or states of things. Instead, his understanding of literality issues from the etymological origins of the word "literal," meaning "à la lettre," bearing exclusively and by definition on the words themselves in their concreteness: as little entities composed of letters.[33] A literal expression, in Hocquard's sense, is one that reproduces letter-by-letter and word-by-word a pre-existing utterance; it is an act of citation, repetition, copying that severs the utterance from its original purpose and referential frame by making the words refer only to themselves. This literality, then, is not oriented towards reducing referential ambiguity; instead it aims to interrupt or side-step reference entirely by substituting a citational purpose in the place of the referential (or descriptive, or expressive) one. The most important influences for Hocquard, in the elaboration of his poetics, do not come from the French tradition (his is not the descriptive literality pursued by the *nouveaux romanciers*), but rather from American Objectivist poets like Louis Zukofsky and, especially, Charles Reznikoff, whose 1934 work *Testimony*—composed entirely of verbatim text from court proceedings that the poet versifies—is a foundational instance of literal copying for Hocquard.[34] In explanations of the role of copying and citation in his poetics, Hocquard often evokes Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's claim that language in its entirety is indirect discourse, a vast system of citation that precedes and precludes any claim to immediacy (originality, personality) in linguistic expression[35]; if Hocquard adopts a citational conceit (insisting

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[32] *OC* I, 18-21, 24. In his essay, "Ponge tautologique ou le fonctionnement du texte," structuralist critic Michael Riffaterre maintains that "[u]ne prose de Ponge n'est jamais autre chose que l'expansion textuelle d'un mot-noyau." See *Ponge inventeur et classique*, eds. Philippe Bonnefis and Pierre Oster (Paris: Union Générale d'Éditions, 1977), 66.

[33] As I unfold in Chapter 2 below, "à la lettre" is one way to describe Hocquard's initiation into the world of contemporary poetry: not as a writer but as a manual typesetter. He is co-founder of the publishing enterprise Orange Export Ltd. (1969-1985), and during its run he hand-printed dozens of chapbooks by poets like Anne-Marie Albiach, Joseph Guglielmi, Jean Daive, Alain Veinstein, Claude Royet-Journoud and others. This manual activity is especially formative for Hocquard in the way it directs his attention to the ontological status of the blank space on a printed page, which a typesetter understands as not empty but full. The influence of this apprenticeship is explicitly visible in Hocquard's 1998 volume *Un test de solitude: sonnets*, a collection of "sonnets" in which the blank line separating two stanzas is granted the status of line and counts towards the sonnet's fourteen-line standard.

[34] Hocquard's first poem "Spurius Maelius" takes direct inspiration from Reznikoff's "cut-up" technique, as it "transcribes" a passage from Livy's *History of Rome* into versified form. For analyses of this work, see Dominique Rabaté, "La Fabrique de l'écart: Emmanuel Hocquard, poète-grammairien," *Twentieth-Century/Contemporary French Studies* (2003): 193-4; Raluca Manea, *Recompositions of Place: The Logopoetics of Jacques Roubaud, Emmanuel Hocquard and Jacques Darras*, 4-5.

[35] Hocquard points to Deleuze and Guattari's treatment of indirect discourse in *Postulats pour la linguistique* in *Mille Plateaux*: "Le discours indirect est la présence d'un énoncé rapporté dans l'énoncé rapporteur, la présence d'un mot d'ordre dans le mot. C'est le langage tout entier qui est discours indirect." Gilles Deleuze

that "je suis le copieur de mes livres"[36]), it is as a way of estranging expression so that the fact of language's givenness can rise to the surface and the work of the text can become the performance (dramatization) and contemplation of the properties of language. The act of repeating an utterance, or copying it out word-for-word, transforms it from a site of passage (expression, communication, leading through language onto something else) into a rigorously non-conductive surface. Hocquard is centrally implicated in the lyricism/literalism antagonism of the 1980s and 90s and describes the partition in the field of contemporary French poetry as an opposition between "ceux qui continuent à célébrer 'le plus haut chant de l'homme' et 'la musique de l'âme' de la Poésie éternelle" and "ceux qui ont choisi de mettre plus particulièrement l'accent sur le *langage* lui-même, son fonctionnement et ses fonctions," whom he refers to as "poètes-grammairiens."[37] And indeed, Hocquard is especially fond of sample sentences in grammar books, which represent a kind of perfect case of the literal utterance—sentences that "exist," as Ann Smock reminds us, "solely to be repeated."[38] For this poet, literality means approaching language and the literary act as something radically exterior (a manipulation of externalities), which requires an activity on the part of the subject that sets aside entirely the problematic of poetic mediation, understood as the externalization of something interior.

As I began to sketch earlier in this introduction, Hocquard's interest in photography represents one facet of his broader and more fundamental interest in copying as a way to unhook utterances from the referential or pragmatic frame (the context) that would fix their meaning. While other of his works assign an important role to the technical image, his 2009 *Méditations photographiques sur l'idée simple de nudité* is one that explicitly confronts photographic practice with the act of producing poems. In my treatment of this text in Chapter 2 below, I draw out in particular the relation it bears with surrealist interpellations of photography, emphasizing the ways Hocquard incorporates different phases of processing as he thinks through the applicability of photographic paradigms to the poetic encounter he stages. If surrealist uses of photography privilege the instantaneity of the shutter-click (its alliance with the flash, the spark) and the photograph's documentary function, Hocquard's text privileges those moments of processing that don't hew so tightly to the image's ontological claims.[39] Diverting attention instead towards actions taken in the darkroom—enlargement, cropping, exposure of the photo paper, the emergence of the image in the development bath—this text centers procedures related explicitly to the copying of images, and recruits these actions in its consideration of the surface-quality of nudity (which is always a copy: the same everywhere it appears). Photography does not serve Hocquard as a support in the communication between parallel realities, instead its relation to copying transforms it into a site of

and Félix Guattari, *Mille Plateaux* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1980), 106. Hocquard asserts elsewhere, along these lines, that "On ne parle jamais de soi Il n'y a jamais eu de sujet d'énonciation Il n'y a de sujet que grammatical" (*Conditions de lumière* (Paris: P.O.L., 2007), 182.).

[36] Emmanuel Hocquard, *Les Babouches vertes* (Marseille: CIPM, 2009), not paginated.

[37] Emmanuel Hocquard, *Tout le monde se ressemble* (Paris: P.O.L., 1995), 17-18. We will recall that Jean-Claude Pinson refers to these same poets as "poètes-philologues" (cited above), perhaps with the intention of portraying this orientation as one that expresses a nostalgia for language as something exclusively written (and therefore polemically opposed to orality).

[38] Ann Smock, "Geranium Logic: Intensity and Indifference in Emmanuel Hocquard," *Qui parle* 22, 2 (Spring/Summer 2013): 47.

[39] Despite the straightforward nature of the comparison with surrealist uses of photography (the unavoidable center of thinking on poetry-photography relations), Hocquard's title also openly conjures Lamartine's *Méditations poétiques*, a canonical standard-bearer for the French lyric tradition, in a way that situates its work in relation to the ongoing confrontation between literalist and lyricist orientations that has persisted in the background of during most if not all of Hocquard's writing career.

visibility whose interest derives precisely from the distancing of the reproduction from the contingent singularity of its referent.

Our contemporary poet, Pierre Alferi, considers Emmanuel Hocquard his "maître" in matters of poetry.[40] It is primarily in relation to Hocquard's views on lyricism and thinking of mediation (or non-mediation) in a poetic context, however, that Alferi's poetics diverges most starkly from that of his mentor. Twenty years his junior, Alferi does not bring to his reflection on lyricism the same entrenchment of views that we observe in Hocquard's work. Approaching lyric from a position outside that of literalist refusal, he is able to reclaim this term as one that is indeed vitally relevant to contemporary experimentalism in poetry. One of Alferi's most significant contributions to contemporary poetics is his cofounding, with Olivier Cadiot, of the *Revue de littérature générale* (1995), the first issue of which is oriented explicitly towards the reappraisal of lyric as a mediating structure. In their co-authored preface to this first issue, "La mécanique lyrique," Alferi and Cadiot present a critique of the French neolyricism of the 1980s and 90s, judged to be anachronistic and intellectually and ethically compromised precisely because it expresses an outdated and naïve understanding of mediation. For Alferi and Cadiot, the term lyric designates a *problem* that precedes and determines the activity of the poet: the externalization of interior states as the fundamental technical challenge of literary creation. How it is that one person's thought— inspired or otherwise—might express itself in language legible to others? This is a question to which Romantic lyric, for example, offers a particular response (recognized by Kittler as an instance of transparent mediation[41]). Poets of the modernist avant-garde respond to this imperative very differently—we might think of Apollinaire's calligrams or conversation poems—, in accordance with a different set of technologically-inflected assumptions about the parameters of poetic mediation. Where Hocquard's literalism works to foreclose entirely the kind of inside-outside mediation that we associate with lyric expression, Alferi and Cadiot retain this—on the condition that such a mediating procedure be taken seriously and approached as a technical challenge. The "*mécanique* lyrique" proposed by these authors is not intended to identify this technical challenge with any specific technological paradigm (mechanical as opposed to electronic, for instance), but rather to demystify lyric by thinking of it as a wholly material affair: the collective functioning of "des unités de base."[42] These base materials, which could just as easily originate from a flash of poetic insight as from a vacuum repair manual, must sacrifice their singularity to the standardization that will allow them to participate in the operation of the whole. To describe the functioning of these ensembles, the authors summon in rapid succession operational models related to mechanics (industrial production), mechanical images (cinema and its apparatus), televisual transmission (broadcast standard), computer programming languages and binary code. Amidst this parade of technological models, it is not one or the other of these that emerges as particularly well-suited to the task of thinking the technics of poetry, rather it is the fact of mediation itself that comes to the

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[40] Their decades-long mentorship and friendship began in the 1989 when Alferi was invited to participate in a collaborative translation seminar organized by Hocquard at the Abbaye de Royaumont, in order to produce translations of American objectivist poetry and theoretical writings that were little known in France at the time. This experience marks Alferi's initiation into the world of poetry (having recently completed and published a doctoral thesis in philosophy on the work of William of Occam).

[41] As Jacques Khalip and Robert Mitchell have recently emphasized, this model of expressive transparency is further reinforced (and ultimately preconditioned) by the print culture of the early nineteenth century "in which the mechanical reproduction of text and visual images was often understood as a 'means' for transmitting thoughts from one individual to another." See "Release— (Non-)Origination—Concepts" in *Releasing the Image: From Literature to New Media*, eds. Khalip and Mitchell (Stanford, CA: Stanford UP, 2011), 10.

[42] Pierre Alferi and Olivier Cadiot, "La mécanique lyrique" (*Revue de littérature générale* 1, 1995): 7.

fore. Writing at the dawn of the digital age, these poets and the contributors they bring together in the *Revue de littérature générale* take the demystification of procedures of mediation (technological and literary) as the center of their preoccupations—the lyric imperative *par excellence*.

In step with this broader vision of the poetic act, Alferi's own poetics does not require the kind of distancing between the poet and the language he manipulates that is so central to the procedures of literality. In a 2002 interview, he explains without regret that "[j]e ne peux pas m'interdire d'être, dans ce que j'écris, là où je suis."[43] His poetry takes on the dynamics of expression as one of its central motivating concerns, and he brings to this work a genuine philosophical interest in what we might think of as para-lyrical questions related to the apprehension of the self, the tension between singularity and universality, and the incommensurability between an experience of presence and its representation. His entire poetics seems to flow from the question: what happens when we take seriously the issues underpinning lyric address? and what if we were to understand these issues as technical imperatives, and approach them from a place of technical sophistication, rather than abandon them entirely to the defensive naïvety of contemporary neolyricists? Practicing the generic multiplicity enshrined in the pages of *La Revue de littérature générale*, Alferi's expansive *oeuvre* includes works of philosophy, poetry, narrative fiction, theatre, literary and film criticism, as well as an array of works that extend beyond the page: drawing, performance and sound pieces, public art installations and video art. In my treatment of Alferi's poetics in Chapter 3 below, I consider his foray into experimental filmmaking in the early 2000s in order to better understand the pervasive cross-contamination between audiovisual media and literature in his work. Critics have generally accounted for Alferi's intermedial tendencies in light of his unveiled obsession with the celluloid cinematic image, which manifests in his work not only as a vast reservoir of images and references that he returns to again and again as a source for themes and images (and as something like a material imagination, or memory), but also through the formal model presented by the cinematic *dispositif*. Alferi's poetry is invariably versified and the vertical seriality of the poem is recognized by critics as an interpellation of the film strip while his rampant use of enjambment has been described as an explicit pursuit of *montage* effects.[44] Directing attention to his efforts as an experimental filmmaker, a domain of experimentation that only becomes accessible with the emergence of digital editing tools, I am able to set aside the assumed primacy of celluloid in Alferi's creative imaginary and reframe the relationship between poetry and audiovisual media in terms of the more varied media ecology within which his intermedial experiments actually take place. As someone who understands and practices poetry in close relation with other creative forms, Alferi's work engages with issues of mediation and remediation in a way that makes a clear case for poetry's relevance to the modes of technological mediation that determine to an ever-increasing extent the unfolding of our daily lives, identifying poetry as a natural site for critical reflection on the production and dissemination of images.

The 1980s Image

If I take the lyricism-literality debate as a kind of center in this study of the image in poetry, it is in large part because of the particularity of the 1980s image environment, as well as the

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[43] Pierre Alferi, "Les choses du monde sont des mots" (interview), translated into Japanese by Manako Ono, *Eureka* (Jan 2002): 194-7. Cited in Agnès Disson, "Pierre Alferi: Compactage et déliaison," in *Écritures contemporaines 7. Effractions de la poésie*, eds. Élisabeth Cardonne-Arlyck and Dominique Viart. (Paris/Caen: Lettres Modernes Minard, 2003), 258.

[44] See, for instance, Agnès Disson, "Comme au cinéma, façonner des minutes réelles: Pierre Alferi," *Contemporary French and Francophone Studies* 9:3 (2005) and Jan Baetens, "Entre récit et rhétorique : la phrase" *Cahier critique de poésie* 28 (2014).

enormous body of critical reflection on photography that asserts itself during this decade. With the unmatched influence of the posthumous publication of Roland Barthes's *La chambre claire* in 1980 as a point of departure, the years from 1980 to 1990 saw the founding of the *Cahiers de la photographie* (1981), the publication of influential studies on photography by Jean-Marie Schaeffer, Denis Roche, Jean-Claude Lemagny, Henri van Lier, the notable translation into French of Susan Sontag's *On Photography* (1981) and Franco Vaccari's *La photographie et l'inconscient technologique* (1982), as well as innumerable colloquia on theoretical approaches to photography convened by universities and cultural institutions. In his recent article "Trace-Image to Fiction-Image: The Unfolding of Theories of Photography from the '80s to the Present," Philippe Dubois describes the 1980s as bringing about "the discovery of a new theoretical domain, […] a terra incognita of the meditation of images."[45] In full recognition of the many studies of photography that precede 1980—notably from Roland Barthes himself—Dubois maintains that "a properly theoretical movement involving meditation on photography developed with a singular force—and even attained its hour of glory—only in the 1980s." This period saw the theorization of the technical specificity of the photographic image through the constitution of the concept of "le photographique," which would name the distinctiveness of the photograph in contradistinction to painting on the one hand and to cinema on the other. This distinction, the *noeme* of the photograph for Barthes, "rests on the principle of the trace, the imprint, of the 'that has been,' of the index," which is to say on photography's organic, necessary relation to the real. It is the photograph's non-optional relation to its referent that makes it an interesting foil to the art of the painter; meanwhile, the contrasts drawn with the cinematic image allow for the theorization of the disparate temporal ontologies of these photographic media. Dubois notes that, after a lull in the 1990s, this question of the specificity of the photographic medium finds itself revived—supercharged, even—at the turn of the twenty-first century as critics begin to reckon with the increasing ubiquity of digital photography and the fundamental shift in the relation to the referent that it presents. What is notable, however, in the theoretical work from the 1980s as well as in more contemporary accounts (of which I take Dubois as an exemplar) is the categorical absence of the televisual image as a point of contrast in the reflection on the *photographique*.

Dubois's study both documents and reinforces this blind spot. He makes the leap from the photographic as it relates to the aesthetic forms of painting or cinema, to the photographic as it relates to digital photography, implicitly positing these as the only available rubrics for thinking about changes to the structure and behavior of photographic images across these decades. This leap to digital is recognized as an extension from questions of an aesthetic nature to the non-aesthetic ground of technological difference, as if digital were the only non-aesthetic image technology that might bring some urgency to the theorization of the incontrovertible truth of the photographic "that-has-been." In this theoretical domain, the emergence of digital is processed as triggering an unprecedented rupture in the structure of the technical image. Dubois: "the digital attacks this link between the image and its 'real' referent directly. […] And from then on, everything changes; everything tips over; everything is called into question."[46] Since the 2000s, however, media theorists have been calling into question the supposed unprecedented nature of this rupture. As theorists like Alexander Galloway and Friedrich Kittler have observed, the mode of conversion required for the electronic transmission of television images (that is, the conversion of a two-dimensional image for transmission through a one-dimensional channel) anticipates the technical rupture of digital image processing in crucial ways. Especially significant is the fact that this

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[45] Philippe Dubois, "Trace-Image to Fiction-Image: The Unfolding of Theories of Photography from the '80s to the Present," trans. Rosalind Krauss, *October* 158 (Fall 2016), 157.
[46] Ibid., 160.

anticipation has largely to do with these mediums' relationship with linear writing. In televisual transmission, the conversion from two dimensions to one processes images as points organized into a series of lines (rasters) scanning, imperceptibly fast, left to right and top to bottom on a receiver screen. Kittler, in his series of lectures published in English in 2010 under the title *Optical Media*, emphasizes that the enabling principle of televisual technology is indeed elaborated by a professional printer, in analogy with the typographical "process[ing of] data streams in a linear fashion."[47] While the relationship between writing and the digital (via coding) is unmistakably central to its technical model, the originary relation of television with text is instructive. Alexander Galloway describes television as initiating a process that finds full realization in digital. Because of the linear decomposition of the image and the signal codification required for transmission, the televisual image "began a retreat away from optical media and a return to the symbolic," a retreat, Galloway insists, that computer technology would "consummate" in its definitive retreat "from the realm of the imaginary to the purely symbolic realm of writing."[48] In this way, we can see that televisual technology represents an initial step towards what Bernard Stiegler refers to as the "grammaticalization of the visible" in the digital paradigm.[49]

In *Optical Media,* Kittler emphasizes that, "[a]s a fully electronic medium, television […] is just as ubiquitous as it is mystifying, and therein lies its much-heralded power."[50] In contrast to cinema, the high-tech opacity of televisual transmission generates a moving image whose illusions are of an entirely different order. In the case of cinema, even if one does not grasp the precise cognitive operation that allows for the synthesis of still frames into a coherent moving image in projection, the physical basis of the cinematic *dispositif* remains theoretically legible to viewers who likely bring to its encounter their own familiarity with still photography and basic awareness of image animation through optical technologies like the flipbook. An important share of the mystification of the televisual image, according to Kittler, issues not only from the invisible and highly technical nature of its operations but from the fact that, "[u]nlike film, there were no dreams of television prior to its development."[51] By virtue of its technical principle, television inaugurates the image as something very much other, as the result of a different set of potentialities and different principles of visualization. Where for Dubois (and so many others) it is the development of digital image technologies that "changes everything" by corrupting the organic link between the photograph and the photographed, I've been trying to show that the pre-digital image environment of the 1980s was already in a state of irreversible upheaval as a result of the paradigm-shifting image technology of television. An upheaval that would be equally relevant to the dueling approaches to the image that we observe in the context of French poetry. Thinking television in terms of technical

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[47] Friedrich Kittler, *Optical Media*, trans. Anthony Enns (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2010), 208. Hereafter *OM*.

[48] Alexander Galloway, *The Interface Effect* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2012), 17. Here, Galloway is reproducing Kittler's famous use of Lacanian register theory in *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*, referencing in particular the association of film with the register of the imaginary (the mirror, or means of understanding the world through perception and self-reflection) and the writing technology of the typewriter with the symbolic (the grid of codified meanings).

[49] Bernard Stiegler, "The Discrete Image," in Derrida and Stiegler, *Echographies of Television: filmed interviews*, trans. Jennifer Bajorek (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2002), 149.

[50] Kittler, *OM*, 24.

[51] Ibid., 207. This assertion applies to the viewing public, for whom the invention of television would not have been imaginable in quite the same way the development of the cinematic moving image was. Of course, among experimental scientists the dream of tele-vision was alive and well as early as 1875. On the history of television technology, see also Raymond Williams, *Television. Technology and Cultural Form* (London, UK: Routledge, 1990), 1-23.

mystification and the special power it wields as the mass-media organ *par excellence*, we can easily imagine that poets working in the midst of such an image environment might be especially wary of efforts to reinstate poetry as a channel of lyric expression with the transmission of images as its primary function. Indeed, given this specific technological context, it is unsurprising that the resurgence of lyric at the height of television's mediatic dominance would have struck many as especially (even hyperbolically) nefarious. This would represent not only a return to a transparent model of mediation (language regaining its function as channel), but also a willing re-mystification of the image.

The contrast we observe between Emmanuel Hocquard's relation to post-celluloid technical images and that of Pierre Alferi might then be simplified as a contrast of rejection vs. integration. Hocquard is committed to the demystification of the image in all its forms, and he turns towards the concrete operations of analog photography (and away from the enchantment of televisual transmission and the facility of digital) in order to pursue his contemplation of the image as something radically exterior. For Alferi's part, the shifting forms of technical mediation shaping contemporary experience demand engagement, and indeed they are of a nature (electromagnetic or digital) that means that any forceful critique of these can only be mounted from a position of sophistication with respect to their technical functioning. Alferi's own savviness with respect to image technologies makes him an astute observer of the ways these new and evolving image forms have shifted the relationships between concreteness and abstraction, exteriority and interiority, that have long shaped the critical potential of experimentalism in poetry.

Francis Ponge

In a dissertation shaped by post-1970s reflection on the image, the relevance of the contributions of a postwar poet like Francis Ponge is, of course, far from given. While the trajectories of Hocquard and Alferi are very clearly related, through ties of mentorship and decades of friendship, there is no biographical basis for Ponge's inclusion here. And while Hocquard and Alferi both engage in image-making practices that conjugate in various ways with the conception of the poetic image that can be observed in their texts, Ponge maintains no such practice. Perhaps most significant, given our concerns here, is the fact that Ponge's reflection on the poetic image is shaped prior to the televisual era,[52] in the decades of the interwar and immediate postwar period when the dominant image technology was analog photography (and cinema) and the dominant transmission technology was radio (both of which he regards as anathema to his creative project[53]). Despite all this, Ponge stands in affinity with these two poets as an unsparing demystifier of poetic illusion, a dogged investigator of the medial properties of the written word, and a poet who

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[52] It is useful to note that televisual technology was widely adopted later in France than in the U.S. By 1955, half of American homes had a television; in France, according to data from the Ministère de la Culture, it is not until 1966 that television homes entered the majority (statistics cited in: Jérôme Bourdon, *Histoire de la télévision sous de Gaulle* (Paris: Presses des Mines, 2014), 336). Ponge critic Philippe Met recently noted that the poet himself did not have a television at home until 1970. See *Ponge et le cinéma* (Paris: Nouvelles éditions Place, 2019), 18.

[53] Ponge's reflection on the internal dynamism of material things expresses a skepticism towards photographic representation, citing the inadequacy of the photograph's temporal ontology to the task of representing a world of things that never stops moving. While he writes very little about photography, his views on radio are more freely and caustically expressed: in a text devoted to this object, he likens the household radio to a "seconde petite boîte à ordures" and describes its emissions as "un flot de purin" (*OC* I, 748). His aversion to the kind of talk that bursts forth from this machine bespeaks his general distaste for spoken language and categorical preference for writing and, especially, for stone inscription which we might recognize as the polar opposite of the ethereal real-time transmission of a voice over the airwaves.

understands composition as a necessarily technical (mechanical) endeavor. Such affinities are never so much as hinted at in Hocquard's work, no doubt because of his more dominant affinity for the American objectivist tradition,[54] but Alferi does recognize Ponge as a kind of tutelary figure for the "imagination technique" championed by this younger poet.[55] Further, and as I unfold in Chapter 1 below, Ponge's rejection of lyricism and subjective expression together with his unceasing reflection on the materiality of language lead him to aesthetic and logical solutions oriented explicitly towards a pursuit of literality (albeit not in Hocquard's precise sense). As such, Ponge appears in this dissertation in part as an anticipatory figure in the broader story of poetic literalism, and specifically one who can be seen cultivating literality as a kind of antidote to lyricism—although making the case for this repressed lineage is not my central aim here.

Instead, and above all, Ponge is included here as a thinker of medium and mediation. We have noted the centrality of his reflection on the material dimension of language within his poetics. If I remarked above that for Ponge language is emphatically not a "lieu de passage," this is because he does not approach language as a tool for the mediation of the real but rather as a material medium to be palpated and explored alongside the materiality of the physical world. This is a preoccupation that results in a particular "chosification" of his texts, especially apparent in the aforementioned volume *Le Parti pris des choses*, that initially proved difficult to penetrate on the part of literary observers but which found immediate and enthusiastic recognition in the studios of many of the most prominent painters and sculptors of the day. Through the match-making work of mentor and friend Jean Paulhan, Ponge was brought into collaboration with Picasso, Jean Fautrier, Jean Dubuffet, Braque, Giacometti and many others. From 1944 onward, Ponge wrote dozens of texts on contemporary artists—commissioned reviews, catalog prefaces, tributes, or texts to accompany exhibitions—which have assumed a significant place in his broader *oeuvre*.[56] The mutual admiration that drove these collaborations was largely down to a shared interest in the investigation and expression of the material properties of their respective artistic mediums. This is one way of saying that Ponge was a dyed-in-the-wool modernist, very much in a painterly sense, keenly attentive to the lessons poetry could draw (or, seemed reluctant to draw) from the radical shift in the perception of artistic materials that was observed in a more committed and irreversible

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[54] Raluca Manea has made the astute observation that "the striking absence of Ponge's name from Hocquard's author indexes, in spite of their shared conception of literality and understanding of poetry as a mechanism for cleaning language—suggests a rejection of French-based poetic filiation on Hocquard's part," in favor, as we've seen, of American objectivist and Language poets. Manea, *Recompositions of Place: The Locopoetics of Jacques Roubaud, Emmanuel Hocquard and Jacques Darras* (Ph.D. diss., New York University, 2013), 20. It is worth noting, however, that many of the American poets Hocquard most admires—Louis Zukofsky, George Oppen, Ron Silliman, Lorine Niedecker—were themselves avid readers of Ponge and did not hesitate to remark their shared preoccupations. See Serge Gavronsky, "Con/vers/ation: Louis Zukofsky et Francis Ponge," in *Ponge, résolument*, ed. Jean-Marie Gleize (Lyon: ENS Éditions, 2004): 148-149; Andrew Epstein, "'The Rhapsody of Things as They Are': Stevens, Francis Ponge, and the Impossible Everyday," *The Wallace Stevens Journal* 36, 1 (Spring 2012): 47-48.

[55] See, most recently, Alferi's statement on the back cover of *Brefs: discours* (Paris: P.O.L., 2016): "[C]es brefs discours […] plaident pour une imagination technique assez négligée—ou mal vue—en littérature." In this vein, we will remark that Ponge's name appears in Alferi and Cadiot's 1995 "La mécanique lyrique," not once but twice in this essay's nineteen pages; in each case, he is invoked as figure of the poet-as-mechanic and thinker of the technicity of poetic composition. See *Revue de littérature générale* 95/1: 12, 20.

[56] This work has garnered much critical attention. See, for instance, Shirley Ann Jordan, *The Art Criticism of Francis Ponge* (London, UK: Modern Humanities Research Association, 1994); Jennifer Pap, "From Ekphrasis to 'Moviment': Ponge's 'Nuage…informe" *Dalhousie French Studies* 55 (Summer 2001): 95-119.

fashion in the visual arts of the early twentieth century.[57] The art writing Ponge produces almost never discusses—and certainly never describes—actual, specific art works; instead, these texts largely turn around questions of medium, the unique properties of the artist's materials and the kind of activity these properties demand from their artist. The refusal to describe the figural content of artworks, no doubt the strangest feature of Ponge's art-writing, comes through as an implicit by-product of the emphasis on materials, and a statement about the relationship between medium and mediation. The works he considers are not viewed as "lieux de passage" mediating figural content; the figure itself (the *image*, we might say) is not registered as the primary content of their expression, as something separable from the flatness of the support or the thickness of the paint that make it visible.[58]

Ponge thinks the extraliterary image through the fine arts and, as such, his reflection on images is a reflection on medium—and the relation of images to the medium of their support. Above, in my discussion of 1980s theorization of "le photographique," I emphasize a reflexive bias on the part of theorists towards the aesthetic forms of painting and film as privileged foils in the work of defining the specificity of the photographic medium. The absence of the televisual image as a point of comparison in this work expresses a conventional opposition between aesthetic image forms (those identified at a given moment as carriers of aesthetic properties) and those considered non-aesthetic. This opposition is often described in contemporary criticism as that between *medium* (a term associated with the fine arts and art-historical discourse) and *media* (a term associated with mass communication technologies). As critic Anna Shechtman has recently noted, the concepts of media and medium as currently deployed in media and cultural studies or in art history belong to the post-televisual era, with the medium concept in particular consolidated to distinguish the fine arts from more popular, commercial forms. To insist in 1980, at the apogee of television's reign, on photography's status as a *medium*, characterized by the specific properties of its material support, is a way of defending it against, or clawing it back from, its association with the instrumental and/or commercial motives of media. It is also a way of acknowledging what Shechtman refers to as "photography's internal 'media' tendency—its reproducibility, its scalability, its vulnerability to advertising."[59] The anxiety about television's dominance, and its transformation of what an image is and how it can circulate, can be recognized in the emphasis placed on the indisputable concreteness of the photographic image in this moment of theoretical recuperation. Writing several decades earlier, from within a pre-televisual image environment, Ponge displays an analogous anxiety about photography, which appears to him unnervingly abstract, an anxiety that seems to play a role in his rapturous embrace of the superior concreteness of fine-art lithography.

Like photography, lithography also possesses an intrinsic media tendency. Indeed, its function as a communication technology has overwhelmingly dominated its fine-art applications. Invented at the end of the eighteenth century to bring more efficiency to image reproduction, lithography was throughout the nineteenth and much of the twentieth centuries the technology

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[57] Ponge is notably critical of Apollinaire's calligrams as the quintessential example of poetry's integration of the lessons of cubism. Instead of viewing the calligram as a potent critique of lyric convention and, more proximately, of the Symbolist obsession with musicality, or even as a technical response to the vertiginous technological changes of the pre-war period, Ponge sees the calligram's introduction of a formal logic of iconicity as a failure to pursue solutions within the linguistic medium itself.

[58] Peter Osborne has remarked that the valorization of the medium itself in modernist painting, and most especially Greenberg's theorization of modernist aesthetics in terms of the formalist ontology of medium, carry the consequence of "excluding 'image' as a category of artistic analysis, indeed as a constituent of the experience of modern art itself" (Osborne, *The Postconceptual Condition* (London: Verso Books, 2018), 135).

[59] Anna Shechtman, "The Medium Concept," *Representations* 150 (2020): 65.

tasked most directly with the mass dissemination of images (through the illustrated daily newspaper, but also posters, product labels, advertising placards, religious icons).[60] Because, in lithography, images are traced directly onto the surface of the stone (rather than carved into it, as with intaglio and relief techniques), this technique is associated from the start with directness and immediacy— an image-medium in which, as one nineteenth-century observer remarked, "rien ne s'interpose entre la pensée créatrice et sa manifestation écrite."[61] A medium-less medium, or in other words a *media* technology: a channel through which an artist may address their "pensée créatrice" directly to a mass public. The 1944 essay Francis Ponge writes on the lithographic stone and printing process, written to accompany a series of lithographs by Jean Dubuffet, is organized around what we can recognize as the media/medium opposition with the intention of defending the lithographic process against its media tendency. Through the action of this artist, who is well-known for his fondness for the matter of paint and plaster, the stone reveals itself to be not an instrument but a collaborator in the production of images—and lithography as such reveals itself, in the pages of Ponge's, text to be a medium capable of self-reference.

Throughout this essay, Ponge brings the action of the lithographer and that of the writer into constant analogy, in a way that speaks to Ponge's parallel and perennial anxiety regarding language's own media tendency (its will-to-transparency and easy conscription into the service of commerce) and the tireless activity required to maintain and defend his relation to language as a medium. Key in this analogy is a fact that Ponge does not mention in his text: each of Dubuffet's lithographs (see Fig. 2), like most of his painting throughout the 1940s, is explicitly figural. The artist's extreme attention to the material qualities of his medium does not result in the exclusion of figural content (as Greenbergian medium purification would eventually demand), rather this attention expresses itself in the submission of figuration to the empirical conditions established by the lithographic medium.[62]

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[60] Even if the invention of photography came barely 40 years after that of lithography, introducing new efficiencies to the work of image reproduction, the operational simplicity of lithographic printmaking (and derivative methods) along with its use of cheaper printing materials (ink on paper), meant that it remained the dominant technology for large-scale reproductions of images throughout the twentieth century. For more on this history, see Domenico Porzio, ed.. *Lithography: 200 Years of Art, History & Technique*, trans. Geoffrey Culverwell. (Milan, Italy: Arnoldo Mondadori Editore, 1982).

[61] Henri Bouchot. *La lithographie* (Paris: Ancienne maison Quantin, 1895)*,* 10.

[62] Indeed, it is a fact not often registered by critics that the painters and sculptors that interest Ponge are, without exception, artists for whom figuration remains central to their work. Bernard Vouilloux alone remarks that Ponge, who produces art writing continuously from 1944 until the 1980s "ne s'occupe pas […] des différents mouvements qui secouent la scène artistique française"—I might name *tachisme*, the *nouveau réalisme* of Yves Klein, Arman, Nikki de Saint-Phalle, etc— "non plus d'ailleurs que de ce qui agite l'autre grande scène du monde de l'art, au moment où New York vole la vedette à Paris et contrôle l'expansion planétaire du marché: expressionnisme abstrait, pop art, minimalisme, art conceptuel, land art" (Bernard Vouilloux, *Un art de la figure. Francis Ponge dans l'atelier du peintre* (Villeneuve d'Ascq: Presses Universitaires du Septentrion, 1988), 41).

Figure 2. Jean Dubuffet, *Maternité*, in *Matière et mémoire, ou Lithographes à l'école*, 1945.

As we will see in Chapter 1 below, Ponge is interested in the fate of the image in a poetics built upon a strong concept of language as a medium, and how it is that figuration—which remains a key feature of his poetry—can become a tool for disrupting, rather than performing, language's media tendency. While Ponge, like Hocquard and like Royet-Journoud, brings a penchant for iconoclasm to his poetry (and can be found advocating for a "poésie sans images," free of the overbearing expectation of poetry as a technology for the production and transmission of images[63]), it remains important to the work of this mid-century poet not to deny that signification, figuration, image are intrinsic to language as such and are, therefore, integral to this medium. Speaking of painting, Ponge has been caught parroting Lessing's *Laocoon* and its famous categorization of poetry as a temporal art and painting as a spatial one. He tells us: "La principale damnation de la peinture est, en effet, d'être statique, fixée à jamais, immobile; de tout dire en termes d'espace et de ne rien exprimer du *temps*, c'est-à-dire de la catégorie majeure, à quoi se rapporte la vie." Then: "Il va sans dire que les meilleurs peintres, dès lors, se distinguent par leur aptitude à conjurer cette damnation."[64] The necessary place of image in poetry, then, might appear to Ponge as a kind of internal limit, constitutive of the linguistic medium, which can be conjured, acknowledged, engaged with, but not eradicated entirely. This is one way of understanding the figures previously cited, that seem to issue from language itself (e.g. orange as sponge): as a concrete affirmation of a paradox cited by Jean-Marie Gleize, thinking of Ponge, that we must hold unresolved: "l'image est dans la langue, la langue *fait* image(s)," and *still*, "[c]ontre les images, il voulait la poésie *à la lettre*."[65] As we

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[63] Jean-Marie Gleize describes Ponge's "méfiance systématique et raisonnée envers le 'magma analogique'" (*Littéralité* (Paris: Questions théoriques, 2015), 344).

[64] "Braque-lithographe," *OC* II, 670.

[65] Gleize, *Littéralité*, 343-4.

will see, Ponge does the important work for us in this project of sitting with the relationship between image and medium, between image and language taken *à la lettre*.

With reflections on the image that are shaped in the photographic, televisual, and digital eras—respectively—Ponge, Hocquard, and Alferi present in this study as rigorous thinkers of the place their own images occupy within the broader (aesthetic as well as non-aesthetic) image ecology of their contemporary moment. What emerges from these studies is a strong sense that the poetic image, too, is a technology of visualization that has its place in analyses of the historical contingency of the image concept as such. And the sense that in our increasingly image-soaked lives, the significance of poetic investigations into the structure, function, and critical potential of linguistic images reaches far beyond insular literary-historical debates and cycles of avant-garde one-upmanship to illuminate problematics of the digital image—its inherent abstraction, its confusion of exterior and interior (reality and virtuality), its mobility, fungibility, exchangeability—that are shaping social, economic, and political realities in real time.

CHAPTER 1

Images *à la lettre*:
Literality and the Image in Francis Ponge's Poetics of *Fonctionnement*

Francis Ponge's literary project is premised upon the poet's encounter with a given object: his peeling of a boiled potato or squeezing of an orange, his happening upon a clearing in the forest of the Cévennes. The poet's movement through the world, his apprehension of the world, his sensory enjoyment at its sight, touch, taste, all of this forms the embodied basis for an object-facing poetics which oscillates between phenomenality and materiality, between inside and outside, between the mimosa blossom as object of Ponge's perception and memory and what he refers to, aspirationally, as "le mimosa sans moi."[66] The encounter provides the impetus for his work, as his *oeuvre* moves object by object through the natural and domestic environments of his everyday life, yielding a ceaselessly amended record of his objective frequentations. But the works themselves—never concerned with *this* object (this singular mimosa tree) but with the object in general (the mimosa tree as a species or type)—move inexorably towards that aspiration to the impersonal: the thing without him ("douce illusion!"). The goal, in Ponge's treatment of objects, is always to "dégager la qualité différentielle de la chose."[67] This imperative accompanies all of Ponge's work, and the key to pinpointing this differential quality is often found in the object's demise. A portrait of the orange concludes with the ejection of its seeds under the pressure of a squeezing hand and a candle is observed drowning itself in its own puddle of wax. Leaves shrivel and fall to the ground, a cut of meat rots, a bird excretes the seeds of the blackberry. Elsewhere, the lithographic stone breaks under the press, soap froths itself away. Not down simply to the object's appearance or our way of engaging with it, its qualitative particularity is registered as inseparable from its characteristic way of being in time, of resisting entropy as best it can, and ultimately of succumbing to it. In this way, the movement from "le mimosa *et* moi" to "le mimosa *sans* moi" is indeed best understood in terms of time: the contingent, human-centered temporality of the encounter subordinated entirely to the autonomous (material) relation to time that constitutes the fingerprint of an object's species or type. Such a movement requires the withdrawal of the phenomenological subject, the marginalization (or relativization) of the time of perception, and as such sets the stage for a rather unusual approach to poetry.

Uninterested in the expression of subjective experience, what Ponge would like more than anything would be to produce a text whose relationship to its object is so overwhelming in its *évidence* as to achieve a kind of autonomy *from him*, from his own indispensable presence as both observer and author. This desire, Ponge explains, is indeed fundamental to his approach to writing from the very start:

> J'ai toujours considéré, depuis mon enfance, que les seuls textes valables étaient ceux qui pourraient être inscrits dans la pierre; les seuls textes que je puisse dignement accepter de signer (ou contresigner), ceux qui pourraient *ne pas* être

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[66] Francis Ponge, "Le mimosa," *La rage de l'expression, Oeuvres complètes* I (Paris: Gallimard, 1999), 367. Citations throughout will refer to Ponge's two-volume *Oeuvres complètes*; hereafter *OC* I and *OC* II.
[67] *OC* I, 537.

signés du tout; ceux qui *tiendraient* encore comme des objets, placés parmi les objets de la nature: en plein air, au soleil, sous la pluie, dans le vent.[68]

In this account, the fact of a text's ability to stand authorless, to not require a signature, is inseparable from (synonymous with) its achievement of a kind of object-status. This statement recalls another, better known, evocation of authorlessness and its consequences in a different context: "Tous les arts sont fondés sur la présence de l'homme; dans la seule photographie, nous jouissons de son absence. Elle agit sur nous en tant que phénomène 'naturel', comme une fleur ou un cristal de neige dont la beauté est inséparable des origines végétales ou telluriques."[69] For André Bazin, writing in 1945, the curious ontology of the photographic image derives from the singular absence of the human from the act of image-creation. The withdrawal of the human engenders an image that acts on its viewer in unprecedented ways: not as an aesthetic substitute for the thing but as the thing itself, whose aspect alone—what the photograph gives us to see of it—delivers the viewer directly to the material particularity of the object's internal structure (vegetal/mineral). As with Ponge's textual ideal, we can observe in this account of photography the assertion of a kind of necessary relationship between the obsolescent withdrawal of the creative subject and the concrete existence of the created thing, as if the object-status of the image or text were attained precisely at the cost of the subject's withdrawal. But of course, to say that a text behaves "*comme* [un] objet" is a very different statement from saying that an image behaves "en tant que phénomène 'naturel.'" In the first case, we are very clearly in the presence of an analogy whereas in the second we are presented with a rather bold ontological claim. If the photo can act upon its viewer as (in the capacity of) a natural phenomenon, this communicates an assumption that the photograph shares or partakes to some important extent of the substance of the object photographed—a judgment that Bazin goes on to assert with confidence: "[l'image photographique] procède par sa genèse de l'ontologie du modèle; elle est le modèle" (14). Where other art forms are observed as "hétérogène[s] à l'univers qui l[es] entoure," photography alone operates from a position of homogeneity relative to the physical world.

Ponge regards photography with a great deal of skepticism and, as we will explore later in this chapter, disputes this claim to homogeneity on the grounds that it relies on a relation to the real via visibility alone, and that the photographic image presents a temporal ontology that is alien to the internal dynamism of matter. Returning to our initial remarks, if it is true that the contingent then-and-there of the encounter is precisely the temporality of photography (which, by the 1940s, was already the privileged medium for documenting the subject-object encounter), then Ponge's need to overcome this temporality in favor of the unique existence in time of material things is equally legible as a kind of correction to a photographic temporal logic that was becoming increasingly naturalized. As an artist fully ensnared in questions of the artistic mediation of the physical world, Ponge views matter as fundamentally heterogeneous to all forms of representation—regardless of the technical conditions of its execution. The "qualité différentielle de l'objet" that Ponge is after is something he also refers to as "la preuve de [son] existence indescriptible,"[70] proof of the object's existence as such, and of this existence's difference from the language one might put to it (from the image one might make of it). If language is incommensurable with the thing it might describe, this is not evidence of its inadequacy or inferiority to the world of things; rather it is evidence of language's autonomy from that world. That language forms a world

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[68] *Pour un Malherbe*, *OC* II, 160. Original emphasis.

[69] André Bazin, "Ontologie de l'image photographique," in *Qu'est-ce que le cinéma ?* (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1958), 13.

[70] *Comment une figue de paroles et pourquoi*, OC II, 768.

unto itself is an idea that Ponge regularly expresses as settled fact: "Il y a donc d'une part ce monde extérieur, d'autre part le monde du langage, qui est un monde entièrement distinct [...]. On ne peut pas passer de l'un à l'autre."[71] Critic Jean-Marie Gleize affirms that Ponge's vision for poetry is directed "toute à l'expérience de l'irréductible distance entre les choses et les mots, *tendue pour la réduire*, sans illusion (aucune) sur les chances de sa réussite."[72] This "tendue pour la réduire" designates the seduction of literality within Ponge's poetics, the ineradicable sense that there exist sites where these worlds (things/language, both approached in view of their autonomous complexity) achieve a kind of asymptotic intimacy ("sur le point de toucher," Gleize says) where their relation ceases to have anything to do with reference or image and presents instead as a material fact—unarguable, *literal*—and it is the work of poetry to seek these out.

This dissertation poses Francis Ponge as an important contributor to mid/late-twentieth-century reflection on literality in French literature. Ponge's literality, however, is not that of language's transparent purchase on the real (meaning's unopposed dominion over worldly phenomena, which casual uses of the term tend to assume), nor is it that of the copy—as it is for Emmanuel Hocquard—in which taking language "à la lettre" means forfeiting any relation at all to that which lies outside the text. Rather, Ponge elaborates a poetics that is based in a pursuit of literality that doesn't require turning ones back on language's complexity (the inherent tension between materiality and ideality, the inescapability of its image-making) nor on the uncompromising exteriority of the world of things. Literality is a way for this poet to think about the *possibility* of mediation between these worlds (not its achievement, but the rare conditions in which such a possibility comes into view). Most notable of all, even a cursory glance at a text by Ponge discloses the prominent place occupied by the image within his poetics—a fact that has perhaps delayed the recognition of this poet's place in the broader story of poetic literalism. In Chapter 2 we will explore more directly the relationship between photographic image-making and late-twentieth-century reflection on literality; here, though, we are in the presence of a literal poetics that does not require the exclusion of images, that never posits the erasure of difference between word and thing, and that has nothing to borrow from or aspire to in the homogeneous relation to the world of light that the photographic image claims for itself.

Fonctionnement

From some of his earliest works onwards, the term that passes most often under Ponge's pen as a way of registering the temporal ontology of material objects is *fonctionnement*. In conversation with Philippe Sollers in 1967, in the last of their well-known radio interviews, Ponge explains in response to a question directly concerning this notion: "j'ai toujours considéré que ce qui permettait à quelque chose d'exister, c'était une espèce d'imbrication très complexe des éléments de la chose, qui en faisaient une sorte de machine, de mécanique, d'horloge."[73] This imbrication of elements, which Ponge specifies are "éléments *matériels* et, par eux-mêmes statiques et inertes," sets in motion and sustains the existence of the physical object or organism solely by virtue of their *arrangement*, "la façon de les mettre en rapport les uns avec les autres, comme des rouages qui se font fonctionner quand on les met ensemble." With the existence of the object conceived as an achievement of quasi-Newtonian clockwork mechanics, the careful placement of the final gear sets the whole mechanism in motion as it starts ticking of its own accord—as a result of nothing other than this accord. This overtly materialist view of external phenomena is one that

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[71] Ibid, 677.

[72] Jean-Marie Gleize, *À noir. Poésie et littéralité,* in *Littéralité* (Paris: Questions théoriques, 2015), 344. My emphasis.

[73] *Entretiens de Francis Ponge avec Philippe Sollers* (Paris: Gallimard, 1970), 180-1. Hereafter *EPS*.

manifests at every scale in Ponge's apprehension of the world: not just as a way of thinking the dynamics of organization by which the carnation achieves and maintains its form (or the gemstone, or the candle), but also in terms of more dispersed natural processes (a rainstorm presenting quite literally as a steam clock: "une horlogerie dont le ressort est la pesanteur d'une masse donnée de vapeur en précipitation"[74]). In every case, Ponge's materialism, which is shaped by Epicurean and Enlightenment philosophy as well as contemporary discoveries in quantum mechanics, has at its center the apprehension of matter in terms of time.[75]

This term *fonctionnement* names the innate dynamism of material processes, the activity of existence and formal resistance observed in animate and inanimate matter alike. This is also the term he uses to describe the central ambition of his poetics: to get the stuff of language, *its* "éléments matériels," to achieve a kind of material functioning analogous to what he observes in the object world. In a broader sense, Ponge understands the pursuit of this kind of compositional *fonctionnement* as fundamental to the social usefulness of the artist in general. As he develops in his 1950 essay "Murmure (condition et destin de l'artiste)," the task of the contemporary artist (the artist creating works in the aftermath of the Second World War) is to tend to the functioning of expressive materials, to bring the conditions of representation back into step with the mysterious, unstoppable dynamism of natural systems. "Mais quels sont les matériaux expressifs? Ceux qui signifient déjà quelque chose: les langages. Il s'agit seulement de faire qu'ils ne signifient plus tellement qu'ils ne FONCTIONNENT."[76] The experience of the first half of the twentieth century is an experience of the collapse of meaning and of the notional girders of social cohesion (humanity, solidarity, justice); we need look no further than the gleeful use of euphemism by the Nazi war machine to recognize the irrecoverable corruption of signification itself in this period. In the lines just cited, Ponge asserts the need to reduce and relativize the supremacy of meaning, to find other ways of using his linguistic materials that do not partake of language's efficacies in the domination of people and environments (that do not relate to language as a system that regards the physical world as nothing other than "le lieu ou l'occasion d[u] pouvoir [humain]"[77]).

With this prescription, we can hear a potent and deliberate extension of Ponge's materialism into the domain of expression, as well as an explicit nod to the hyperbolic (all-caps) centrality of this notion of *fonctionnement* within his own poetics. But it is important to note that for Ponge this term never loses its doubleness. In theoretical and poetic texts alike, the term *fonctionnement* shuttles between the domains of material existence (as something objects do) and of language/text (as something a text can be made to do). As we've seen, it is not because the text is approached as an object among others that this term finds application in the domain of textual production. The functioning of a text is necessarily different from that of its object. If this latter *fonctionnement* relies, in Ponge's conception, on the fact that the object is composed of "éléments matériels et, par eux-mêmes statiques et inertes," the distinction of the textual composition is that its component parts are by nature *not inert*. They are components of a conventional system of signification and therefore *already* signify, are already on the move away from themselves and towards their *signifié(s)*. For Ponge, the distinction on the grounds of signification is fundamental—

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[74] "Pluie," *Le Parti pris des choses, OC* I, 15.

[75] Ponge's materialism is also a question of politics. Throughout the 30s, 40s, and much of the 1950s, Ponge was a card-carrying member of the French Communist Party. He was an engaged syndicalist, an active participant in the Resistance, and the simple fact of his beleaguered economic condition throughout these decades, working long hours for wages barely sufficient to keep his small family fed, is formative in the elaboration of his poetics and ceaseless critique of a mercantilist approach to language's social function.

[76] *Méthodes, OC* I, 628.

[77] Ibid., 627.

words signify, things do not—fundamental enough that this is ultimately the basis for the impassible breach he identifies between the 'world of language' and the 'world of things'. As the so-called poet of things, Ponge's entire poetic project emerges from the incommensurability of these two worlds, the impossibility of bridging them, and the need to find a way to create texts that achieve a reality within their own sphere (the world of language, of texts) that would be just as indisputable, irreducible, and self-sustaining as that of the object. He explains in a later text that it is by marshalling not only language's difference from the thing but also language-as-world's difference from the efficacity of everyday speech—all those qualities of language that are reduced in the pursuit of transparent communication—that this textual reality can be achieved. It is through "la multiplication intérieure des rapports, les liaisons formées au niveau des racines," at the level of what is most material and durable in language, that the words composing a given text can hope to rise to "ce fonctionnement qui seul peut rendre compte de la profondeur substantielle, de la variété et de la rigoureuse harmonie du monde."[78] This notion of *fonctionnement*, then, is borrowed into textual production as a way of getting out of a representational logic—that the poet's textual treatment of an object would necessarily imply *rendering* that object in language—and of replacing that logic with one that places an achievement of the text's "adéquation" to the object as the ultimate objective of the work.[79]

In scholarly treatments of this question of adequation in Ponge's poetics, critics tend to focus on "l'objeu," Ponge's name for the textual genre he develops around the principle of *fonctionnement* and which he christens as such in the early 1950s. Because "l'objeu"—to which I'll be returning below—offers a perhaps more codified way of speaking about Ponge's compositional strategies, the term *fonctionnement* often falls out of critical accounts of Ponge's poetics. However, as I have tried to show in the preceding section, it is precisely the doubleness of *fonctionnement*—its equally foundational importance as a way of understanding the vitality of the material world, on the one hand, and as a textual phenomenon, on the other—that defines Ponge's poetic practice. Further, because "l'objeu" (which bears exclusively on textual production) was the methodological innovation of Ponge's that most resonated with the structuralist and poststructuralist literary thinkers who became an enthusiastic audience for his work in the 1960s, the significance of *fonctionnement* as, first of all, a quality of material objects is reduced.[80] By privileging the textual feature, we risk losing sight of what is unique in Ponge's conception of language as a material realm: a realm whose materiality only becomes interesting when observed in sincere relation to the timebound materiality of the extralingual world.[81]

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[78] "Le Soleil placé en abîme," *Pièces*, OC I, 778.

[79] Ponge insists on this point in his interviews with Philippe Sollers: "Il y aurait à revenir sur l'expression 'rend[re]', parce que je pense qu'il s'agit de deux mondes absolument différents. Il ne s'agit pas de 'rendre,' de 'représenter' le monde physique, si vous voulez, mais de *présenter* dans le monde verbal quelque chose d'homologue" (*EPS*, 44).

[80] The only article I've come across that centers the term "fonctionnement" uses it as a frame for a structuralist textual analysis, without the slightest evocation of the broader significance Ponge grants this term within his project. See Michael Riffaterre, "Ponge tautologique, ou le fonctionnement du texte," in *Ponge inventeur et classique*, eds. Philippe Bonnefis and Pierre Oster (Paris: Union Générale d'Éditions, 1977), 66-84.

[81] This moment in the 1960s and 70s, when the textuality of Ponge's work (*fonctionnement textuel*) is recognized and celebrated by associates of the journal *Tel Quel*, and especially by Jacques Derrida, represents the second major episode in Ponge's reception history. The first episode comes with Jean-Paul Sartre's 1944 essay on Ponge "L'Homme et les choses," in which it is the world-facing acceptation of *fonctionnement*—and its philosophical implications—that are emphasized. Arguing that with *Le Parti pris des choses*, "Ponge [...] a jeté les bases d'une Phénoménologie de la Nature," Sartre isolates and elevates Ponge's observational project,

The doubleness of *fonctionnement* in Ponge's project reflects the imperative for the poet to intervene in expression in a way that restores it to the world and in the hopes of reducing the disequilibrium in the relationship of the human to the world of things. Speaking of the artist in general, who is not exempt from the human tendency to dominate ones environment, Ponge concludes his essay on the social role of the artist thus: "D'autant que, par son activité à le dominer, il risque de s'aliéner le monde, il doit à chaque instant, et voilà la fonction de l'artiste, par les *œuvres* de sa paresse se le réconcilier."[82] This reconciliation is operated, or initiated, through precisely this move of making one's expressive materials *function* more than signify. In the poetic encounter with the object, it is important to retain this idea of reconciliation-through-*fonctionnement* as notably distinct from the reconciling function traditionally performed by a certain kind of poetic image (for the lyric theorist Frank Kermode, for instance, the poetic image is nothing less than "the linguistic medium of reconciliation and unity"[83]). If *fonctionnement* displaces signification into a secondary plane of relevance as Ponge's prescription suggests, the consequences for the role assigned to the image in a poetics of *fonctionnement* would be significant. The production of images by means of metaphor and analogical development is, after all, a primary piece of signification's work in a poetic text. And Ponge's texts abound in these structures. So much so that when confronted with one of these texts, one might find it difficult to attend to this other mode of meaning-making when presented with the many other things one is given to see—the whole world in an oyster, a sky flooded with squid ink, a shutter like a one-winged bird—in this poet's work.

Le Parti pris des choses: the image of *fonctionnement* and the *fonctionnement* of the image

Le Parti Pris des choses (1942) is the first major volume Ponge saw published, and it remains his most read and most commented work by far. The texts that comprise this volume—prose poems dedicated to the humblest features of natural and manmade environments (orange, pebble, candle)—are composed between the years 1924 and 1934 (with a handful of texts added in 1937). Produced during what Ponge will refer to as his bomb-building period (the text as a "bombe à mécanisme d'horlogerie"), the texts of *Le Parti pris* are exemplary within his poetics of *fonctionnement* as finely wrought text-objects that often explicitly assert the confident autonomy of a functioning mechanism. The volume opens with a text that establishes this principle openly in the content of its images. "Pluie" registers a rainstorm as a kind of steam clock: "un mécanisme compliqué, aussi précis que hasardeux, comme une horlogerie dont le ressort est la pesanteur d'une masse donnée de vapeur en précipitation."[84] One is initially struck by the sheer literality of this image. Not only do there exist real clocks that function by this principle (in which the pressure generated by steam takes on the role of the wound spring in powering the clock's gears), but this image underscores another obvious truth: that the predictable cyclicality of water's movement through its liquid and gaseous states is one of these inexorable natural cycles that form the basis for a mechanistic conception of the world in the first place.

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very clearly at the expense of any significant recognition of the kind of text-based *fonctionnement* that his poetics pursues ("L'Homme et les choses," in *Situations* I (Paris: Gallimard, 1947), 270). Both of these interpretive orientations (world-focused vs. text-focused) reduce an important share of the complexity and particularity of Ponge's project, which derives precisely from his refusal to accept the zero-sum elevation of one pole of his work at the expense of the other.

[82] *OC* I, 629.

[83] Frank Kermode, *The Romantic Image* (cited in Forest Pyle, "The Romantic Image of the Intentional Structure," in *Releasing the Image: From Literature to New Media,* eds. Jacques Khalip and Robert Mitchell (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2011), 184).

[84] *OC* I, 15.

This is a crucial text in this volume, and in Ponge's *oeuvre*, for its introduction of the image of mechanical functioning and, further, for the effect this image seems to have on the unfolding of the text itself. "Pluie" has the notable distinction that its opening line features the volume's only explicit representation of a phenomenological subject: "La pluie, dans la cour *où je la regarde tomber*, descend à des allures diverses" (my emphasis). This is a subject that we encounter in the present-tense act of observation, bounded by the circumscribed space-time of an atmospheric event.[85] The first paragraph of the text—longer than the remaining three combined—offers a precise, detailed rendering of the rain's various visual aspects from the perspective of our situated observer. This part of the text reads as a model of detailed and precise formal description: "Selon la surface entière d'un petit toit de zinc que le regard surplombe [la pluie] ruisselle en nappe très mince, moirée à cause de courants très variés par les imperceptibles ondulations et bosses de la couverture." By the end of the text, however, with the rainstorm affirmed as an autonomous spring-powered mechanism (now winding its way down to stillness), what was at first announced as a unique phenomenal event finds itself displaced into hypothesis: "Alors si le soleil reparaît tout s'efface bientôt, le brillant appareil s'évapore: il a plu."[86] The specificity of the encounter is here subsumed into the announcement of a general correlation between conditions ("*si* le soleil reparaît") and a given outcome. The past perfect "il a plu" closes the text on a completion that is other than that of the precise meteorological event in question, a completion this hypothetical turn allows the text to engender all on its own. That this "il a plu" should also introduce the ambiguity of double-entendre (*pleuvoir/plaire*) simply reinforces that the *fonctionnement* on view in this text is as much that of the text itself as of the object observed.

Beyond the machinic imagery that punctuates the texts of *Le Parti pris*,[87] the role of the image in general in this volume is complex. Indeed, the sheer abundance of images in these texts proves an obstacle to recognizing Ponge as a thinker of literality. In this volume, and elsewhere of course, Ponge takes up familiar objects and conjures them in his texts in ways that push against the forms and figures these objects already bear in the contemporary French imagination. In this effort, images play both a negative and a positive role. Speaking in a 1952 radio interview with André Breton and Pierre Reverdy, Ponge characterizes what he considers to be the practical, and thoroughly defetishized, function of the poetic image in precisely such a context: "Concernant l'analogie, je dirai que son rôle est important dans la mesure où une nouvelle image annule l'imagerie ancienne, fait sortir du manège et prendre la tangente. Rien de plus réjouissant que la constante insurrection des choses contre les images qu'on leur impose."[88] Far from any interest in aesthetic rapture (and even less in the glimpse of the unconscious afforded by the surrealist image), analogy and the novel images it has the power to produce take on the primary function of knocking stale, reductive imagery out of place. Through the poetic image, Ponge conspires with the objects of this world—"[qui] n'acceptent pas de rester sages comme des images"—to bring their fight into the

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[85] It is a feature of *Le Parti pris* that the first-person subject appears rarely in its pages, and when it does appear it is almost always as a writing rather than an observing subject (e.g. "c'est ici que je touche à l'un des points principaux"; "comme des taches dont je parlais tout à l'heure" (ibid., 27, 47)).

[86] Ibid., 16.

[87] A rotting piece of meat is "une sorte d'usine, moulins et pressoirs de sang"; "Végétation," the penultimate text, continues the work of "Pluie" in its apprehension of plant-life as so many "appareils hydrauliques multiformes" pumping rainwater into every inch of its extremities; and "Le Galet" closes the volume on a treatment of the pebble that includes a rendering of all the physical entities of this world as gears in a vast clockwork, "une montre dont le principe est fait de roues qui tournent à de très inégales vitesses." See ibid., 32, 48, 53, respectively.

[88] "Entretien avec Reverdy et Breton," *OC* I, 689.

language that would reduce them to their concept. Commonplace figures of speech are an important source of this "imagerie ancienne," and Ponge evokes no expression with greater frequency to illustrate this than "cœur de pierre." To suit the purposes of this figure, stone is used as a symbol for nothing but hardness, as if that were all it's good for, and indeed the stone is only evoked so that it can transfer this meaning, the quality of hardness, onto the heart of a dour human. "Voilà à quoi sert la pierre. 'Un cœur de pierre' cela sert pour les rapports d'homme à homme, mais il suffit de creuser un peu la pierre pour se rendre compte qu'elle est autre chose que dure."[89] So when we see, in a text accompanying a series of lithographs by Jean Dubuffet, Ponge transforming the lithographic stone by way of analogy into a mineral memory, a "lourd bloc-notes," and a lover responsive to only the most devoted of Casanovas, it is in part to deal another blow to the monolith of hardness and to return the stone to the qualitative complexity that is proper to it.[90]

The function of the poetic image just described is a negative one—to get rid of stale imagery—and it is one that is intended to operate in the mind of the reader (a mind presumably packed with unwitting commonplaces). Metaphor and figuration also play a distinctly *positive* role on the production side of this relationship. Ponge asserts, in the preface to *La Rage de l'expression*, that it is never appropriate to allow conventions of poetic form and practice to structure one's texts ("ne sacrifier jamais l'objet de mon étude à la mise en valeur de quelque trouvaille verbale"), but is careful to make the precision that the tools of poetry *must* be taken up at a certain moment in his study "parce que [la forme poétique] dispose un jeu de miroirs qui peut faire apparaître certains aspects demeurés obscurs de l'objet. L'entrechoc des mots, les analogies verbales sont *un des moyens de scruter l'objet.*"[91] While the role of analogy remains coolly demystified here (a tool among others for ascertaining and taking the measure of an object's qualitative richness), it emerges as crucial in its ability to produce a certain visibility, to bring to light aspects of the object that remain obfuscated in our habitual relations with it. Analogy is deployed as a research tool, a probe of sorts, but one whose capacity to detect these neglected qualities of the object is collapsed into its capacity to reveal them as such, to make them visible and therefore available to detection and observation. In this way, we can see just how emphatically distinct the Pongian analogy is from a conception of figurative language as an element of style, employed here and there to give novel form to an expression that could be put otherwise. Instead, it is consubstantial with the idea it figures. That idea, the heretofore neglected perspective on the object, is revealed as expressible and worthy of expression in the very moment of its formulation. In this way, the analogies that abound in any of Ponge's texts emerge as so many findings from the course of his research, each one representing a single illuminating perspective on the object, a quality discovered because the poetic image made it visible.

Whatever Ponge's sense of its purpose, in the texts themselves, the poetic image behaves in very particular ways. As previously noted, the image does not take on a reconciling, synthesizing function here. Instead, images take on a notable seriality in Ponge's texts, each one emerging as a replacement to the one that precedes it. In the context of the 1930s and '40s, when Ponge is writing, such a model brings immediately to mind the cinematic image as a foundational technology for the representation of time (a central preoccupation of Ponge's, as we've seen), and one that relies structurally on serial images to achieve its illusion of movement. However, as noted, Ponge's images

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[89] "Tentative orale," *OC* I, 665.

[90] "Matière et mémoire," *OC* I, 116-123. See also: "Le Galet" (*OC* I, 49-56), "Des cristaux naturels" (*OC* I, 632-3), "SCVLPTVRE" (*OC* II, 582-3), "L'Ardoise" (*OC* II, 656-7), etc.

[91] "Berges de la Loire," *OC* I, 337-8. Original emphasis.

do not give themselves to this sort of diachronic synthesis.[92] Let's consider a brief development in "Le pain" from *Le Parti pris des choses*: "Ce lâche et froid sous-sol que l'on nomme la mie a son tissu pareil à celui des éponges: feuilles ou fleurs y sont comme des soeurs siamoises soudées par tous les coudes à la fois." Here the bread's crumb is registered through a parade of figures: a cold basement, whose internal structure is similar to that of a sponge, and that structure is described in botanical terms suggesting a confluence of propagative extension (leaves) and blossoming (flowers) whose adhesion is compared to that of an atypical conjoining of twins at the elbows. The initial shift of lexical register between "sous-sol" and "éponge" is abrupt and ungarnished. From this point onward, we can observe that in terms of what is evoked, these images are increasingly particular: sponge is a term that encompasses an entire phylum of organisms, leaves and flowers suggest a more specific organic coordinate (but unrelated to that of the sponge), and the image of conjoined twins conjures what would be an exceptional case (bodies joined at a limb rather than torso or head) within what is already an exceptional category of forms. Each referent is more narrowly targeted than the last, but this specificity does not continue the work of the preceding image, it does not bring precision to an extended analogical development. Analogies are collected here, rather than developed, and their arrangement gestures towards a deliberate rhetorical movement from general to specific, but the sequence is executed in a way that foregrounds *these* values (generality vs. specificity of referent) over and above the consolidation and intensification of a unified—*imaginable*—analogical development. A structure or schema is clearly identifiable, the substance less so.[93]

We can see already in this brief example that the seeming arbitrariness and unrelatedness of the content of these images (basement, sponge, leaves/flowers, siamese twins) is precisely what directs our attention to the way this text—despite its overt descriptive premise—activates modalities of signification that are not, at base, descriptive. The unimaginable quality of this description may well point to the fact that the processes in question are in fact unobservable. In breadmaking, the development of the crumb—as the dough rises, proofs and bakes—is hidden from view, even if the extravagance of the transformations underway is very much apparent from the outside. If each of the meanings brought together here seems to move us in a different direction, this is suggestive of the riotous, gassy business of yeast metabolizing sugar, the process at the center of bread's 'functioning'—the dynamic attainment of its form. While it is certainly the case that these unexpected images force the reader to re-examine whatever ideas about bread she might harbor, their work is not limited to this alienation from the referent; because they render the bread unrecognizable, these images are able to enact a key piece of this object's *fonctionnement* that necessarily eschews the gaze.

One of the most unforgettable images of *Le Parti pris des choses* comes in the very short text "Le feu," and its place in the text may help us think about the status of the image and the traffic of non-symbolic relations within a poetics of *fonctionnement*.

> Le feu fait un classement: d'abord toutes les flammes se dirigent en quelque sens…

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[92] We will see, however, that Pierre Alferi, writing at the end of the twentieth century and the turn to the twenty-first, will experiment openly with serial image effects in his poetry that ally this work with different moving image technologies (celluloid, televisual, video, and digital)—an openness to other image forms that I associate with a poetics that embraces the principle of re-mediation, in contrast to the kind of medium-specificity of the text that we see observed and defended in Ponge's work.

[93] Despite the instability of the content of these images, and the (clumsy) sonic coherences—*f*euilles ou *f*leurs, *s*oeurs *s*iamoises *sou*dées par t*ou*s les *cou*des—we are far afield from the symbolist image here.

> (L'on ne peut comparer la marche du feu qu'à celle des animaux: il faut qu'il quitte un endroit pour en occuper un autre; il marche à la fois comme une amibe et comme une girafe, bondit du col, rampe du pied)…
>
> Puis, tandis que les masses contaminées avec méthode s'écroulent, les gaz qui s'échappent sont transformés à mesure en une seule rampe de papillons.[94]

Two things strike the reader here, from the outset: (1) the vividly imaginable comparison of fire's movement to that of an amoeba-giraffe hybrid, and (2) the paradoxical *sangfroid* of this description in which fire appears as a methodical functionary, carrying out its work of classification "avec méthode." Both of these features place us squarely outside any consideration of fire's role (catastrophic or catalytic) in the great drama of human civilization. Earlier in the volume, the domesticated flame of "La Bougie" presents as a kind of houseplant, but here "toutes les flammes" are recognized as essentially self-directing in a way that allies them with animals. If animals *must* move from place to place, this is because the need for nourishment demands this movement.[95] In the case of fire, the relation between movement and consumption is indeed one of absolute conflation: fire is nothing other than mobile consumption, its movement a function of the fuels it encounters. If it effectuates "un classement," it is in the way its trajectory makes visible the distinction between "food" and "not food," between the combustible matter that fuels its movement and those inflammable elements of its environment that do not participate in its propagation.

While the image of hybridized animal movement stands out in its vividness, the formal aspect of the text weakens its centrality. Indeed, the fact that that metaphorical development comes between parentheses that are themselves held between twin ellipses suggests a contestation of the very idea of "center" (metaphorical, grammatical, physical). The typographical doubling of the ellipses and parentheses is joined by two instances of homonymic doubling. "Marche" appears twice within the parenthetical development, first as a noun then as a present-tense verb: "la marche du feu…il marche…". The same morphological coincidence between a conjugated verb and its nominalized form is then repeated: the "rampe" that seals the animal metaphor ("bondit du col, rampe du pied") returns to close the text on a metamorphic note as the fire's gases transform into "une seule rampe de papillons." With this latter example, which stands with one foot within the parenthetical development and one foot outside, we are witnessing a true change of state. Where "marche" refers in both instances to the movement of the flame, the verb "ramper" brings a more specific (animal) nuance to that walking metaphor then sees itself transformed into a noun—whose meaning (a series of objects arranged in a line) is only weakly metonymic in its relation to crawling—to describe a further shape-shifting of the escaping gases, which are *already* the product of a material change of state. Despite the stable chiasma of these homonyms' appearance in the text (noun, verb, verb, noun), their relation to concrete forms becomes more and more tenuous, thus performing a vaporization of referential substance. The matter that goes up in flame is only referenced upon its collapse—"Puis, tandis que les masses contaminées avec méthode s'écroulent, les gaz…"—and even here this mention of 'masses' is subordinated to a main clause in which the

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[94] *OC* I, 23.

[95] The text "Faune et flore" from *Le Parti pris* elaborates a distinction between plants and animals on this very point: plants are immobile because they do not need to move in order to feed themselves; animals, for lack of this fundamental convenience, must actively search their environment for nourishment. See *OC* I, 42-6. The alliance with the candle flame with plant life (because it does not move about to find its food) sits coherently within this dichotomy.

transformation from solid to gas is already complete. But in terms of the text and *its* functioning, it is the central parenthetical image that we see metabolized.

Impossible things

As Ponge toils to produce texts adequate to their objects, there is a kind of classification that emerges within his *œuvre* regarding the possibility or impossibility of this achievement. *Le Parti pris des choses* is a volume that is replete with what we might call "possible" objects: small, familiar, abundant things. Oyster, snail, candle, cigarette, piece of meat, and so on. Many of the texts in the volume, like those considered above, are also small and tightly wrought—a compactness and formal aspect suitable to things of this scale. One gets the sense reading this volume that, at least here, the adequation between text and object seems to be *possible*. The objects themselves are circumscribable (many presenting their own inherent circumscription in the form of a shell or peel or crust), and the texts, dense with certitude and with what Jean Paulhan diagnosed as "une infaillibilité un peu courte," approach their task as eminently achievable.[96] But, before *Le Parti pris des choses* is even published, Ponge finds himself increasingly embroiled in less possible tasks. Not only does he turn his gaze to objects that are less coherently circumscribed, less easily observed (for instance, the Seine), but his perception of the task before him—no matter the object—is colored with a new pessimism as to the possibility of achieving adequation with an object that is necessarily "plus important, plus intéressant, plus capable" than any text that treats it.

The project of *La Rage de l'expression* (written 1938-1944, published 1952) is undertaken shortly after Ponge completes his work on the manuscript of *Le Parti pris des choses*, and it rises out of his growing pessimism regarding literary expression. In many ways a correction to the compositional practice enshrined in that earlier volume, *La Rage de l'expression* is especially significant for its inauguration of the "poetic journal" format that would remain in force in nearly all of his subsequent work. The volume is comprised of seven works devoted to a range of natural objects, each presenting the record, in the form of consecutive, dated journal entries, of the poet's research and development towards perfected poems that never properly materialize. Each *brouillon* features a proliferation of images, a gathering of figural and lexical materials, which are evaluated for aptness and efficacy with respect to the object's emerging particularities, and a concatenation of variant passages in which phrases are ordered and reordered, syntax is flipped, and metaphorical developments are extended or suppressed. It is not towards aesthetic ends, however, that the images and expressions in these texts are submitted to such rigorous correction—it is towards the end of adequation. Ponge takes an oath in the volume's preface "Que mon travail soit celui d'une rectification continuelle de mon expression (sans souci *a priori* de la forme de cette expression) en faveur de l'objet brut,"[97] and brings the work—the text as the work of producing it—into the foreground.

This continual rectification and emphasis on process over product, in addition to advancing the defetishization of poetic procedures that we've already observed in his approach to images, reflects a newly relativized thinking about the possibility of finishedness in the poetic treatment of objects. In a note contemporary with the composition of *La Rage de l'expression*, Ponge describes a journey in his approach to writing:

> Historiquement voici ce qui s'est passé dans mon esprit: 1° J'ai reconnu
> l'impossibilité de m'exprimer; 2° Je me suis rabattu sur la tentative de description

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[96] Ponge reports this comment from Paulhan in the preface to his second major volume *Prôemes* (*OC* I, 165).
[97] *OC* I, 337.

des choses […]; 3° J'ai reconnu (récemment) l'impossibilité non seulement d'exprimer mais de décrire les choses.

Ma démarche en est à ce point. Je puis donc soit décider de me taire, mais cela ne me convient pas […].

Soit décider de publier des descriptions ou relations *d'échecs de description*.[98]

La Rage de l'expression is such a publication, a collection of texts that manifest openly this status as "relations *d'échecs de descriptions.*" This recognition of the impossibility of expression is a function of Ponge's understanding of the fundamental absurdity of language, which is the main topic of the note just cited.[99] This absurdity manifests itself in the fact that we are obliged to express our inner life, our emotions, our subjective identity or alternatively the qualities of the world around us with the same tool that we use, with invariable success, to get someone to pass us the salt. We can recognize here a critique of what Mallarmé called "l'emploi élémentaire du discours," the everyday language that enjoys the commercial efficacy of a coin silently exchanged.[100] This efficacy that language exhibits in the world leads us to believe that those other forms of expression—of subjective states and objective qualities—are equally achievable. There is no such efficacy in the descriptive endeavor. As we've seen, the values that populate the world of language for Ponge are of an order irrevocably other to the qualities of the physical world that they might evoke. The reconciliation between language and the world is ruled out by the fundamental incommensurability of matter and meaning, but Ponge refuses to resign himself to the certain failure of expression ("l'on ne se résout pas à l'abrutissement"), and maintains the conviction that any progress that can be made towards reducing the ineradicable imbalance between the real and the language we put to it is worth the struggle and will pay dividends for the human mind. "D'ailleurs l'échec n'est jamais absolu […], dans certaines mesures […] il y a des succès *relatifs* d'expression."[101] *La Rage de l'expression* introduces an approach to composition and publication that draws explicit attention to the scrutiny turned upon the judgment of a text's adequation to its object. The objects treated in this volume (wasp, carnation, mimosa) are for the most part not different in kind to those that populate *Le Parti pris des choses*. But where *Le Parti pris des choses* presents text-objects whose finely wrought form asserts their adequacy, *La Rage de l'expression* presents text-processes in which the question of adequation is ceaselessly contested and where the object's resistance to textual adequation, documented in calendar time, becomes another measure of its existence in time (its *fonctionnement*).

Few objects are as resistant to Ponge's efforts as the sun. The sun is an impossible object—a hyperobject *avant la lettre,* so far exceeding our capacity to observe it as to defeat the very notion

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[98] "Pages bis, I" (26-27 août 1941), *Proêmes, OCI*, 206-7. Original emphasis.

[99] This note is part of a longer, fragmentary text bearing the title "Réflexions en lisant l' « Essai sur l'absurde »" in which Ponge responds to the work by Camus that would be subsequently renamed *Le Mythe de Sisyphe*. Ponge's main complaint with Camus's text is that in its identification of his "thèmes de l'absurde," he neglects what is for Ponge the most capital of the absurdities of human existence: language.

[100] Stéphane Mallarmé, *Igitur, Divagations, Un coup de dés* (Paris: Gallimard, 2003), 259. Ponge often develops a similar idea of silence with respect to everyday language use: "Il y a le monde des objets et des hommes, qui pour la plupart, eux aussi sont muets. Parce qu'ils remuent le vieux pot, mais ils ne disent rien" (*OC* I, 678).

[101] *OC* I, 337.

of object[102]—, one that resists observation as it blinds its onlooker and through this brilliance asserts its power as the very condition of observation itself ("la condition de tous les autres objets. La condition même du regard"; "Le Plus Brillant des objets au monde n'est—de ce fait—NON—*n'est pas* un objet; c'est un trou, c'est l'abîme métaphysique"[103]). The resistance of this non-object is so absolute that the project of adequation, the intuitive scrutiny of textual *fonctionnement* in relation to that of the object, demands that these compositional objectives be conceived and formalized as an entirely new literary genre: *L'Objeu.* The sprawling masterpiece *Le Soleil placé en abîme*, published in 1954 (in an édition de luxe featuring engravings by Jacques Hérold), opens with a discussion of the necessity of this generic innovation: "Nous avons toujours pu penser du Soleil avoir quelque chose à dire, et certes ne pouvoir l'écrire sans inventer quelque genre nouveau, comme nous ne pouvions non plus imaginer *a priori* ce nouveau genre, dont il eût fallu qu'il se formât au cours de notre travail, nous avons usé à cet égard de beaucoup de ténacité et de patience, et mis autant que possible le Temps dans notre complot."[104] The text is long, composed of fragments culled from more than three decades of attempts to nail down the defining qualities of the sun. Despite the project's extension through time, however, this text does not bear the form of the poetic journal. Or, we could say that dated entries are not a generic convention specific to *l'objeu.* Instead, what we encounter is a series of wildly varied fragments whose difference in tone, form and preoccupation direct us to the plurality and diachronic extension of the "nous" Ponge employs in this opening passage: "ce *nous*, l'a-t-on compris, prononcé sans emphase, figure simplement la collection des phases et positions successives du *je.*" The coherence of dated entries unfolding in strict chronological order and over a relatively short period of time, as in the texts of *La Rage de l'expression*, grants a certain continuity to the writing subject as each day's entry revises or carries on the work of the previous day. In the case of *Le Soleil*, the lack of continuity in the subject is actively pursued as an indispensable feature of the genre it inaugurates. In this text, the order of fragments is far from chronological, and indeed the multiplicity of points of view and the unfixable nature of the relationship between the subject and their object that results from this multiplicity generates a kind of temporal density that would seem appropriate in the face of an unbeholdable object that is the literal source of what we call time.

The position and status of the subject when faced with an object like the sun, and the expressive action that remains available in such an encounter, are at the heart of the novelty offered by *l'objeu.* Ponge describes his new genre as follows:

> C'est celui où l'objet de notre émotion placé d'abord en abîme, l'épaisseur vertigineuse et l'absurdité du langage, considérées seules, sont manipulées de telle façon que, par la multiplication intérieure des rapports, les liaisons formées au niveau des racines et les signfications bouclées à double tour, soit créé ce fonctionnement qui seul peut rendre compte de la profondeur substantielle, de la variété et de la rigoureuse harmonie du monde.[105]

In remarks on *Le Soleil placé en abîme,* Jacques Derrida affirms that "telle initiation [à l'objeu] ne peut se tenter que depuis le lieu impossible," referring perhaps not only to the special impossibility that

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[102] The concept of the hyperobject was forged by Timothy Morton, a leading figure in ecocriticism in the humanities. See his *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World* (Minneapolis, MN: Minnesota UP, 2013).

[103] *Le Soleil placé en abîme, OC* I, 781.

[104] Ibid., 776.

[105] *OC* I, 778.

this non-object presents to the descriptive endeavor (so impossible as to catalyze the creation of this new genre), but also to this *abîme* that is announced in the title of the work and that presents in the above passage as the primary condition for the operation of *l'objeu*.[106] If the aspiration to textual *fonctionnement* expressed here is already core to Ponge's poetic practice, as we've seen, this "placé en abîme" represents the indispensable methodological innovation of *l'objeu* as a distinct genre. Of course, "placé en abîme" is so close to "mis[e] en abîme" as to immediately conjure this representational topos in which an element of a work is repeated at a reduced scale in its interior. In the case of the sun, such an operation would mean producing not just a double but infinite recursive duplications of this most singular of entities (in Derrida's formulation: "unique 'exemplaire' et référent irremplaçable," in transcendant position outside of the system of signification it renders possible[107]). To imagine the sun as copiable is to transform it into a different kind of object. If the sun resists our gaze—"[il] repousse le regard, vous le renfonce à l'intérieur du corps!"—so we can only know it indirectly (and paradoxically) through visual observation, this *placement en abîme* would seem to be that gesture that would allow Ponge to extract himself from this object's dominion, to carve an impossible distance between himself and the sun so he can plunge himself into the world of language and get to work.

This obligatory *placement en abîme* returns us to the issue of the encounter where this chapter began. From the start, the doubleness of *fonctionnement* figures the radical separateness of the worlds of things and of language in Ponge's thought, with textual *fonctionnement* emerging as a way of working on language and its relation to things in a way that does not reduce the complexity of either of these domains. Indeed, this approach to expression and composition presents as the *only* way of bridging (if not reconciling) these worlds, provided language is summoned in all its non-signifying complexity. The need to remove the object from the world and cast it into an abyss is a way of removing himself from its orbit, and presents as an enabling condition for the act of expression. In a note contemporary with the final drafting of *Le Soleil*, we encounter a broader discussion of this condition that begins with an appeal to the uncertainty principle in physics: "Nous pouvons déformer [les objets] par notre seule présence, notre seule insertion dans le paysage, la seule insertion de notre température (cf. tempérament) dans leur voisinage." He pursues:

> C'est en nous ôtant de là, en refroidissant l'atmosphère par notre éloignement, notre retrait (autant que possible), que nous pouvons redonner à chaque objet sa cohésion vitale (fonctionnante). Comme si notre présence, notre voisinage, notre regard seulement ramollissait les mécanismes des montres ou des horloges, de façon qu'elles ne sonnent plus. Il faudrait alors que nous nous ôtions de là pour que les mécanismes refroidissent, et que le fonctionnement se rétablisse, que le tic-tac et la sonnerie des heures se fassent entendre à nouveau.[108]

This "redonner à chaque objet sa cohésion vitale (fonctionnante)" emerges here as the overarching objective of Ponge's poetic project, one that is a direct result of the poet's withdrawal. His presence (the temperature of his body, his gaze) softens the object's vital cohesion which he then moves to restore to the object through his withdrawal. Bearing in mind the lesson of the uncertainty principle, the observer cannot absent himself from his observations. So what manner of withdrawal is posited here? In this passage, if Ponge offers withdrawal as an antidote to the contaminating

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[106] Jacques Derrida, *Signéponge = Signsponge* (bilingual edition)*,* trans. Richard Rand (New York, NY: Columbia UP, 1984), 143.

[107] Ibid., 141.

[108] *Pour un Malherbe, OC* II, 61.

effects of his presence upon the autonomous functioning of the object, he is not suggesting the usefulness of hallucinating a disembodied observation of the object (as if this would grant access to that *tic-tac*). No, it is in writing that such a withdrawal could be envisioned. It is through the production of textual *fonctionnement* that this autonomous vitality can be *given back* to the object. The subject's effect upon the object draws us back to the example of "Pluie." As we noted, this text opens by announcing the presence of the observing subject, the one watching the rain as it falls and describing it in painstaking detail. The description presented in this opening passage displays a kind of hyperbolic effort towards precision and rendering clearly visualizable features of the falling rain: "À peu de distance des murs de droite et de gauche tombent avec plus de bruit des gouttes plus lourdes, individuées."[109] But where this precision is expressed as explicitly aspectual (precise *for the viewer*, as a function of his spatial situation and aspect on the object), the subsequent emergence of the image of the rainstorm as a kind of self-winding clock (image that asserts itself as apt because of its apprehension of the storm as a system) displaces the there-and-then presence of this subject and cuts it loose by posing its specificity as a mere hypothetical. This poem, which opens with a first-person observing subject to then close on an impersonal "il," performs the withdrawal that Ponge prescribes in the above passage by subsuming subjective immediacy to the project of bringing to light the law of the object's functioning.

La Mounine

Ponge's is a poetic project that holds very little space for immediacy. He does not write from within the sphere of experience, he writes from within the "profondeur vertigineuse" of language, the world of text. As we noted at the very top of this chapter, the encounter with the object in Ponge is at once indispensable and that fragile bit of immediate experience that he works most urgently to convert into something more durable (the law of the thing, "le mimosa sans moi"). As we've seen, the 1952 volume *La Rage de l'expression* shows Ponge contending with moths and carnations and mimosa blooms, and exposing to public view the record of his failures. However, that volume closes with a text that takes on an object of an entirely different sort, one that forces a problematization of the presence of the poet at the time of encounter (his "insertion dans le paysage" and its deforming effects) and of the capacities of language as Ponge conceives it in the face of immediate experience. "La Mounine ou Note après coup sur un ciel de Provence" collects chronological dated entries documenting Ponge's three-month effort to put into words an impression he had—so powerful as to trigger an involuntary "sanglot esthétique"—while looking out of a bus window on the road between Marseille and Aix-en-Provence between eight and nine one April morning, 1941.[110] The event occurs at a spot along the road called La Mounine—a proper noun which, in its title position, redoubles the singularity of its referent (in contrast to the common or category nouns that are typically placed atop Ponge's texts). His object here is of the most unwieldy variety, quite impossible to investigate: a memory of a sense impression, a memory of the particular quality of the Provençal sky (so bright it was dark, heavy, tragic) and his enduring conviction that the expression of this quality is of capital importance. The power of that sensory impression breeds an obsession—"je n'aurais de cesse de l'avoir conquis et exprimé"[111]—which

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[109] *OC* I, 15.

[110] My attention to and reflection on this particular text can be traced back to conversations with Ann Smock, whose enduring fascination with its premise and the quasi-solutions Ponge scrapes together in the face of this unusual object accompanies me in this work.

[111] Letter to Linette Fabre, Ponge's cousin whom he was traveling to visit on that trip from Marseille to Aix-en-Provence, and to whom he wrote for corroboration that this impression of his was "quelque chose de sérieux" (*OC* I, 437-8).

yields the longest and most tortured text of the volume. Like most texts in *La Rage de l'Expression*, it is abandoned more than finished—the final attempt at a draft of the poem "La Mounine" is cut off after five stanzas with "*Etc. ......*"—and the concluding *envoi* is a deferral of this poem "que—passion trop vive, infirmité, scrupules—nous n'avons pu encore nous offrir."[112]

As an event rather than a confrontable object, the sense impression at the center of this text's preoccupations is discrete and non-renewable. It is a "vision fugitive" (413), and the anxiety produced by this instantaneity is the driving force in the text's composition. "La Mounine" overflows with images of an incredible diversity, as it seeks out those figures that will allow Ponge to *see it again* in order to contemplate and understand the sky's lesson. The color of the sky presents, alternately, as "l'explosion en vase clos d'un pétale de violette bleu," blue seen through "le miroir noir des peintres," a squid's expulsion of blue-black ink resulting in a "tragique encrage de la situation."[113] As we've seen, Ponge prefers to scrub his texts of all or most indications of the anecdotal and contingent nature of his observation of the object ("le mimosa sans moi"). Here, though, Ponge finds himself caught up with an object that demands his immediate presence, that would vanish with him if he were to withdraw from the scene as he likes to do. The impossibility of Ponge's task in "La Mounine"—written a full ten years prior to his formulation of *l'objeu*—prefigures in many explicit ways the difficulties that led to the inauguration of this genre in the context of *Le Soleil placé en abîme*. In "La Mounine," we witness Ponge measuring his linguistic resources against an event-object that is by nature instantaneous (observationally evasive), at a time before he has formalized the way the linguistic/textual medium marshals its qualities in just such circumstances. We observe Ponge in this text desperately probing his medium as he seeks out expressive solutions within the medial boundaries of text.

"La Mounine" is a text that moves in and out of various and distinct discursive and expressive modes, and displays a textual rhetoric that pushes relentlessly towards clarity—relentless because its successes are dubious and elusive. There are narrative passages telling and retelling the sequence of events leading up to Ponge's "sanglot esthétique," often expressed schematically as a series of bullet points. Properly descriptive passages deploy poetic images to try to make visible (to the reader and to the poet) the sky as Ponge saw it, in its qualitative particularity; these passages do the work of generating novel images that are then evaluated for revelatory aptness. The text is dotted with passages of metatechnical and epistemological reflection, in a register assertively distinct from the others: explicitly discursive, positioned outside of the creative moment, and often a space where Ponge expresses his exasperation at the unique difficulty of this poetic task. Finally, there is a mode of syntactic and lexical variation that activates at various moments throughout the text to revise and reorder content already introduced by the narrative and descriptive modes. This mode is worthy of isolation here because its variations end up occupying quite a lot of the actual bulk of "La Mounine" and, more crucially, because of the particularity of the effects it produces—effects that are syntactic and organizational in nature, and not simply precipitated by the expressiveness of the image-content itself.

With respect to the professed objectives of these multifarious efforts, "La Mounine" and Ponge himself are pulled between two central imperatives: (1) to simply preserve his impression of that ash-blue sky (to represent it so he can marvel at it at will), and (2) to analyze and explain this phenomenon and the strong emotional response it triggered in him.[114] This is a tension between description and explanation, between the presence-making powers of poetic language (image) and the sense-making powers of reasoned discourse. Resolving himself more towards the latter of these

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[112] Ibid., 432.

[113] Ibid., 418 and *passim*.

[114] Ibid., 429.

imperatives (the only option, really), he remarks: "Il s'agit […] d'y mettre la lumière, de dégager les raisons (de mon émotion) et la loi (de ce paysage), de faire *servir* ce paysage à quelque chose d'autre qu'au sanglot esthéthique, de le faire devenir un outil moral, logique, de faire, à son propos, faire un pas à l'esprit."[115] The singularity of the event, experienced as singularly and viscerally affecting, must open onto some generalizable significance, must be convertible to a particularity. Of course, the objectives of representation and explanation are always active in Ponge's work, and the calling card of his poetics lies in their synthesis (the abolition of their opposition showing them to be inseparable one from the other): "Pour que je le maintienne il faut d'abord que je le saisisse, que j'en lie en bouquet pouvant être tenu à la main et emporté avec moi les éléments sains (imputrescibles) et vraiment essentiels—que je le *com-prenne*."[116] The preservation of the experience (maintenir) is a function of the poet's understanding of it (saisir) through his isolation of its imperishable qualities. Its qualities must be analyzed, sorted according to their essentialness, then put into a new arrangement (a bouquet), in order for its preservation to hold.[117] However static this image might appear—transforming the poet's encounter with this sky into an object that can be held in one's hand (doubly emphasized: *maintenir…tenu à la main*)—it is important to read this *maintenir* in the most active of senses. This is the verb that Ponge associates most consistently with the *fonctionnement* of even the most seemingly inert objects, that wondrous, mysterious dynamism of things as they continue to exist—to maintain themselves against those forces that would return them to the earth—one moment to the next.[118] "Maintenir" is how an object's functioning keeps it in the present tense of the physical world, "maintenant," and Ponge's ambition, announced in the above passage, to maintain this sky-phenomenon becomes legible as a pursuit of *fonctionnement* in his rendering of it, that would simultaneously allow him to overcome this object's inherent pastness. In order to maintain it, to *faire fonctionner* this sky in the world of texts, a certain understanding of it must be achieved. We can see here that for Ponge the explanatory moment—in which the causal subtleties of an object's nature are made available to the reader's understanding—ought to be inseparable from the object's poetic representation, ought to underpin and shape that representation, and it is in the thorough imbrication of these objectives that the text's *fonctionnement* is guaranteed.

It is in the accumulation of variant drafts—the aforementioned mode of lexical and syntactic reordering at work—that we begin to discern, on the surface of the text, the relationship between the representational and explanatory impulses that motivate this work. Analogies abound in this text, emerging from the descriptive mode of its preparation, we presume, like the analogies which reveal qualities of the object in the very moment of their manifestation in language. These images—an ash-blue sky, like cremated violet petals, like smudged graphite, like a desk blotter soaked in blue ink, like a cyanide drip—cycle through the text, turned in slightly different ways and in slightly different combinations. The effect of these accumulating variations is that variation itself—the play of difference and sameness that establishes each passage as both unique and as an iteration in a series—takes on a visibility and a significance far more overt than that of the seriality

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[115] Ibid., 424.

[116] Ibid., 413.

[117] Here, we can observe the influence of Ponge's friend and mentor Jean Paulhan. This image of the bouquet evokes Paulhan's *Les Fleurs de Tarbes*, an evocation that serves to remind us that this resilient, imperishable hand-held thing will be a poem.

[118] See, for example, *Tentative orale*: "…il s'agit à l'intérieur de tout [objet] d'un mécanisme d'horlogerie (je parlais de bombe) qui, au lieu de faire éclater, maintient, permet à chaque objet de poursuivre en dehors de nous son existence particulière, de résister à l'esprit" (*OC* I, 668).

of images in the closed texts of *Le Parti pris*. A condensed example of this work of variation, convenient for the purposes of citation, comes early in the text of "La Mounine":

> Rien ne ressemble plus à la nuit... C'est trop dire. Disons seulement: il a quelque chose de la nuit, il évoque la nuit, il n'est pas si différent de la nuit, il a une valeur de nuit, il a les valeurs de la nuit, il a la même valeur, les mêmes valeurs que la nuit, il vaut la nuit. Ce jour vaut la nuit, ce jour bleu cendres-là.[119]

This final phrase, magnetic in its rhythm and its colloquial quality, marks a certain point of arrival in these lexical *tâtonnements* and a condensation of thought relative to its predecessors as it joins day and night with a single verb. It's almost as if, in just these four lines, we are witnessing what it would mean for an image to become thought, for the vague suggestiveness of this relationship between day and night—expressing day by evoking night—to sharpen into an expression that gets as close as possible to the imbrication of the meanings it joins. This lone verb *valoir* presents a simultaneous sharpening of Ponge's metatechnical thinking about how analogy itself functions (here and everywhere). Day counts as night, day's value is equivalent to night's value, they are worth the same, a fair trade, one gets you the other and vice-versa. "Ce jour vaut la nuit" explains the mechanics of the analogy it expresses, and the evocativeness of its image is thereby intensified. But as the text charges on and the variants accumulate, this phrase too becomes subject to further syntactic reordering. "Ce jour vaut nuit […] ce jour bleu cendres vaut nuit […] ce jour de cendres-là vaut nuit […] ce jour bleu de cendres-là vaut nuit […] ce jour vaut nuit, ce jour bleu cendres-là."[120] Ponge's oath of "rectification continuelle" reasserts itself even here, where a relative success seemed to have been achieved. What emerges from these subsequent contortions is a sense that the content of this image—the visibility it creates and the thought it chisels with such precision—is not necessarily primary to the pursuit of this text's objectives. Indeed, the lexical *tâtonnements* that we witnessed in the block quote above seem to recede, as the text goes on, behind the more numerous, more obsessive, syntactic variations that push on in search of an aptness that is somehow other to that of the image itself. As the text shuttles back and forth between these expressive modes, we can see an almost hyperbolic performance of the functions Roman Jakobson assigns to the vertical and horizontal axes of literary composition. The work of selection, associated with the vertical axis and with metaphor, registers as distinct from that of combination (the horizontal axis of metonymic relation), but there is no sense of hierarchy or generic identification in the way these functions are activated in Ponge's text.[121] This ceaseless rectification on the level of syntax brings the relations between the words themselves—and the relations between the variants as such—to the fore in such a way as to direct our attention towards a level of textual activity (what the text is *doing* as it churns in this way) distinct from the symbolic activity of its figures.

One of the preoccupying dramas of the text—there are many—comes in the form of a confrontation between two images for conveying the initial suggestiveness of the impression that Provence sky had on our poet. Their first adversarial meeting comes in a passage from early July

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[119] *OC* I, 414.

[120] Ibid., 414-418.

[121] In Roman Jakobson's theorization, "[t]he poetic function projects the principle of equivalence from the axis of selection [word choice, metaphor, the paradigmatic] into the axis of combination [ordering, metonymy, the syntagmatic]" (Jakobson, "Linguistics and Poetics," 27). In Ponge's text, we observe a curious reciprocity between these axes, often manifesting as the explicit correction of paradigmatic developments through syntagmatic operations.

1941: "Quel poulpe reculant dans le ciel de Provence a provoqué ce tragique encrage de la situation? Mais non! Il s'agit d'un gaz lourd et non d'un liquide. Quelque chose comme le résultat de l'explosion en vase clos d'un million de pétales de violettes bleues"[122] In passages preceding this citation, these two images coexist, occasionally collated with an "or" in between, among the multitude of metaphors deployed in the effort to express the particular quality of this sky. The relation between these images takes on a conflictual specificity in the above passage, however, as the metaphor of gas and combustion intervenes to contest the validity of the liquid metaphor. This instance of correction (rectification), retained as such in the text, is precisely the kind of procedure that abounds in *La Rage de l'expression*, where one day's production revises, elaborates, or departs from that of the previous day without throwing any of it away. What is particular in the case of this moment of correction, however, is that it gets picked up and replayed a dozen or so times before the text is brought to a close. Each encounter is structured identically—the squid expresses its ink then is contested with an explosion and the heavy gas it leaves hanging in the air. As it is staged and restaged, the images contort somewhat (although their primary content—liquid or gas— remains the same), but the *rectification* gains considerably in refinement. Consider this last instance of correction, now fully baroque in style, included in the opening section of what would be the final version of Ponge's "Poème après coup sur un ciel de Provence" (although this too is left unfinished). Following an evocation of the emptying of a squid's ink into the sky:

> […] Mais non! L'atmosphère était telle
> Que je ne puis avec quelque raison
> M'espérer voir fournir par l'élément liquide
> Un terme de comparaison
>
> Il s'agit d'un gaz lourd […][123]

The correction alone—previously signaled by the simple "mais non!"—here unfolds over an entire quatrain. That this liquid-gas doublet should be so ubiquitous in this unresolved state across numerous variant drafts indicates that there is something this pair's *contention* is accomplishing towards the text's objective of adequate expression that their simple juxtaposition would not. The specificity of their relation is underscored as these drafts multiply: not "liquid *and* gas", nor "liquid *or* gas"—although both of these options would sound the desired paradoxical chord—, but "liquid—no not liquid, it has to be gas." An evaluation, rejection and replacement are performed, "en faveur de l'objet brut,"[124] out of fidelity to the object and a commitment to conveying its qualities through only the most densely precise of images. Over the course of the accumulating iterations of their encounter, however, a different effect is revealed. These images are retained throughout the text as representatives of the descriptive mode, working to make visible in the mind of the reader the startling particularity of the color and quality of that sky as it first struck Ponge. Through their repetition, however, these images are all but evacuated of their content and expressivity (note how rarefied Ponge's language has become in the above citation), particularly as they appear to us in *this* text, "La Mounine," which never isolates a final version that would exist separate from its repetitive preparation. As a result, experimental salience shifts to the relationship between the repetitions, the way each iteration positions itself with respect to the one that came before, calls it back to mind and brings *their* difference to light as the thing to be seen—albeit not

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[122] *OC* I, 421.
[123] Ibid., 431.
[124] Ibid., 337.

contained in their images. A kind of composite image, rather, produced through the multiplication of their collated forms. In the above example, the elaboration of the logical relationship between the two images serves to direct near-hyperbolic attention to the question of how elements of the text are placed in relation one to the next. It makes visible on the surface of the text concerns that run invisibly across and between the various instances of its series. In this way, we can see the sky's own rhetoric asserting itself just as the "multiplication des rapports" between the component elements of the text manages to cast their symbolic content into a secondary plane of relevance.

Immediacy, transparency, *clarté*

The immediacy of this experience is a problem for Ponge—not just because of its contingency or fleetingness, but because of his own indispensable position within it. The lack of a definitive version of this "Poème après coup sur un ciel de Provence" suggests that his poetics of *fonctionnement* is not entirely equal to the task of presenting within the world of text this event-object that requires him to assume his own immediate relationship to it. While he does not in the end manage to get to the bottom of his aesthetic sob, there is a moment, in a passage left out of the published version of the text, where a certain immediacy is achieved. This passage comes shortly before Ponge closes the book on this project, and it represents a kind of *point d'arrivée* in his description and understanding of this sky and its lessons (a point of arrival which still is not a poem). From his writing table in Roanne, in early August 1941, Ponge imagines himself back in Provence:

> Ici la clarté par exception n'est pas une idée (une idée, une chose intérieure, une imagination que l'on cultive mieux à l'intérieur de chambres à vitraux, en se protégeant contre la tromperie du jour). Ici par exception la clarté est un fait extérieur.
> […]
> c'est sous cette lumière que l'on vit dans mon cher midi classique
> La nuit toujours présente
> (clarté)
> pas d'illusions, de nuages (formant écran)
> Ici le ciel n'est pas un écran à représentations vagues et informes
> —il ne s'occupe pas à véhiculer des nuages
> il pèse, il est présent, immédiat à l'homme.[125]

In Provence, "clarté" is not an idea but is rather an external fact. Which is to say that, here in Provence, this brightness that brings clarity—illumination/elucidation—is not a reference confined to the figurative mode, as it is for the rest of the country, but rather imposes its literality on the landscape in observable ways. A clarity that results from the absence of clouds. The central tension of "La Mounine," however, derives from the fact that what this "clarté" brings to light is not at all clear. What it reveals is "la nuit toujours présente," a sky so bright that darkness seeps in from outerspace and makes it appear "tout mélangé d'ombre."[126] That darkness that haunts our light, that infinite interstellar night that usually goes invisible, passes into oblivion, against the opacity of daylight. A brightness so extreme that values of light and dark are inverted. In this moment of clarity, we are freed of illusions—untenable under its light—below a sky free of clouds, rid of those "représentations vagues et informes." Wiped clean of images (clouds), the sky ceases

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[125] Ibid., 439-40.
[126] Ibid., 427.

to be a screen (pas d'illusions, plus d'images). It refuses its status as a medium for the transmission of other ideas (divine ones, most problematically[127]). What does this sky become when it ceases to function as a technology for an enduring, subliminal metaphysics? Ceasing to function as a screen, as a medium for the transmission of something else, the sky can assert its presence, it can be immediate in its relationship to a worldly viewer, imposing its presence within her world rather than as a point of passage to another. What Ponge gives us to observe here is a moment where what might otherwise serve as a kind of transparent medium fully inhabits its own qualities in a way that transfers attention from the uninterrupted programming of meteoric events to the material basis of that drama. As we will see in chapter 3, where we encounter another landscape viewed through the window of a moving vehicle, the imperative to see the screen and take in its qualities becomes at once more complicated, impossible, and urgent as the screen in question becomes televisual, and then informatic.

It seems to be the power of this conjunction of sun and sky to vaporize illusions, to bring figure back to material fact. "Clarté," that illumination that eradicates confusion and excess, is established as *literal* here, and in other passages the clarity it brings is revealed to be a perfectly material, meteorological one: a light so strong that it evaporates all the water from the atmosphere. It is this absence of vapor in the sky that lets the night seep through from behind and darken the sky's blue. And it is only then, as that darkness asserts its unwavering presence, that the sky asserts its own. This idea that the hot Mediterranean sun creates a clearing in the sky, "la clairière donnant sur la nuit intersidérale," is affirmed as the most important in the text as a whole, something closing in upon "une explication vraie (?)" of this strange, phenomenal revelation.[128] A clarity that is perfectly material. And one that shows us that there is something to see in the sky other than the images typically projected there, these vague and unformed representations that we reflexively associate, and conflate, with the sky itself. As such, this "clarté" represents a meaning which is as far as possible from abstraction relative to the exterior phenomenon it describes. With this word, Ponge allows the concrete, perceivable referent (light) to incorporate and concretize its figurative meaning (clarity, precision of thought and expression) as it ceases to serve primarily as an idea.

The sky becomes present, it weighs down and imposes its own qualities, on the condition of—or simply in perfect coincidence with—the banishment of foreign images from its surface, elsewhere referred to as "la fantasmagorie des nuages."[129] At a moment of acute discouragement in the development of the text, Ponge points out to himself: "À noter que j'éprouve les plus grosses difficultés du fait du nombre énorme d'images qui viennent se mettre à ma disposition (et masquer, mettre des masques, à la réalité)."[130] The images that come to him as he attempts to express in language the specificity of this phenomenon become a parade of masks that populate this sky whose greatest lesson is located, on the contrary, in its radical emptiness, in the dryness that eradicates those other masks—the clouds that similarly distort and displace the qualities of the sky itself. But as we've seen, the way images like those we've been considering (liquid vs. gas) are made

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[127] Ponge, convinced of and comfortable with the meaninglessness of the world, is gleeful in his observation of this sky as it asserts its emptiness and opens up a window onto an *au-delà* that is nothing more than the black abyss of interstellar space ("l'abîme supérieur"). With this observation, Ponge intends a swift demystification of the associations with the divine that humans—he's thinking particularly of French Christian humans, for whom the word *ciel* means both sky and heaven—impose upon that vast expanse overhead. See, for example: ibid., 416, 422, 425.

[128] Ibid, 430. In his interviews with Philippe Sollers, Ponge describes this idea as his own "hypothèse quasi scientifique." *EPS*, 40.

[129] *OC* I, 430.

[130] Ibid., 425.

to move through the text in interminable syntactic variation compromises their substance, evacuates them of meaning in a way that we can only observe as adequate to this demand for emptiness.

The slippage that Ponge establishes between cloud and image concretizes the difficulty of the poetic task that has imposed itself upon him, and installs the troubles he is encountering with image within a register of literality that mirrors the productive, desirable literality of the term *clarté* as we've just discussed. Clouds are masses of water droplets and crystals which populate a slice of the atmosphere referred to, impossibly, as the *troposphere*, and which, through our habits of viewing, seem to slip inexorably into symbolic or indexical signification, always standing in for or pointing to something else. They are somehow simultaneously forms and figures, and as such they mimic to some extent the ambiguities of "image" itself—images that have form, as images of things real or imagined, or that operate mentally, swapping one thing for another, to produce metaphorical visibilities. The lesson of this Provençal sky, and the difficulty it poses to expression, is situated in the tangled literalities through which it makes visible its own resistance to image, its fundamental difference from both images *of* it (formal representations) and images *for* it (figural representations). This oppositional energy, Ponge understands, is at the center of this sky's qualitative particularity, and it is therefore this that he must labor to express. Even if the image of the "clairière donnant sur la nuit intersidérale" is asserted as the most pertinent to the sense and interest of what Ponge is trying to describe, the event-object itself—that conjunction of sky and landscape that drew a sob from him—remains ontologically unstable, unfixable. The absence of a definitive version —that poem that "nous n'avons pu encore nous offrir"—means that the movement of attention through the text, across and within the various discursive and expressive modes—which are constantly trading places with one another, intervening on the others' turf—and across and within the various revisions and rewritings within each of these modes, is a perpetual movement, and one which in the end *does* attain to a certain representational adequacy with respect to an object that is itself unfixed. "La Mounine" confronts an object that defies on its face our tendency to turn it into a symbolic entity, an object that is and remains more than anything *present*. It is that presence that Ponge labors to render in his texts, as he bends language to pay homage to that which lies beyond its elastic and dexterous grasp.

The referential immediacy of "clarté" is motivated, justified, literal. But of course, this is not an immediacy in which Ponge himself features. It is not his own immediacy with respect to the phenomenon described that is at stake. Instead, "clarté" represents an instance of immediate encounter between language and world (or very nearly). For Ponge, as we've seen, these worlds are separate and unbridgeable: "Il y a donc d'une part ce monde extérieur, d'autre part le monde du langage, qui est un monde entièrement distinct [...]. On ne peut pas passer de l'un à l'autre."[131] "Clarté" is a clearing ("clairière donnant sur la nuit intersidérale"), a point not of passage but of contact between these worlds. This is the stability of reference that Ponge is always searching for, a moment where figuration recedes and his materials show themselves to be perfectly apt, where language and world can look upon one another with recognition from either side of their boundary, and the author can disappear. He locates in this term a kind of escape hatch from the scene of expression, a point at which the world of things and that of language succeed in their collusion to evict him from their encounter.

Coda photographique

The flash-like quality of Ponge's event-object in "La Mounine," its irrecoverable contingency, the visuality of its effects, his reaction to it as an image ("sanglot esthétique") and the

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[131] Ibid, 677.

poet's tortuous efforts to capture it, to pull it back from its pastness and restore it to visibility—all of this suggests a kind of reflexive desire (or envy) for photographic record. For a long time now, photography has served as the paradigmatic medium for visualizing the encounter between subject and object. But, as we noted at the outset of this chapter, Ponge harbors a virulent distaste for this medium. In view of his broader project, his dynamic conception of matter and of the stuff of language, photography doesn't offer Ponge the answers he seeks. This is in part because of its visualization of time as stoppable, in part because of its presumption of homogeneity with the world it represents and the standardized (programmed) processes it applies to whatever gets captured in its image-field (≠ "une rhétorique par objet"), but perhaps most of all because the impersonality of its representations is guaranteed *à l'avance* by virtue of its technical structure (as André Bazin so emphatically articulates in his "Ontologie de l'image photographique"). As we've seen, in Ponge's poetics, the withdrawal of the author registers as an achievement of *fonctionnement*, the result of meticulous tinkering and tireless research as he seeks out the materials and arrangements that will lend his text the kind of internal dynamism and autonomy that would render him simply extraneous, unnecessary, to its functioning.

In a curious passage from his *Tentative orale*, a text largely improvised in front of an audience in Brussels in 1947, Ponge invites his listeners to examine photography's inadequacies. "Pour vous montrer à quel point j'ai horreur des photographies, je peux vous raconter une anecdote." He recounts that after the death of his beloved father he experienced what he imagines to be a common phenomenon: he could no longer bear the sight of his father in photographs. "Ce n'était pas tant que ces photographies me parussent émouvantes, me troublassent exagérément, non: c'était parce que cela ne me paraissait correspondre à rien de réel." He seems here to catch these photographs in a lie. When the realism of photographic representation ceases to have any connection to the experience of a reality irreversibly altered by a death, the truth of the image collapses into illusion. There is no great insight in this grief response—"voilà qui est probablement fort commun"—but the development that follows takes a sharp turn out of the domain of the common. He continues:

> A ce propos, il me semble qu'il ne serait pas mal de continuer à photographier après la mort, de photographier le cadavre proprement dit, de photographier la suite. Ce n'est pas très drôle, il y a un mauvais moment, comme une sale maladie, le moment de la décomposition, mais après cela il y a un petit long moment, pendant lequel les vers se chargent de nettoyer tout très bien, et ensuite, cette image : quand les os sont dans la boîte, bien propres, bien nettoyés, bien rangés, il ne me semble pas que cela soit une image intolérable. Pour moi je la juge beaucoup plus rassurante pour l'esprit de celui qui la regarde, qu'une ancienne photographie. *Cela*, c'est vrai, et n'est pas intolérable.[132]

For Ponge, it would be far more reassuring to document his father's passage from corpse to skeleton, than to preserve some past moment of enfleshed appearance. More reassuring to submit this documentation to the time of bodily decomposition (following along this "petit long moment"), rather than to the circumscribed temporality of the photographic capture. Following Ponge's logic, the *truth* of his imagined snapshot derives from its correspondence to the real, but the failure of the old photograph on this score (corresponding to "rien de réel") seems to suggest that representational truth relies on a certain correspondence between the medium of representation and the object it represents. The survival of the image of the loved one, long after their physical demise, lends the photograph an imperishable quality that is radically distinct from

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[132] *OC* I, 656.

the fate of the organic matter (here, the human body, its face) whose appearance it captures. Only when the subject itself reaches a state of relative imperishability—everything but the bones cleared away by worms ("les agents du Chronos," Ponge calls them)—does the temporal resistance of the photographic image appear equipped for its representation. Put slightly differently, this imagined collection of bones offers itself as a photographic subject that allows the photograph to reflect back on *its own* properties and representational procedures, the conditions it imposes on all its subjects regardless of their particular qualities. Theorizations of the photograph have emphasized the temporal paradoxes that accompany such objects: the irreconcilable disjuncture between the there/then of photographic capture and the here/now of the image's viewing.[133] What Ponge's imagined photograph would achieve, then, is precisely the annulment of the photograph's temporal ambivalence. The photograph's pastness collapses into the state of things as they are and will continue to be. The careful staging of this photograph forces it into a paradoxical eternity where the suspension of time, as in the embalmed split-second of the snapshot, becomes indistinguishable from time pursuing its course.

What Ponge demands of the photograph in this example is a kind of medium specificity—insisting, very much in the spirit of Clement Greenberg's theorization of modernist painting, that the kinds of images produced photographically should be determined by those operations and effects most particular to photography as a medium.[134] In this instance, Ponge seems to want the photograph to keep to subject matter that presents an image of (what he sees as) the limitations of the photographic medium, much as Greenberg identified modernist painters by their foregrounding of the "limitations that constitute the medium of painting—the flat surface, the shape of the support, the properties of the pigment" at the expense of figurative content.[135] Of course, as we've been unfolding throughout this chapter, the principle of textual *fonctionnement* relies on a similar respect for medium specificity, for the separateness and particularity of the world of language and text relative to the world of things. But his prescription regarding the photographing of bones seems motivated by the assumption that it is the specific way instantaneous photography embalms things (and time) that constitutes the core of its medial logic. It is the photograph's immobilization of appearances and of the invisible clockwork of things that draws Ponge's critique, on the grounds that it represents in all but a few exceptional cases (like the one he hypothesizes) the antithesis and negation of *fonctionnement* as a representational principle. From this perspective, the desire for time's stoppage that permeates "La Mounine" assumes the fullness of its own idiosyncrasy within his *oeuvre*, as Ponge registers his task as the pursuit of precisely such an

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[133] Most notable, Roland Barthes, in his 1964 "Rhétorique de l'image," describes "une conjonction illogique entre l'*ici* et l'*autrefois*" (in *L'obvie et l'obtus* (Paris: Seuil, 1982), 34-5); critic Thierry de Duve re-examines and reshuffles these categories in his comparative study of photographic forms: "Time-Exposure and Snapshot: The Photograph as Paradox," *October* 5 (Summer 1978): 118.

[134] As art historian T.J. Clark observes, citing Greenberg's famed theorization of aesthetic modernism as a regime of medium specificity, that the business of art in this period is "the business of each art 'determin[ing], through the operations peculiar to itself, the effects peculiar and exclusive to itself.'" Clark, "Clement Greenberg's Theory of Art," *Critical Inquiry* 9, 1 (1982): 153. While Greenberg's observation and theorization of the tendency in modernist painting to direct attention towards the material qualities of the medium (e.g. the flatness of the canvas) and away from figural representation is hugely influential, his development of this observation into a call for medial purity and the demand that each medium eradicate those elements and methods that are not proper to *its* material basis quickly became controversial and inspired a backlash on the part of contemporary American artists, notably those associated with the Minimalist movement.

[135] Clement Greenberg, "Modernist Painting," in *The Collected Essays of Clement Greenberg,* vol. 4, *Modernism with a Vengeance, 1957-1969* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 86.

embalming: "De ce paysage, il faut que je fasse conserve, que je le mette dans l'eau de chaux (c'est-à-dire que je l'isole, non de l'air ici, mais *du temps*)."[136] So strong is Ponge's antiphotographic bias, however, that even as he recruits an array of visual art mediums in his descriptive endeavor, the one best suited to his premise (photography) is never mentioned.[137] The physical medium, the plastic *stuff* of expression, and the way it demands recognition and intervention on the part of the artist are too central to Ponge's conception of art for photography's automatism to retain any place within his technical imagination.

Beyond the stopping of time, however, there are other aspects of photographic operation that seem at home in Ponge's imaginary. The notion of image latency that becomes associated with photographic development—the photographic print that appears blank before the action of the chemicals in the *bain révélateur* allow the image to surface, as if drawn up from below—is an image-behavior that Ponge evokes rapturously in his treatment of lithographic image-making.[138] Most crucially, as Ponge is himself a practitioner of an art that relies, at the most concrete level, on copying technologies (typography, but also lithography), the copying function of the photographic process does not enter into his critique. Indeed, this issue is central to Ponge's conception of objective and textual worlds. In "La crevette" from *Le Parti pris des choses*, Ponge concludes his text with the following reflection on the ecstatic worldly abundance of his chosen object: "Qu'est-ce qui peut d'ailleurs ajouter plus d'intérêt à une forme, que la remarque de sa reproduction et dissémination par la nature à des millions d'exemplaires à la même heure partout, dans les eaux fraîches et copieuses du beau comme de mauvais temps?"[139] These copious waters harbor millions of copies of the shrimp-as-text (the shrimp-as-image). Etymologically, *copiare* derives from *copia*: to copy is to generate plenty through writing, to transcribe an original text over and over to make it plentiful. In Ponge's poetic universe, a *texte fonctionnant* is precisely a text that manages to copy into its own code (to make copiable, disseminable, plentiful within its own idiom) that differential quality which is the essence of what might distinguish a particular species of organism or object from its taxonomical neighbors. Here, again, we can see that the literality of Ponge's poetics emerges in those instances when a term surfaces that is *at once* and *to an equal degree* vividly salient to the functioning of the world-object and text-object at hand. To create a text is to create something copiable, to create something that is only ever singular in the sense of being one of a multitude; what Ponge seeks in his observation and textualization of objects is not that which makes an individual object unique but that which, in it, confirms that it is a copy. In this way, the materiality of Ponge's approach to image and text is indissociable from a reflection on technology, and is powered throughout by the sense that for Ponge poetry is a very particular technology, one for producing and setting in motion little one-off logical machines assembled to emulate the natural technologies active in the internal organization of organic and mineral things. As we will see as we turn to the work of Emmanuel Hocquard, the significance of the copying function implicit in the

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[136] Ponge, *OC* I, 413 (original emphasis). Bazin provides the most famous description of photographic embalming: "[…] la photographie ne crée pas, comme l'art, de l'éternité, elle embaume le temps, elle le soustrait seulement de sa propre corruption" ("Ontologie de l'image photographique," 14).

[137] In addition to numerous references to the fauvist painter Auguste Chabaud and to Paul Cézanne, many images draw on materials related to color work: "le miroir noir des peintres," "mine de plomb," "estompe" (a tool for smudging colors), and powder pigments.

[138] In his 1945 "Matière et mémoire," an essay written to accompany a series of lithographs by Jean Dubuffet, Ponge emphasizes the fact that in the lithographic process there is a moment, prior to printing, when the image inscribed on the stone's surface is erased and retained only as a memory (in Ponge's account) until the inking of the stone for printing reveals it again (see *OC* I, 121-123).

[139] *OC* I, 48.

technology of literature (as in the propagation of natural things) presents differently—not as an aid in the conception of a text-world relation, but as a production of sameness that marks the distinction of the space of the page (and of the photograph).

CHAPTER 2

Suddenly You See Something:
Copying and Invention in Emmanuel Hocquard's *Méditations photographiques…*

> *[…] on a beau dire ce qu'on voit, ce qu'on
> voit ne se loge jamais dans ce qu'on dit […]*
> Michel Foucault[140]

       "Toute la poésie, c'est cela. Soudain, on voit quelque chose."[141] This line, originally spoken in English by the American Objectivist poet Louis Zukofsky, is ubiquitous in the work of Emmanuel Hocquard. It appears more than once in epigraph to his publications, and is evoked or cited directly in countless texts, from the 1980s to the 2010s. A beloved refrain bordering on *idée fixe*, this phrase holds an enduring attraction for Hocquard. Suddenly you see something. The openness of Zukofsky's statement captivates, spurs questions: what is it that you see? something about the world? something about language and its possibilities? or about the possibilities of poetry itself? The *what* is given as an indefinite something (in the interview from which this phrase is lifted, Zukofsky does not elaborate what he has in mind), the *who* is an impersonal you, no information is given about the *where* of this seeing, but there can be no mistaking the *how*: suddenly. And this whole indeterminate scene, that's poetry. All poetry. That's writing it, and reading it, and that's why people have carried on with it and carry on with it still. Or perhaps he means that the only thing that matters and has ever mattered in poetry is this sudden sight it affords—this as the site of poetry's difference relative to other linguistic endeavors. The implication being that without poetry we might see less; that there are some things that can only be seen suddenly, that can only be caught by surprise; and that without poetry, we would only see what we already knew was there and this might not count as seeing at all. The suddenness of "Soudain on voit quelque chose" means seeing something unexpected or for the first time—newness that can only emerge as a surprise or a rupture—, something never before seen that becomes visible through, or alongside, or by means of the poetic act.
       Leaving aside what this phrase might have meant for Zukofsky, if Hocquard cites it with such frequency it's because it means something for him. Moreover, this association of poetry with sudden sight is precisely what we have just observed Francis Ponge wrestling with in "La Mounine," a text that stages a face-off between perception and composition that plays out quite explicitly upon the terrain of the poetic image. The parade of images we encounter in that text, as it works to capture and preserve something of this sudden sight, ends up manifesting a recognition of the poetic image as a mask or obstruction, rather than as an agent of revelation, whose significance derives less from what it gives us to imagine than from the way its shuttling brings to life a non-representational logical structure. Ponge's central revelation in that text comes in the

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[140] *Les mots et les choses* (Paris: Gallimard, 1966), 25.
[141] In the original: "All poetry is that. Suddenly you see something" (L.S. Dembo and Louis Zukofsky (interview), "Louis Zukofsky" *Contemporary Literature* 10, 2 (1969): 212).

vivid literality of the term "clarté," and affirms the eradication of images as a precondition for grasping the lessons of the external world. In a project organized around the unbridgeable separateness of the worlds of things and of text, the literal image for Ponge is the one that best conjures the possibility not of passage but of (asymptotic) contact between them. For Hocquard, as we will see, literality is a way of describing language withdrawn from even this hypothetical connection with the extralingual world, and the phenomenon of sudden sight that so fascinates him is not remotely phenomenological. This chapter sets out to consider what this sudden sight might look like for Hocquard, how it relates to his thinking on literary innovation, and how the particular nature of his interest in photography can help us think about its operations. Measuring Hocquard's sudden sight against the spark of the surrealist image (which Ponge's thinking of the image also contests) and measuring photographic copying against other technologies of reproduction, the pages that follow will bring into focus how suddenness and surprise manifest within a poetics of literality that takes repetition—word-for-word copying—as its founding principle.

Seeing in the dark room

Hocquard's 2009 book, *Méditations photographiques sur l'idée simple de nudité*, takes up and pursues this interest in sudden, unpredictable sight that Zukofsky claims for poetry, with the help of a photographic support—instrument *par excellence* of instantaneous visibilities. This book explores the relationship between language and sight—and between sight and thought, sight and reading—through a sustained encounter with nude photographs at various stages of processing. Hocquard identifies in nudity a paradoxical entity: an ontologically unstable visible phenomenon, a word that is difficult to define and that fits uneasily into French grammar, a simple idea crowded—made complex—by extraneous moral and aesthetic associations. He identifies in photography, and specifically in the analog processing of photographic images, an opportunity to see nudity differently, the possibility of catching a glimpse of something through the development bath (*le bain révélateur*) that might give up some clue regarding nudity's nature, some clarification of its idea. In this way, photography serves not as a tool for capturing a perceptual event, but for engendering a new (deferred) one. The photos in question are not included, nor even really described, in the text, but it is Hocquard who took them. He develops them at home, watching as the images emerge in the bath, as his photographic subjects take form, all the while scrawling notes on bits of paper as he tries to get a handle on this thing—nudity—which eludes him equally in photography, language and thought. The book that emerges from these encounters is composed of seventy-six numbered fragments selected from those darkroom notes, short irregular texts written in a propositional style often reminiscent of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (a text of tremendous importance for Hocquard), each one a response to the implicit imperative: say what can be said about nudity, as accurately and as narrowly as possible, based on what you see—what comes to light in the revealing bath.

The difficulty of this task, and the motivation for the notational undertaking that this book records, rests in the author's suspicion that, at a very basic level, we don't know what nudity is, that our *idea* of nudity is confused and overloaded with meanings that are not proper to it. The first fragment of the volume introduces an initial, fundamental, distinction: "Nudité et absence de vêtements sont deux choses."[142] The distinction drawn here, between nakedness (the fact of being unclothed) and nudity (something else?), is difficult to render in the French language, where these states are joined within a single adjective (*nu(e)*) and a single noun (*la nudité*). Moreover, the meaning that we would translate as nakedness—"état d'une personne qui est entièrement nue [qui n'est pas

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[142] Méditations photographiques sur l'idée simple de nudité (Paris: P.O.L, 2009), 11. Hereafter MP.

vêtue]"—is the very first acceptation of "nudité" given in the *Trésor de la Langue Française.* Hocquard's precision, then, intervenes to correct this definition, evicting "nakedness" from "nudité," on the grounds that they are simply two different things that have been heretofore mistaken as consubstantial. This distinction clearly does not solve the question of what nudity is, it merely narrows that question's formulation: if nudity is *not* nakedness, what is it? As we move through the text, we see Hocquard working to strip nudity of extraneous associations, particularly those that would seem most intuitive to his readers. Regarding the traditional aesthetic distinction that holds nakedness to be a material fact whereas nudity requires an aestheticizing gaze and/or cultural representation, Hocquard asserts an inversion: "On peut représenter un corps nu. Mais la nudité n'est pas représentable."[143] The first of these can be taken as an object, the second cannot. On the question of touch: "On peut toucher la peau ou le papier. [Mais] la nudité est impalpable"; on the question of form: "la nudité est amorphe," "la nudité n'a qu'une seule face," "la nudité est détachée du corps qui la révèle"; on the question of personal attribution: "[la nudité] n'appartient pas à," "[…] elle ne s'attribue à aucun sujet."[144]

Hocquard's interventions move imperceptibly between considerations of the word *nudité,* its semantic falsities, its syntactic and morphological rigidities, and considerations of the idea of nudity, what we think and what can be thought in association with the word. Take for instance the following fragment:

XXV

Parce qu'elle n'est pas définissable, la nudité n'a pas de sens. Sa répétition tient lieu de définition. Même nudité : nudité même, où *autre* prend le sens de *même.*[145]

The question of definition that this meditation raises bears explicitly on *nudité* as a word, a word which cannot be defined and therefore cannot be said to "have" any meaning. *Nudité* emerges here in its fundamental paradox, as a substantive which names something that is neither fully abstract nor fully concrete, unstable in its visibility but visible is all it is. What it names is itself so indefinite as to foreclose any affirmed definition for the word that names it. From this reflection on the word, the last sentence of this fragment moves us through naming into idea. Nudity, the word, can only be repeated, not defined. And so, every time I see nudity and say nudity—every time I recognize nudity through the conceptual framework I have for it—, that too is an instance of repetition. An*other* nudity is the same nudity (*même nudité*), it is nudity itself (*nudité même*). Here, the logic that is at work in the word carries over to designation, and that is where our notion of nudity narrows.

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[143] *MP,* 49. The most influential art historical theorizations of the nude (in the European tradition) all rely to some extent on this distinction. See, for instance, Kenneth Clark, *The Nude: A Study in Ideal Form* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1956); John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (London, UK: BBC, 1972); Lynda Nead, *The Female Nude: Art, Obscenity and Sexuality* (London/New York: Routledge, 1992). By inverting the value of representability, Hocquard clarifies that he is approaching "nudité" in its capacity, first of all, as a fact of language, as a word that does not fit comfortably into the conventional subject-object relations implicit in the representational act (while also suggesting that the classic alliance of nudity with representation can only hold if one disregards the curious intractability of the word itself).

[144] Respectively: *MP,* 52, 58, 50, 63, 18, and 24.

[145] Ibid., 35. Original emphasis.

Nudity is not as numerous as its perceived instances, there is not a different nudity for each of the world's human bodies. It is the same thing, every time it appears. This fragment, number XXV, is appended with a *scolie*—a kind of footnote—which expresses this idea another way:

> Scolie. *De deux briquets identiques posés sur une table, on peut dire que l'un est le même que l'autre. Pourtant, ce n'est pas le même briquet. Corps distincts, même nudité. « Deux est corrigé. »*

This pedagogically inflected illustration centers, crucially, on the question of identity, in the sense of identicalness. The two cigarette lighters are identical (could have been produced in the same factory, using the same molds, with the same production specs). They are the same, alike in every way, but they are not the same lighter. The lesson this illustration brings to our thinking about nudity, however elliptical, serves to draw a distinction around this idea of identity. "Corps distincts, même nudité. « Deux est corrigé. »" Nudity is identical to itself in the strong sense of identity: fully self-same, one thing in its relation to itself, not two things that we call "identical" (*deux est corrigé*). To be self-same is different than to be perfectly the same as something else. Nudity does not represent a set of qualities that can be possessed, equally, identically, by two people ("Elle n'appartient pas à").

This relationship of a thing (or word, or idea) to itself, a relationship that need not be brokered by comparisons and cannot be written as an equation, is what Hocquard would call (with Wittgenstein) a *simple* relation.[146] In notation, this simple relation could not be written "A = A" (statement of equivalence), but rather it would be rendered as "A *is* A" (statement of identity). A relation so simple that it needn't even be posited, a relation as close as possible to no relation at all. The title of this work, *Méditations photographiques sur l'idée simple de nudité*, gives the simple idea of nudity as its object. It should already be clear, from my preliminary remarks on this notion of simplicity, that "simple"—like "nudité"—is a word with which we enjoy far less traction than we might have initially thought. Nudity and simplicity are, however, intricately intertwined in the work of this book. To think nudity simply, to approach this simple idea of nudity—an idea purged of all *other* ideas, held in relation to only itself (*nudité même*)—we must understand something about simplicity and its relation to poetry, photography, and the potential for sudden sight. For a native French speaker, however, these elements are already fused, their relation already apparent as a matter of course: a relation prepared, or perhaps foreseen, by the commonplace phrase *le plus simple appareil*. This euphemism for nudity (as common as "birthday suit" in the Anglophone context) is called up automatically by the juxtapositions that the title presents.[147] The simplest of outfits, which is to say no outfit at all. This winking relation between superlative simplicity and outright negation is essential to Hocquard's thinking on simplicity, and it is already there in one of his language's well-worn clichés. We will return to this cliché later in the chapter, but the proximity between simplicity and negation that it presents orients us within Hocquard's thinking of simplicity in language more broadly.

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[146] Wittgenstein's thinking about simple objects and simple utterances in the *Tractatus* as well as in his *Philosophical Investigations* is the formative reference for Hocquard's use of the notion of simplicity.

[147] With the introduction of a photographic element to the meeting of simplicity and nudity in the title, the word "appareil" rings as camera (*appareil-photo*), yielding a near overload of punny, overdetermined significance. The cliché itself only appears once in the text, in a reference to the book *Le plus simple appareil* by contemporary poet Anne Portugal, cited in a *scolie* (*MP 72*).

A simple utterance, in Hocquard's understanding, "pourrait se définir comme une unité de langage qui, prise isolément, ne dirait qu'une seule chose: ce qu'elle dit, et pas autre chose."[148] If an utterance, taken out of context, is to say only what it says, this is different than saying what it *means* for the simple reason that the stability of meaning is always context-dependent. For the meaning of an utterance to stabilize outside of a given context, for there to *be* meaning—one meaning—a relation would need to be established (guaranteed) between each word and a single of its possible significations. Instead, for an utterance to say what it *says* and nothing else, it must say its words and stop right there. As noted above, a simple relation links same to same—*dire ce qu'elle dit*—such that the simplest of relations is effectively no relation at all. And indeed, in this citation, the simple relation is formulated through an exceptive negation—*ne dirait qu'une chose*—a near complete negation, the ruling out of all but one thing, and that one thing is a simple restatement: *ce qu'elle dit*. Nothing but itself. This is the premise underlying nudity's simplest outfit. If *le plus simple appareil* means nudity, this would imply that it is nudity that wears it—that nudity's simplest outfit is nothing other than nudity, nothing but itself. Simplicity in language—and in thought—signals a hyperbolic minimum of relations, where the "ne…que" rules out everything but the self-same relation. Hocquard is quick to clarify, though: a simple utterance, which would say only what it says outside of any context, "cela peut se concevoir, mais ça n'existe pas." A simplicity of relations that is conceivable but foreign to real (existing, possible) language. If there's no such thing as a simple utterance, not really, then what words would one use—how would one write, what would language become—when faced with a simple idea?

It is in the photographic premise of *Méditations photographiques sur l'idée simple de nudité* that we must consider the kind of writing this work deploys in its pursuit of nudity's simple idea.[149] If these meditations are photographic, it is not because they take a photograph as their object: the photographs themselves hardly make their presence felt, they do not serve as ekphrastic supports, there is no attempt to represent them. Rather, it is the notational operation employed here that takes something from the process of photographic capture and development. Concretely, Hocquard's meditations are inscribed within the time of photographic processing: the discontinuous and limited time of looking-on as his images are revealed in the *bain révélateur*, then fixed, rinsed, and hung to dry.[150] Each of these fragments is an attempt to capture something of what those images reveal or suggest about the qualities and conceptual contours of nudity, some little burst of clarity, some momentary illumination. "Suddenly you see something." The distinctiveness of this moment, its circumscription, is expressed in the editing and formatting of the fragments. Consider, for example:

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[148] "Qu'est-ce qu'un énoncé simple ?" in *Les Babouches vertes* (Marseille: CIPM, 2009). Hereafter *BV*. This volume is not paginated. Reference will be made, as here, to the title of the section from which the citation is excerpted.

[149] And it is here as well that a consideration of this work's most obvious intertext is warranted. The "méditations photographiques" of the title can't help but recall Lamartine's *Méditations poétiques*, a foundational work of the French lyric tradition (we might think as well of Descartes *Méditations métaphysiques*). In Lamartine's title, the adjective "poétiques" describes both the form of the collected texts and the disposition/orientation of the meditator. In Hocquard's title, however, the modifier "photographiques" is most accurately thought as describing the operation by which the texts are produced, an operation that it registers as technical.

[150] For detailed information about the procedures involved in the processing of photochemical images, see Robert Hirsch, *Photographic Possibilities* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2017).

XXXVI

la nudité excède le corps

Scolie. *Quand la photographie est floue, les contours du corps perdent en définition mais la nudité, qui n'est pas contenue, gagne en expansion.*[151]

Here, and throughout the volume, the main fragment retains an instantaneous quality that registers not only through its concise propositional aspect but also through the inconsistency of capitalization and punctuation that we can see preserved in the above text. This fragment, like fragment XXV discussed above, is appended with a "scolie." These footnotes, which appear below roughly two-thirds of the volume's fragments, are set off from the main text in italics, and represent a second moment of meditation, a later moment of processing, this time not a meditation on the developing photographs in the darkroom but a meditation on that initial fragment. In an interview on the occasion of this volume's release, Hocquard explains that in French there is a distinction between "une scolie"—meaning "gloss" or "explanatory commentary" as one might see in the margins of a philosophical or ecclesiastical tract (à la Spinoza)—and "un scolie," in the masculine, which signals the addition of a parallel line of thinking, a complementary development to an idea examined in the main text. Hocquard explains this distinction and clarifies that his *scolies* are masculine (although the grammatical gender of this term is never marked in the text itself).[152] Since these notes do not intervene in the text they supplement—they do not serve to prolong that first moment—but rather represent a second time of meditation, distinct but complementary to the first, they too function to shore up the instantaneous quality of the main fragment's initial capture.[153] While the *scolies* vary widely in terms of the kind of supplement they offer, they generally do the work of bringing grammatical or logical specificity to the implications of the main fragment's insight, and often address, implicitly or explicitly, the relationship between structures of language and structures of thought—the sayable and the conceivable.

Fragment XXXVI, cited above, illustrates clearly the relationship between photography and thought in this project. There, we can see that the encounter with the developing photograph presents a support to Hocquard's *thinking*—an occasion for insight to pass into language, making possible the secondary occasion for clarifying what that insight makes visible, not in any given photograph but in the idea of nudity. The initial meditation above yields a phrase, "la nudité excède le corps," which reads as a general proposition or rule about nudity itself. Adding to propositional insights already mentioned, if nudity is distinct from any given body, there is no reason to think that nudity should be contained by, or restricted to, bodily form. The body captured in the photograph, as it passes from amorphous light into formal distinction from within its chemical bath, reveals this idea to the mind exposed to it—and it is this idea that the meditation pursues. For the reader, the *scolie* brings this proposition "la nudité excède le corps" back into an explicitly photographic context, reformulating its idea in terms of the photograph—in terms of what can be

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[151] *MP,* 47.
[152] The interview, done with his editor, is available on the publisher P.O.L.'s site: www.pol-editeur.com/index.php?spec=livre&ISBN=978-2-84682-445-3.
[153] *MP* also attests rare editorial interventions, the insertion of words and references into the main fragments after the fact—but these are always placed in brackets, formal markers which again serve to shore up the instantaneous quality of those initial meditations.

glimpsed when the photograph is blurry. Here too, however, it is a general statement that emerges (never *this* photograph, always *the* photograph as a category noun), one that helps us think about, or investigate for ourselves, the photographic premise of the main fragment.[154] The meditation presented in this *scolie*, despite its relevance to the photograph, is not photographic in the same way the initial meditation is. In general, the *scolies* give us the tools to modify our thinking about nudity explicitly, so we can see more clearly what the main fragments reveal. They serve, above all, to bring the instantaneous, photographic quality of the darkroom meditations into relief—a slanted shadow of italics to make the luminous immediacy of those exposures that much brighter.

<div align="center">XXII</div>

> la nudité est surprise. La photographie
> surprend un corps […] lavé par la
> nudité.[155]

The "photographic meditation" brings together in its two terms an action of the mind associated with long contemplation with an operation of instantaneous capture. Where the word meditation already implies a collapse of thought and writing (meditation as a textual genre (poetic, philosophical) as well as a kind of thinking), the adjective photographic brings immediacy to this collapse. It is the immediacy of the photograph that allows it to capture (surprise) nudity which is itself described as qualitatively "instantanée" and "immédiate."[156] If nudity can only be *surprised* by the photograph, in the French sense of caught off guard (or walked in on, in the nude), then these texts must seek to produce a similar surprise. This is the premise that structures *Méditations photographiques sur l'idée simple de nudité.* As I've tried to show in my comments on simplicity, however, this pursuit of non-mediation which would give us nudity solely in relation to itself, is haunted by a range of questions: can thought collapse fully into writing? if I can conceive of nudity in its simplicity, can that conception pass into language? And most of all: can language surprise in the way a camera surprises? What is it, in a language that is by definition conventional, that could allow for such a surprise?

Poetic insight and the photograph

This chapter centers on the question of how photography helps Hocquard think about surprise (sudden sight—a certain kind of novelty) in language. This question, which delivers the basic premise of *Méditations photographiques sur l'idée simple de nudité*, situates Hocquard within a long history of thinking about, through, or with analog photography in French poetry. In this context, there is no more major exemplar than surrealism. In his 1921 essay "Max Ernst," written as a preface to the catalog of an exhibition of the artist's collages, André Breton famously describes surrealist automatic writing as "une véritable photographie de la pensée."[157] Even if this figure for automatism is one of many in Breton's writings, this formulation is instructive. Breton invokes

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[154] This preference for the category noun recalls Francis Ponge's similar preference. In both cases, it is the contingency of the singular object that the poet moves to overcome, and while each poet would articulate the purpose of this slightly differently both are pursuing a clarification of thought with regard to their chosen object (be it concrete or a simple idea).

[155] Ibid*.,* 32.

[156] Ibid*.,* 16, 43. We can imagine that in the context of this text's work, "immédiat" is understood in an almost processual fashion as that which is alien to thought, understanding, and representation.

[157] Breton, *Les pas perdus* (Paris: Idées *NRF*, 1970), 101. Hereafter *PP*.

photography here as a way of shoring up the most important procedural feature of automatic writing: its impersonal, mechanical recording of thought. Automatic writing, we are told, takes direct dictation from the unconscious. The hand, moving as a result of something other than voluntary gross motor control, operates as if independent of rational intention in the recording of "le fonctionnement réel de la pensée": the work of the mind captured prior to rational mediation, before the bourgeois subject chooses how to express it.[158] Photography emerges as a useful figure for relating the essence of automatic writing because the camera itself is a machine of un-mediated record (in which light speaks as light). Breton goes on, in his text on Ernst, to refer to the camera as "un instrument aveugle." Light-sensitive, and not just *borgne* but blind. An instrument which produces visibility, which generates precise images of the real, but which cannot itself see—where "sight" would designate a psychologized understanding of human vision. A blind instrument that sees more clearly, and in greater detail, than any human eye.[159] The operation of automatic writing would then emerge as similarly blind (deaf, dumb) in its direct, non-rationalizing, recording of subjectless thought. The full sentence from which the photographic analogy is gleaned, however, makes a broader claim about the relationship between photography and automatism. "L'invention de la photographie a porté un coup mortel aux vieux modes d'expression, tant en peinture qu'en poésie où l'écriture automatique apparue à la fin du XIXe siècle est une véritable photographie de la pensée." Not only does automatism function in analogy to photographic technology, it emerges in some sense as a *result* of the invention of photography, becomes possible only in its wake, and stands as the positive manifestation of its influence in the literary field. The fatal blow photography deals to old modes of expression lands most heavily on the activity and centrality of the expressive subject,[160] which it renders obsolete in the reproduction of appearances and whose obsolescence in the domain of literature the advent of photography makes ponderable. If Breton likens his literary automatism to photography, it is because it was precisely the automatic, impersonal aspect of photography—its non-reliance on an expressive subject—that was so revolutionary, so radically different from the "vieux modes d'expression."

In the 1924 Manifesto, Breton turns to the figure of dictation in his definition of surrealism: "Dictée de la pensée."[161] In an important distinction, the figure "photography of thought" from

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[158] The 1924 *Manifeste du surréalisme* defines surrealism as automatism: "Automatisme psychique pur par lequel on se propose d'exprimer, soit verbalement, soit par écrit, soit de toute autre manière, le fonctionnement réel de la pensée. Dictée de la pensée, en l'absence de tout contrôle exercé par la raison, en dehors de toute préoccupation esthétique ou morale." *Manifestes du surréalisme* (Paris: Gallimard, Collection idées, 1970), 37. Hereafter *MS*. The procedures of surrealist automatism are devised explicitly to disrupt the consolidation of a coherent speaking subject, and it is in this that surrealist poetry carries an implicit critique of lyric convention (as well as of the ideological privileging of aesthetic forms).

[159] In her essay "The Photographic Conditions of Surrealism," Rosalind Krauss paraphrases the obsession in the 1920s and 30s with what the artist László Moholy-Nagy called the New Vision: "Camera-seeing is thus an extraordinary extension of normal vision, one that supplements the deficiencies of the naked eye. The camera covers and arms this nakedness, it acts as a kind of prosthesis, enlarging the capacity of the human body" (in *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1986), 116).

[160] We recall here André Bazin's assertion, cited in the previous chapter, of photography's particularity among the arts: "[t]ous les arts sont fondés sur la présence de l'homme; dans la seule photographie, nous jouissons de son absence" ("Ontologie de l'image photographique," 13).

[161] This figure is quite literal in fact, since automatic writing often took the form of one person (Robert Desnos, most famously) free-associating while another member of the group wrote down what was said. To call this a dictation of thought registers this practice as fundamentally scriptural, despite the earlier appeal of the optical metaphor supplied by photography.

the Max Ernst essay places its emphasis on the explicit relationship to image (thought *as* image) and its impersonal documentation. The image is indeed the cornerstone of surrealist poetics. Characterized by heteroclite word pairings—Eluard's "bleue comme une orange" stands as a canonical example[162]—, the surrealist image is structured around the idea that language can be used, the elements of our language deployed, to produce an image for which we have no pre-existing concept. We can imagine a blue orange, but we don't recognize it as a thing that exists. Distinct from metaphor, which is a technique of description in which meanings are intentionally exchanged, the surrealist image and its visionary power are founded in the *unintentional* bringing together of disparate elements. Indeed, it is precisely with respect to this question of intention that Breton tweaks Pierre Reverdy's definition of the poetic image, in the 1924 Manifesto, to express the specificity of the surrealist image. Reverdy had written, in 1918, that "[l]'image est une création pure de l'esprit. / Elle ne peut naître d'une comparaison mais du rapprochement de deux réalités plus ou moins éloignées. / Plus les rapports des deux réalités rapprochées seront lointains et justes, plus l'image sera forte—plus elle aura de puissance émotive et de réalité poétique."[163] In Reverdy's estimation, the strength of the image derives from the remoteness of the two terms it brings together. Breton retains this idea, but makes a precision around the word "rapprochement." For Breton, "il ne semble pas possible de rapprocher volontairement ce qu'il [Reverdy] appelle 'deux réalités distantes'. Le rapprochement se fait ou ne se fait pas, voilà tout."[164] It is not through any voluntary, intentional juxtaposition that this particular "rapprochement" occurs—the bringing together must happen by chance. The distinction that the *rapprochement* happens or doesn't happen is important because it differentiates *rapprochement* (dynamic, reactive) from the simple fact of juxtaposition (static, inert). In the Max Ernst essay, Breton emphasizes that this attention to *rapprochement* reflects a judgment that it is only there—in the fortuitous and unintended meeting of two unrelated elements—that something like novelty (sudden sight) is achieved. Distinguishing surrealism from other avant-garde efforts,[165] he rules "stérile" the tendency towards reinventing conventional images of objects (such as they appear in catalogue snapshots) or the conventional meaning of a word ("comme s'il nous appartenait de le rajeunir"[166]), and posits that, if one accepts that words and objects are just as they are, then it becomes their pairing, their distribution, the relations between them that count. It is here, in the interstice of each *rapprochement*, in the semantic and conceptual distance it contracts, that something new can be glimpsed.

The surrealist image is associated with a kind of seeing that is not a seeing-to-recognize (seeing only what is recognizable) but a seeing cut loose from conceptual recognition, where the workings of the unconscious mind are brought into visibility (brought to light). Returning to the *Manifeste*, Breton remarks, in reference to the operation of the image in a few verses cited from Reverdy: "C'est du rapprochement en quelque sorte fortuit des deux termes qu'a jailli une lumière particulière, *lumière de l'image*, à laquelle nous nous montrons infiniment sensibles."[167] It is this light of the image, which Breton also calls a spark ("une étincelle"[168]), a kind of instantaneous *jaillissement de lumière*, that is recorded (as an exposure) in automatism's operation as a photography of thought. This photography does not serve to show us any known object more clearly, it doesn't work to elucidate our actual perceptions of the world as a certain thinking of photographic "New Vision"

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[162] Paul Eluard, *Capitale de la douleur* (Paris: Gallimard, 2008), 153.

[163] Cited in Breton (*MS,* 31).

[164] Ibid*.,* 50.

[165] Breton takes aim at Symbolist poetry and Cubist painting, explicitly.

[166] *PP,* 101.

[167] *MS,* 51. Original emphasis.

[168] *ME,* 86.

would have it. Rather, it serves to bring into our conception of reality—of documentable reality—a new field of possible visibilities. To record, photographically, the unconscious associative activity of the mind—its spontaneous production of surrealist images—is to stretch our understanding of where reality begins and ends[169]; it is to assert this "real functioning of thought" as available to a certain kind of objective, empirical record—a domain of visibilities that is revealed (developed, negative to positive) through photographic automatism.

Literality and the image

The status of the image in the poetics of Emmanuel Hocquard could not be more distinct from that of the surrealist image. The surrealists viewed poetry as a domain of activity entirely oriented towards the production of images. For his part, Hocquard aligns himself with a community of contemporary poets "[qui] ne sont ni des collectionneurs d'images rares ni des chasseurs de métaphores," and he likes to describe his own poetry as "sans accent poétique, aussi sèche qu'une biscotte sans beurre."[170] The sudden sight that Hocquard is after is a function, for him and many of his poetic cohort, of a certain thinking of literality—texts that say only what they say and nothing more—which situates his preoccupations very far indeed from any concern for the structure of poetic images. The favorite phrase from his friend Claude Royet-Journoud, cited at the opening of this dissertation, puts it tidily enough: "Remplacer l'image par le *mot* image."[171] We observed in the opening pages of this dissertation that the literalist rejection of the poetic image is elaborated in the 1970s and 80s in part out of a desire to get out from under the persistent influence of surrealism and the surrealist image within French poetry. As we are already seeing, literalist poets find a way to capture photography (a technology which would look quite different to a poet writing in the 1920s versus the 1980s (or 2000s)) as a tool in service of their neutralization (literalization) of poetic images and, thus, instrumental in their critique of the surrealist image in particular. Francis Ponge, for his part, is not moved to dissociate photography from surrealist poetics and instead crafts a critique of the surrealist image that is at once a critique of the photographic image.

To speak of a poetics of literality is to speak of a poetic methodology that takes text as text, that approaches language as a two-dimensional phenomenon, and that pursues a thinking of the poetic act that is structured around copying and repetition. Literality means taking language *à la lettre*, which for Hocquard does not mean reading for a certain kind of "literal" meaning—first-order denotation—that would be contrasted with the "figurative," nor does it borrow from Ponge's project of seeking out those sites where world and language seem to spontaneously coincide. Hocquard's literality is located exclusively in the repetition of language, taken by the letter, like a printer setting type pieces in his composing stick, copying out word for word some already given bit of language. Hocquard explains, in his 2009 text *Les Babouches vertes*, "si on parle de littéralité,

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[169] Breton's surrealism works to elevate the threshold states of dreaming and trance above conscious, rational perception (as a "réalité supérieure" (*MS,* 37)), and posits "la surréalité" as the eventual resolution of these two states into "une sorte de réalité absolue" that would eliminate the threshold between them (*MS,* 23-24). Critic Laurent Jenny has further noted the usefulness of photography as a technical model that allows surrealists to ground and visualize their transformation of the external world into "un vaste paysage psychique où s'effon[d] la distinction entre intériorité et extériorité" through the indexicality of the photographic image (*La fin de l'intériorité* (Paris: PUF, 2002), 14).

[170] "Bibliothèque de Trieste," in *ma haie* (Paris: P.O.L., 2001), 25-26. Hereafter *MH*.

[171] Claude Royet-Journoud, *La poésie entière est préposition* (Marseille: Éric Pesty Éditeur, 2007), 11. Hocquard cites this line often. See, for instance, the entry for "Pli" in the glossary that Hocquard wrote as a preface to the anthology *Tout le monde se ressemble* (Paris: P.O.L., 1995), 29.

celle-ci ne peut porter que sur des propositions déjà formulées, oralement ou par écrit," and goes on to demonstrate for us what this looks like.

> Olivier dit à Emmanuel: 'Les babouches de Marie sont vertes.' Emmanuel, qui n'a pas bien saisi ce qu'a dit Olivier ou qui s'en étonne parce qu'il a vu que les babouches de Marie sont rouges, demande à Olivier de répéter ce qu'il a dit. Olivier redit: 'Les babouches de Marie sont vertes.' Nous sommes ici devant un type très particulier de représentation. Non pas la représentation d'une observation portant sur la couleur, réelle ou non, des babouches de Marie, mais bien la re-présentation de l'énoncé lui-même.[172]

To repeat an utterance is to sever it from any referential pretense it may have had in its original occurrence, and to take the utterance itself as the sole referent of its repetition. The question of representation is explicitly nullified, here, in the repetition of the phrase "Les babouches de Marie sont vertes." The accuracy of its representation of these real slippers ceases to matter and gives way entirely to the accuracy of its repetition: saying what it said.

We can see that this conception of literality resembles closely the notion of simplicity that we explored in the context of *Méditations photographiques sur l'idée simple de nudité.* These ideas are intricately linked, and indeed in a world where a simple utterance—which says only what it says— "peut se concevoir, mais […] n'existe pas," Hocquard offers literality, repetition, the re-presentation of utterances as such, as a way of achieving a kind of simplicity within the bounds of real language use. "[L]a répétition [d'un énoncé] *re-présente* l'énoncé lui-même. La répétition littérale en *fait* (performatif) un énoncé simple, qui n'a de compte à rendre à aucune autre réalité que lui-même."[173] If the utterance, now repeated, ceases to broker any representational relationship to its referents, then any fathomable relationship of word to *image* (we can think perhaps of Saussure's rendering of a sign's signified, its concept, as a picture: a drawing of a tree for the Latin *arbor*[174]) flattens out entirely. The text becomes nothing other than text. Clarifying the quality of this act of repetition, the critic Dominique Rabaté has described Hocquardian literality as an operation that "consiste justement en une répétition des énoncés; cette répétition passe par la retranscription mot à mot, par la copie plutôt que par une stricte ré-énonciation."[175] The emphasis Rabaté places on the copy—as opposed to a vocal restatement—is crucial because it implicitly centers a technological element. We can recognize in this very premise an embrace of the logic of mechanical reproduction, and an approach to the activity of writing that takes as its mandate to identify and integrate what happens when an utterance suffers—or enjoys—what we might term a loss of aura (comparable to the fate of unique works of art in the age of their mechanical reproduction).

Hocquard got his start in the world of contemporary poetry, oddly enough, as a publisher— and really as an amateur printer. Speaking in an interview in 1995, he explains that he and his friend, the artist Raquel, founded the publishing enterprise Orange Export Ltd. (1969-1985), "parce que nous en avions besoin, à ce moment-là. Raquel, pour confronter sa peinture au langage dans

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[172] *BV,* "La littéralité." A version of this development first appears in Hocquard's contribution to the 1995 *Revue de littérature générale* ("Ma vie privée," *RLG* 1 (1995): 223-235), and is reworked again in the opening text of his *Conditions de lumière* (Paris: P.O.L., 2007).

[173] *BV,* "Qu'est-ce qu'un énoncé simple ?" Original emphasis.

[174] Ferdinand de Saussure, *Cours de linguistique générale* (Paris: Payot, 1972), 99.

[175] Dominique Rabaté, "'Chercher la sortie': Réflexions à partir d'Emmanuel Hocquard," in *Présences du sujet dans la poésie française contemporaine (1980-2008)*, ed. Elisa Bricco (Saint-Étienne: Publications de l'Université de Saint-Étienne, 2012), 126.

l'espace et le volume du livre. Moi, pour apprendre à lire en m'occupant les mains."[176] With little knowledge or experience of contemporary poetry, Hocquard took on the work of setting the type for minuscule *tirages* of works by poets like Anne-Marie Albiach, Joseph Guglielmi, Jean Daive, Alain Veinstein, Claude Royet-Journoud and others. He describes, in the same interview:

> je composais à la main, caractère par caractère, puis j'imprimais à la main, puis je pliais à la main, etc. C'était long, mais ça me donnait le temps d'entrer *à la main* dans ces écritures qui résistaient à mes habitudes de lecture. J'étais content parce que je découvrais des chemins de pensée et d'expression dont je n'avais pas soupçonné l'existence jusque-là. Et j'étais content parce que ce travail conjugué d'imprimerie et de lecture exigeait beaucoup de précision dans la tête et dans les doigts. […] Bref, Orange Export Ltd. a essentiellement été mon école de la modernité.[177]

Hocquard's apprenticeship as a reader of contemporary poetry unfolded as he copied these works out, backwards and upside-down, in his composing stick, learning as he went what blank space means to a printer, how words can be made to scatter sparsely on a page, a scattering that shows its precision to the typesetter who must reproduce it. Decisive for the subsequent theorization of his own poetics of literality, this period of apprenticeship is highlighted in the above citation as a time of discovery, of identifying pathways of thought and expression that became visible to him through this attentive work of copying. And here, we can start to see how the sudden sight claimed for poetry in Zukofsky's phrase unhooks, for Hocquard, from the poetic image.

Technologies of literality

In his seminal work *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*, the anthropologist Gregory Bateson presents a series of "metalogues,"[178] transcribed conversations between him and his 8-year-old daughter, Mary Catherine Bateson (who would become an accomplished anthropologist herself), in which the two of them puzzle through complex theoretical problems. In one of these conversations, the question of the cliché arises as Bateson (father) explains that it will be easier for them to clarify their ideas, or come up with new ones, if they allow themselves to speak in unconventional ways sometimes:

> F[ather]: […] if we both spoke logically all the time, we would never get anywhere. We would only parrot all the old clichés that everybody has repeated for hundreds of years.
> D[aughter]: What is a cliché, Daddy?
> F: A cliché? It's a French word, and I think it was originally a printer's word. When they print a sentence they have to take the separate letters and put them one by one into a sort of grooved stick to spell out the sentence. But for words and

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[176] "Entretien avec Stéphane Baquey," *MH,* 274.

[177] *MH,* 275.

[178] Bateson defines this term as "a conversation about some problematic subject. This conversation should be such that not only do the participants discuss the problem but the structure of the conversation as a whole is also relevant to the same subject" (*Steps to an Ecology of Mind* (London, UK: Jason Aronson Inc., 1972/1987), 12).

sentences which people use often, the printer keeps little sticks of letters ready made up. And these ready-made sentences are called clichés.[179]

Before referring to those things—phrases and ideas—that we parrot, before referring to the idiomatic commons of our language community, the term *cliché* refers to a technique of printing. In French, the term takes an important detour through photography, where it refers first to the photographic negative and later generalizes to refer to the positive image, the product of photographic processing, as well. If *cliché*, as a technical term, finds its way from the printer's workshop to that of the photographer, it is due explicitly to the copying function implied in the technology: the development of a support—the readymade cliché or the negative phototype— from which a large number of copies (*tirages*, in both contexts) can be made.[180] The cliché, then, in its technical applications, is fundamentally an instrument of repetition.

Bateson goes on, in his conversation with his daughter, to bring the cliché back to his point about thinking and saying new things:

> F: […] We all have lots of ready-made phrases and ideas, and the printer has ready-made sticks of letters, all sorted out into phrases. But if the printer wants to print something new—say, something in a new language, he will have to break up all that old sorting of the letters. In the same way, in order to think new thoughts or to say new things, we have to break up all our ready-made ideas and shuffle the pieces.

Here, in the lengthening of his engagement with the *cliché* to draw out its implications for their conversation underway, Bateson betrays an incomplete understanding of this technology. Crucially, the printer's cliché, once produced, could never be broken up into its component letters. This is because a cliché is not, as Bateson describes it, a commonly used phrase pre-arranged in a composing stick so that it could be put quickly into place without having to reset the type each time. Instead, the cliché refers to the *casting* of a whole phrase (or indeed of a whole page of type— in this sense it becomes a synonym, compellingly, of the print *stéréotype*)—a casting that would produce that phrase as a single object to be inserted into the composition as the type was being laid.[181] Indeed, the central principle of the cliché, as a technical innovation in printing, was only indirectly geared towards typesetting "efficiency." Rather, the cliché was developed out of a practical necessity regarding the letters themselves. Producing a cliché of a common phrase, casting it in its composed form in a single slug of metal, allowed the printer to free up those individual type pieces for other uses. In the zero-sum game that is manual typesetting, the cliché represents a

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[179] Ibid., 25.

[180] The definitions of cliché given in the *TLF* insist on this as the defining feature the cliché in both the printing and photographic contexts. "[Plaque/épreuve] par laquelle on peut tirer un grand nombre d'exemplaires…".

[181] An early twentieth-century dictionary of printing terms gives the following definition for the practice of "clichage": "Le clichage ou stéréotypage consiste à prendre, à l'aide d'un flan préparé, l'empreinte d'une composition typographique et à couler dessus de la matière d'imprimerie afin d'obtenir un bloc en relief sur lequel on puisse tirer à la manière ordinaire" (*Le dictionnaire de l'imprimerie* (Paris: Imprimerie des Beaux-Arts, 1912), 62).

transfer of resources, releasing the letters of its common phrases back into circulation so that the printing of even more unconventional ones becomes possible.[182]

A French speaker would not be surprised to discover that the word *cliché* is an onomatopoeia, although contemporary ears will be likely to hear a reference to a camera's shutter click (a sound we still hear, digitally reproduced, when taking pictures on our cell phones), and thus to the word's photographic acceptation. The onomatopoeia, though, is also the printer's—mimicking the sound made by the casting press as the mold comes into contact with molten metal. The cliché is named for this action, which produces it as an autonomous object. It is also in the printer's workshop where the phrase "tirer son cliché" is first employed metonymically to mean "speaking in commonplaces." But this leap—from cliché to cliché—is not as obvious as it might seem. While they both involve language, printing is not speech, and the phrases that would emerge as "common" in the printed medium would be quite different from those fixed phrases that recur in the context of daily speech. A printer would only make a cliché of a phrase that appears relatively frequently in texts to be printed. A purely practical matter, these would be more likely to include phrases like "c'est-à-dire" or "et ainsi de suite," rather than the kinds of clichés of oral language that this term has come to designate (not without pejoration), and which might be rather uncommon in print—in the French language in particular, where the difference between spoken and written codes has historically been so marked. What relates the print cliché to the spoken one is not the *nature* of the phrases they designate but is rather—as with the relation to the negative phototype—the simple fact of copying. The printer's cliché is not only an instrument of repetition, fixing phrases to allow for their easy repetition; it also, more importantly, represents a technological response to the presence of repetition *already there* in the texts to be printed. The spoken cliché is a phrase that comes to us fixed, already a copy, an image close at hand to help us say something or nothing at all, whose meaning seems to derive more distinctly from its commonness—from its repetition—than from the meanings of the words that compose it. A particularly common place within a language that is by definition common (conventional).

Emmanuel Hocquard is interested in commonplace phrases for exactly the reason that they represent common language that wears its commonness, its mindless repetition, on its sleeve. He gives his 1995 anthology of contemporary poetry the title *Tout le monde se ressemble*, a commonplace whose words mean everyone is alike but which is used to mean that despite this resemblance "personne n'est pareil." Hocquard remarks, in an entry devoted to the "lieu commun" in the glossary he writes as a preface to this anthology, that this was precisely the kind of expression he was looking for.[183] Not only does "tout le monde se ressemble" achieve what all oral clichés do ("un lieu commun veut tout dire et son contraire, c'est-à-dire qu'il finit par ne plus rien vouloir dire"), but it also exhibits a grammatical "malaise" which marks its interest most particularly. Hocquard comments, in half-ironic banality, that "*Tout le monde* ne signifie pas ici *le monde entier*, mais *tous ceux qui sont au monde*, ce qui fait, au total, un grand nombre de personnes. Et pourtant le verbe est au singulier." "Tout le monde" is a fixed expression that is used to mean something other than the meaning of its words, and represents perhaps the most well-worn of such expressions in the French language—so well-worn that few would class this expression as a commonplace at all. Hocquard draws attention to the perplexing fact that this phrase, which expresses a plurality (often more specific than "tous ceux qui sont au monde," e.g. "tous ceux qui sont présents à cette fête, qui font partie de cette classe, etc."), should conjugate in the singular. He doesn't insist on it here,

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[182] By the same token, the practice of casting a cliché of a full page of text (for each page of a book of which a large printing was forecast, for example) allowed printers to take on more jobs simultaneously as those letters could be redistributed once a cliché had been produced.

[183] *Tout le monde se ressemble* (Paris: P.O.L., 1995), 23-4.

but the singularity of the subject is not strange simply because it is contrary to the state of things it expresses, but because this singularity perplexes the possibility of a *reciprocal* resemblance, which would require at the very least *two* entities between which such a relation could be established.[184] It is precisely this grammatical strangeness that attracts Hocquard to the commonplace.[185] And it is here that we rejoin the printer's cliché. If a cast is made, for example, of the phrases "Il était une fois" and "ils se marièrent et eurent beaucoup d'enfants," the generic formulas opening and closing fairy tales, if each is made into a single object whose words can no longer be rearranged, are the grammatical relations between those words not literally neutralized, submitted to the status of the whole as a single unit of repetition? "Il était une fois" does not mean "there was a time…"; it *means* the fairy tale is beginning. It means "once upon a time," and the power of this formula means that these words (upon?) and the relations between them are not interrogated—not out of laziness on the part of the reader, but because those relations don't actually function in the normal way. It is the literal (word-for-word) repetition of these phrases over time that unhooks them from the grammar of the language and empties them of their meaning. A place so common that it somehow slips out of, or manages to sit atop, the grammatical and semantic conventions that constitute the common-place of any language.

For Hocquard, the principle of literality—word-for-word repetition, *le tirage des clichés*—subtends all of language. To say a language is a conventional sign system is to say that it functions, propagates one generation to the next, by way of the citational mode of indirect discourse.[186] Hocquard likes to say that we learn to speak by hearsay (*ouï-dire*), that the first time we say a word we are citing those around us whom we've heard use it (often with no necessary connection to its meaning). This obligatory citation is what makes language a communal thing, a shared resource— all of language forming a literal *lieu commun*—, but this is also what makes it a closed system, a regime of circumscribed possibility. If *my* language is nothing other than an accumulation of things I've heard said, what possibility is there for authentic self-expression? Hocquard answers, unnostalgically: none. In his more recent text, *Conditions de lumière*, he clarifies: "On ne parle jamais de soi Il n'y a jamais eu de sujet d'énonciation Il n'y a de sujet que grammatical."[187] For Hocquard, it is never, has never been, a question of digging deeper into language in the hope of finding there some richness that would allow for a kind of singular or originary expression. And even less does he posit digging deeper into psychic interiority to find, as the Surrealists sought, some channel for unmediated and unrationalized expression. The possibility of this kind of direct discourse is pure illusion, a ruse pulled over on us by indirect discourse, a mask it wears. Rather, "En parlant ou écrivant ou lisant ou traduisant on cherche la sortie À s'en sortir."[188] Repetition provides a way out of the illusions of expression and representation (of the world, of the self), by neutralizing grammar

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[184] The critic David Lespiau has written that in Hocquard's work "'se' est un autre"; the reference to Rimbaud's "je est un autre," which stands as a kind of battle cry in avant-garde poetry's assault on the consolidated, personalizable lyric subject, sees itself transposed into what is ultimately a purely logical space of grammatical interrogation (Hocquard's terrain). See David Lespiau, "Se est un autre," *Cahier critique de la poésie* (février 2011).

[185] This is something he identifies in the photograph as well: "Les photographies disent : tu n'es pas le sujet de tes photographies. Une grammaire se désintègre" (*MH*, 158).

[186] Hocquard is, on this point, inspired by and goes on to cite directly Deleuze and Guattari's treatment of indirect discourse in *Postulats pour la linguistique* in *Mille Plateaux*: "Le discours indirect est la présence d'un énoncé rapporté dans l'énoncé rapporteur, la présence d'un mot d'ordre dans le mot. C'est le langage tout entier qui est discours indirect" (Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Mille Plateaux* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1980), 106).

[187] "Dans une coupe en verre," in *Conditions de lumière* (Paris: P.O.L., 2007), 182. Hereafter *CL*.

[188] Ibid., 184.

which neutralizes meaning, and it grants access to language's surface—in itself a kind of "outside"—by eschewing the seductive charms of its supposed depth (what Francis Ponge would call its "épaisseur sémantique"[189]). If anything new is to be glimpsed in language, through writing, it is here, outside of any effort of meaning-production, in a repetition that gets language to say what it says not what it means. "L'unique surprise," he affirms, "se trouve dans la repetition."[190]

Innovation and cliché

I look to Gregory Bateson's metalogue, and the brief detour he and his daughter take there through the cliché, not only to open a discussion of the technical specificities of the cliché as a printing innovation, but also for what is revealed in the usefulness this reference ends up serving for him. It is important to note that Bateson only calls upon the cliché to help him make a broader claim about the way he and Mary Catherine conduct their conversations. Returning to those remarks, we hear Bateson explain: "if we both spoke logically all the time, we would never get anywhere. We would only parrot all the old clichés that everybody has repeated for hundreds of years"; and he concludes: "…in order to think new thoughts or to say new things, we have to break up all our ready-made ideas and shuffle the pieces." Even if his presentation of the cliché is inaccurate on a rather important point (the letters of the cliché can't be broken up, and at any rate the pieces that composed it have *already* been put back into circulation), the cliché works for him as a figure, as a way of explaining received ideas and fixed phrases to a young person and of getting her to join him in his view that such reflexive habits of thought and speech must be interrogated, and indeed broken apart in order for new thought to occur. With this prescription, Bateson voices the motivation of many an avant-garde writer in pursuit of new modes of expression, for whom clichés of all sorts are anathema. A textbook case of Terrorist sympathies, Jean Paulhan might say.

In his 1941 book *Les fleurs de Tarbes ou La Terreur dans les Lettres*, Paulhan considers the relationship between clichés (both oral and literary or rhetorical) and the possibility of an authentic, unconstrained expression of thought, as a way of thinking about cycles of literary innovation in nineteenth- and twentieth-century French literature. Literary terrorists[191] want to rid their texts of all clichés, very particularly those clichés that would identify their work with any aspect of literary convention (tropes, formal devices, the "flowers" of rhetoric), to allow for the free expression of thought. Instances of cliché are viewed, from this perspective, as moments when thought, which might otherwise be freely expressed, "cède à la puissance des mots."[192] It is through this idea, that the cliché obstructs or enslaves the free expression of thought, that Paulhan brings together the verbal cliché with clichés of written (literary) form and style. The great impact of this book—its central argument and its most pertinent insights—bears upon clichés of the latter sort most

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[189] A good way of understanding the distance between the positions of Hocquard and Ponge on this point has to do with the degree of pessimism each of these poets brings to the relation between language and the world. For Ponge, as we developed in Chapter 1, his work is powered by an indomitable sense that even despite the insuperable incommensurability between language and things there is something to be gained by continuing the search for these moments of literality in their relation. For Hocquard, the pessimism about language's function as a tool of any kind of apt or authentic expression (interior to exterior) leaves no avenue for such an earnest pursuit. While Ponge's approach to language clearly distinguishes him from the tradition of what Hocquard refers to as "la modernité triomphale," characterized by a manic sense of expressive possibility through experimental forms, he nevertheless remains attached to a certain ideal of language-world relation that keeps his conception of literality closer to questions of referential transparency than what we observe in Hocquard.

[190] Ibid., 183.

[191] He names them only rarely, but Paulhan has his surrealist contemporaries most particularly in mind.

[192] *Les fleurs de Tarbes ou La Terreur dans les Lettres* (Paris: Gallimard, 1941), 57. Hereafter *FT*.

particularly, the markers of literarity, the *flowers* of rhetoric referenced in its title. But it is part of the strangeness of this text that Paulhan devotes most of it to the question of the other kind of cliché, the verbalisms that can creep into print and that pose particular challenges to a reader. Clichés of spoken language, and their appearance within a written code that should vigilantly exclude them, function for Paulhan essentially as a figure for thinking about the received forms of literarity against an idea of literary creation that is hostile to them.

When a verbalism passes under the pen of an author, then into a typesetter's composing stick, to emerge in a printed literary text, it becomes a "lieu d'incompréhension," in Paulhan's words, "par excellence l'endroit du langage où le lecteur perd entièrement de vue l'écrivain—puisqu'il ignore si cet écrivain a passé par le détail du cliché, ou s'il l'a répété d'un trait."[193] It is impossible to determine if a cliché that has made it into print is there as a readymade phrase (in analogy to our printer's cliché, repeating the phrase as a single entity) or if it is a phrase composed piece by piece by the author who might have stumbled unawares into a commonplace. This ambiguity—the impossibility of knowing, for certain, if an expression is new or old—is one that, crucially, applies just as much to the most novel of expressions, to complicate one's judgment of their novelty. This novelty is expressed as a kind of innocence (a "pureté de l'âme" which connects Terror in literature to Robespierre's *Terreur*), by which a writer affirms that he is unsullied by tradition, unconstrained in his expression. The problem such a claim to novelty poses, for example in Paulhan's estimation of surrealist innovation, is that it simply cannot be substantiated. Automatism is, for Paulhan, just such an alibi, a claim to unmediated expression that the texts themselves cannot prove beyond a reasonable doubt. Indeed, he sees in surrealist texts an abundance of convention, agreed upon forms and elements of style, and suggests that "un poème surréaliste s'imite plus aisément qu'un sonnet."[194]

Hocquard refers to clichés of ordinary speech exclusively as *lieux communs* (a choice which underlines the ideas around commonness explored above), and generally reserves the word *cliché* for pejorative use regarding conventional literary practices, as if this meaning—the "clichés rhétoriques" of lyric/poetry/novelistic prose—pointed to a distinct phenomenon. As we've seen, Hocquard's interest in verbal clichés is quite distinct from Paulhan's. For Hocquard, these are phrases that, by virtue of their repetition, their hyperbolic conventionality, manage to evade linguistic conventions. If they are easy to understand and easy to offer, even as their grammatical and semantic functions are neutralized, this is indeed what marks them as interesting. Clichés of literarity, on the other hand, participate in what Hocquard sees as an interest*ed* conventionality, "un système de valeurs légitimantes" serving to prop up the literary enterprise as such.[195] Where verbal clichés resist linguistic regulation in their way, clichés of literarity are simply one form that the linguistic regulation of expression takes.

It is in the text "Bibliothèque de Trieste," which we have cited here and there throughout this chapter, that Hocquard describes most clearly his views on his language and literary tradition. Speaking to an audience at UC San Diego, Hocquard explains that the French language, in implicit contrast with English, is one that has for centuries been vigilantly regulated through the printed word, in literature as in grammar school textbooks. "Une langue aux structures rigides, qui ne souffre aucune fantaisie grammaticale ou syntaxique, qui tolère aussi mal les apports extérieurs que les innovations internes. Bref, une langue qu'il est difficile de faire bouger et dans laquelle il n'est pas toujours aisé de se mouvoir."[196] The rigidities of the French language, the crushing weight of

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[193] Ibid*.,* 124.

[194] Ibid*.,* 139-140.

[195] *MH,* 27.

[196] Ibid*.,* 29-30.

tradition in language and literature alike, leave a writer—once he accepts, without illusion, that this language is all he has to work with—a relatively narrow margin for action. Hocquard cites this narrowness of field to explain the avant-garde tendencies that Paulhan calls Terrorism: "Cette étroitesse du champ d'action peut expliquer, en partie au moins, des entreprises de transgression—je serais plutôt tenté de parler de régression—telles que le surréalisme, jadis. À l'inverse, elle fonde la démarche intellectuelle et formelle d'un certain nombre de poètes de notre génération."[197] Hocquard counts himself among this latter cohort of contemporary poets, and as such understands his poetic project as both related to and remote from that of the surrealists.

In the passages I've cited, Hocquard emerges as a full-blown literary Terrorist, with a discourse on language and thought that reproduces exactly the principles of avant-garde terrorism catalogued in *Les fleurs de Tarbes*. "La seule question qui peut se poser est: que peut-on faire pour desserrer l'étau dans lequel le langage, tel qu'il est, gouverne et bride notre pensée"[198] Hocquard structures his literary project, as do the surrealists, around this judgment of language as a fundamental constraint on thought, which is constantly reasserting its dominance within expression we think is our own. In both cases, these authors pursue a kind of sudden sight, a novel vision, which they approach through a certain neutralization of the notion of a creative subject. Where Hocquard diverges, categorically, from the surrealists is precisely in the fact that their response takes the form of a pursuit of free expression elsewhere ("l'existence est ailleurs"), in the recording of the "voix surréaliste." If the surrealists' desire for (terrorist) transgression—of fundamental principles of literary expression, of social conventions and the submission of the bourgeois mind—is characterized by Hocquard as a marking a *regression*, it is precisely because, having accepted that words are as they are and it is not a question of redeeming them ("comme s'il nous appartenait de le[s] rajeunir"[199]), the surrealists go on to double down on an ideal of direct discourse. Hocquard would be quick to point out that even there, in *Les Champs magnétiques*, in Robert Desnos's séance of surrealist transmission in "Entrée des médiums," this supposedly unmediated and subjectless surrealist voice, speaks essentially in grammatically correct (if often fragmented) French. The speaking subject, even if assumed to correspond to an impersonal unconscious is always an exclusively grammatical entity ("Il n'y a de sujet que grammatical"), and as such this particular effort to disrupt the coherence of the speaking subject can be apprehended by Hocquard as missing the point entirely. The surrealists, having failed to locate the real margin for action left by their rigid, rationalizing language, gave the appearance of liminality to a writing practice that was, at its foundation, still very much submitted to that rigidity.[200]

Framing to see

André Breton, in that early essay on Max Ernst, deploys photography as an analogy for automatic writing—one that makes thought synonymous with image, and suppresses the rationalizing mediation of the subject so that these fortuitous, unforeseeable images might pass into record. It is not only the automatism of the photographic capture that matters to the surrealists, however. The photograph's status as an *empreinte*, as an indexical trace, in direct causal relationship

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[197] Idem.

[198] *BV*, "Quel discours direct."

[199] *ME*, 86.

[200] Elsewhere in *ma haie*: "À quoi bon essayer de mettre en place de nouvelles valeurs et de nouveaux principes d'évaluation si c'est toujours fondé sur la même grammaire, celle des conservateurs & des révolutionnaires réunis. Ces gens peuvent ne s'entendre sur rien, ils n'en continuent pas moins à s'entendre sur la grammaire […] de sorte qu'ils sont tout de même d'accord sur le fond(s)" ("Les dernières nouvelles de la cabane" n° 8, *MH*, 431).

to the light it captures, also operates in the analogy with automatic writing.[201] The mechanical operations of the photographic apparatus allowed for the recording of what Walter Benjamin terms the "optical unconscious," granting access to those aspects of the visible field that escape natural vision.[202] As I developed in the introduction to this project, this indexical feature of photographic representation is indeed viewed by many theorists of Hocquard's generation as its dominant technical characteristic. As we've seen, Hocquard's photographic meditations do not work to preserve the integrity of the trace in isolation. Rather, through the use of the *scolie*, Hocquard is interested in what happens after the flash (we might think of Ponge's "note après coup," siloed off from immediate experience). The juxtaposition of various textual "moments" here (darkroom notation, subsequent meditation of the *scolie*) brings emphasis to the multiple temporalities—the multiple moments—of photographic processing. In this respect, Hocquard's interest in photography, as it relates to his writing practice, lies on the side of the photographic cliché. The cliché, in its photographic meaning corresponding to the negative phototype, is located between exposure and reproduction as the specific technology that renders the exposure reproducible. The cliché is also where the image meets its edges. In development, the image will transfer, negative to positive to become a two-dimensional simulacrum of its subject, but the field of the exposure is forever fixed—everything outside it excluded—in the cliché. One can restrict that field further through cropping, but the opposite cannot be achieved. Where Breton's interest in photography bears on its automatic documentary function, and its potential to capture something akin to the spontaneous illumination of the surrealist image, Hocquard's *Méditations photographiques sur l'idée simple de nudité* foregrounds the interest of the photograph after its capture, as it moves from cliché to positive phototype as the poet looks on in the darkroom. While the meditations themselves function photographically—in analogy to photographic exposure (the mind exposed to the image, the attempt at a quick capture in language)—it is not a claim to documentary accuracy that binds them to this technical conceit. Instead, it is above all the frame that grounds this analogy.

Fragment XXXI is unique in *Méditations photographiques sur l'idée simple de nudité*. The text's formal aspect in particular sets it apart from the others: a carefully justified block of text which recalls, in miniature, the rectangular form of a photograph. It is also unique in the volume for its explicit consideration of a finished photograph, not during processing but after it has been developed, and for its representation of an action on the part of the poet-meditator other than simply looking: here he describes moving a frame, an *ad hoc* cropping template, across the surface of a photographic print.

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[201] Suzanne Guerlac has made the precision that in many of the concrete surrealist practices or uses of photography (in Max Ernst's collages, for example), this technology is drawn on not for the strength of its indexical claims but in view of its unmatched capacity as a tool for the creation of "seamless fiction[s]" that serve to turn the viewer away from the real and back into his/her memory and imagination ("The Useless Image," *Representations* 97, 1 (Winter 2007), 49).

[202] We read in Benjamin's "The Work of Art" essay: "Clearly it is another nature which speaks to the camera as compared to the eye. 'Other' above all in the sense that a space informed by human consciousness gives way to a space informed by the unconscious. […] It is through the camera that we first discover the optical unconscious, just as we discover the instinctual unconscious through psychoanalysis" (*The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility and Other Writings on Media*, trans. Edmund Jephcott and Harry Zohn (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2008), 37).

la nudité n'a pas de centre. Chaque
partie la contient tout entière. En
promenant sur la photographie de ton
corps nu un cadre [*templum*] découpé
dans du papier, tel détail devient le
centre décentré d'une nouvelle image.
la nudité prend corps à partir des bords
ou des angles. Bords et angles du cadre,
pas du corps. la nudité, pas plus que le
corps, ne se laisse cadrer.

Scolie. *Chacun de ces « cadrages volatils » est
à l'image de ce que peut être un* énoncé
simple *dans le langage. Un* faire voir *ce qui
est déjà sous les yeux mais qui demeurait non
visible. La phrase cadre la pensée selon des
critères prévisibles. L'énoncé est une surprise.*
(41)

This fragment explores the actions of framing and centering with respect to the photographic nude, and itself represents a frame with a center (marked, flagrantly, with the word "centre"). In the above description, we are drawn into a different photographic temporality—the one after processing, where the image is no longer caught up in the duration of photographic development, where the instant captured in the snapshot enters fully, stably, into the time of objects—a longer time, which the meticulous crafting of this fragment would seem to record. This fragment commands our attention in a different way, draws our eye to form and our mind to intent at the level of the text, as the meditative encounter with the image takes on a new structure. That encounter, which elsewhere appears as an observation of the image in emergence with an attempt to square the definiteness of language with an indefinite visual presence, is characterized here by the application of an extralinguistic instrument of definition—the straight edges of a paper frame— to a photographic print that has already been fixed. Rather than presenting a single finding on the subject of nudity, this text advances sentence after sentence—each one undecidably autonomous from the next—to track the movement of the frame across the image.

This text turns around the relationship between a frame and its center—a relationship which the French verb *cadrer*, which means both to frame and to center, expresses as perfectly coextensive. It opens with the proposition "la nudité n'a pas de centre." Nudity is an uncontained quality that exceeds the limits of any single one of its manifestations: "*Quand la photographie est floue, les contours du corps perdent en définition mais la nudité, qui n'est pas contenue, gagne en expansion.*"[203] Nudity is only contained in the way that a liquid or gas is contained, as in a holding pen of osmotic potential, ready to breach its container's walls at the slightest show of weakness. Evenly dispersed, "chaque partie la contient tout entière," nudity is maximally nude at every point of its visibility—a visibility which, in cropping as in the amorphous stages of the image's development, is delimited by the edges of the frame, not the contour of the body. The poet slides a cropping template over the surface of this nude photograph to produce—and meditate upon—various restrictions of the

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[203] Ibid., 47.

field of the image. He describes the effect of this mobile framing as the generation of a "centre décentré," as "tel détail" becomes the focal point, emphasized here in its arbitrariness (*tel ou tel*), utterly contingent on the settling of the frame. In the movement of the cropping template, one center is substituted for another and each centering is simultaneously a decentering with respect to the prior frame. The word "centre" does indeed lie at the precise center of the text block, but it is followed by the modifier *décentré*, positioned just off-center, that unsettles the self-sufficiency of that center's indisputable truth and reminds it of its contingency within the frame of the text: a center easily decentered.

In the sentence that introduces Hocquard's own activity ("En promenant sur la photographie de *ton corps nu* un cadre…"; emphasis mine), the surfacing of a second-person address commands attention. This nod to the convention of lyric address is short-circuited, however, by a grammatical error: a dangling participle. "En promenant," is presented as the action of our speaker, describing his movement of the frame across the surface of the photo, and grammatical stricture requires that the implicit subject of this participle be the explicit subject of the main clause: "En promenant […], *je*…." Here though, the "je" that would complete the communicative (lyric) circuit with the second-person is withheld, or displaced, and "tel détail" is given in its place, "le centre décentré d'une nouvelle image." With this interjection of somesuch detail, the centrality of the grammatical subject—here also, the speaking subject, the lyric subject—is dealt a subtle comeuppance, as just another contingent point, enacted more by the frame of the sentence, and sentence-level grammar, than by any natural right.

The *scolie* considers an analogy for this volatile image-framing in the domain of language— and affirms the *énoncé simple* as its correlate—but as we can see from the comments I've just made, the main fragment is already doing to language what the movement of the cropping template is doing to the image. Already producing within the sentence a subversion or surprise by shifting the frame and pulling the rug out from under the grammatical subject. The *énoncé simple* functions, in this reckoning, as a "faire voir" which makes suddenly visible something we do not otherwise know how to see. But what? It is emphatically not any corner of worldly phenomena. The *énoncé simple*— an utterance which says one thing, unconditionally—makes itself visible *as* language, and since it has no representational function, it insists that we see *it—the énoncé itself*—rather than any notion we might have of what's behind or underneath it. "*Un faire voir ce qui est déjà sous les yeux mais qui demeurait non visible. La phrase cadre la pensée selon des critères prévisibles. L'énoncé est une surprise.*"[204] It is not by accident that we see the words "non visible" and "prévisible" juxtaposed here. Hocquard remarks, in a text nearly contemporary to *Méditations photographiques*, that "Il en va de *lire* comme de *voir*: on lit et on voit comme on a appris à voir et à lire, […] en ramenant ce qui est inconnu à ce qui est déjà connu."[205] This is a process of elimination and replacement, where the "non visible," that which we haven't yet learned how to see—nudity for instance—is swapped out for the "prévisible"—the naked body. These "critères prévisibles" produce a form of language, in the frame of the sentence, which conforms to rules that precede it, whose form is already foretold (pre*dict*able) by the language, whose form we already have an image of. The sentence, a special target of Hocquard's terrorism, structures not only our language but our thought, our ability to see

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[204] Critic Glenn Fetzer emphasizes, in reference to Hocquard's earlier works, that figuring out what he is looking at ("ce que j'a[i] sous les yeux") is the central driving force behind his writing practice. Fetzer notes, "Knowledge [for Hocquard] is not just *savoir*; it is first and foremost, a question of *ça voir*, of seeing *this* that is." See Fetzer, *Emmanuel Hocquard and the Poetics of Negative Modernity* (Birmingham, AL: Summa Publications, Inc, 2004), 75-95.

[205] "On apprend à lire avant d'apprendre à écrire," in *Une Grammaire de Tanger* (Marseille: CIPM, 2011). Volume not paginated.

things that our language doesn't predict. The surprise that the *énoncé simple* delivers is a flash of presence revealed against a rear-facing *prévisibilité*, an illuminated presence in a sea of past. It is this spirit that motivates Hocquard's dangling participle "En promenant," an action on language that suspends the primacy of predictable criteria—a bit of linguistic volatility that might have been corrected but wasn't. In this fragment, which brings a thinking about image into contact with a thinking about language, Hocquard shows us that language circumscribes the visible and at the same time is an element of our world, particularly as text, that we are not accustomed to seeing.

The manipulation of the image described (however elliptically) in this text—visualizing various crops, various restrictions of the field of the image—is one that an analog photographer might associated more obviously with the phase of processing, just prior to the exposure of the photo paper, where an enlarger is used to visualize different restrictions of the image by adjusting the distance between the negative, the enlarger's lens, and the paper to be exposed (the greater the distance, the tighter the crop). There is something idiosyncratic in the act of cropping that this text describes. Where the enlarger allows a photographer to crop his image permanently (printing only the desired field), Hocquard improvises a cropping template that allows him to visualize ephemeral (explicitly non-permanent) crops *within* the field of the image already printed. Hocquard's crops are not a function of magnification, they do not isolate an area of the image by bringing it "closer", and they do not establish new edges for the print as a whole. Rather, they allow Hocquard to operate, unpredictably and without a trace, within the fixed frame of the photographic print. The *scolie* characterizes these crops as "cadrages volatils"—a volatility that would seem at odds with the fixity implied by the frame. A fixed frame imposes a center—hence the collapse of framing and centering in the French verb *cadrer*—but a *volatile* frame (not just unpredictable but apt to combust, to vaporize, to disappear) would be the opposite of fixed, and as such it might slip out of the semantic imperative binding it to an idea of "center."

The centerless frame: *templum*

Fragment XXXI presents a meditation on image-framing that illuminates something about all the other fragments of the volume, their structure, the circumstances of their composition. Each one starts to look like some attempt at a "cadrage volatil," each putting in place a provisional set of edges within which nudity might take form, and each proposing a provisional center, a point of focus, that the next fragment displaces. What captivates in this fragment is the way the text itself makes this revelation visible, helps us to see the volatility of its own framing, the utter contingency of its center. Here, the centerless quality of nudity serves to probe the self-sameness of "to frame" and "to center" expressed in the verb *cadrer*. Looking closely at fragment XXXI, it is clear that the word "centre" is in fact *not* the center of the text in its initial form (its first capture). The bracketed addition, after the fact, of this word "[*templum*]" is what pushes "centre" dead center. A compositional precision of this sort—in the concrete typographical sense—could not occur by accident for a writer like Hocquard for whom poetry itself is inseparable from the act of typesetting. The brackets enclosing this *templum* present a frame within the frame that would seem to ally it with the notion of "énoncé simple" and its ability to "faire voir" explored in the *scolie*. Indeed, these terms are made to mirror each other typographically—italic in a sea of roman in the main fragment, roman in a sea of italic in the *scolie*—in such a way as to collapse the editorial moment with the moment of second meditation producing the *scolies*.

Templum is Latin for temple, but it takes on this meaning only after descending a few rungs of the metonymic ladder from the Greek τέμενος (témenos) for an area cut off, separated. Very specifically associated with augury, the *templum* was a rectangular space marked out in the sky by an augur's staff, and from which the augur's observations (of meteorological phenomena, the flight patterns of birds, etc.) would be drawn as fodder for the decipherment of the will of the gods. A

templum was also the patch of land, circumscribed and sacred, from which that patch of sky was observed—a rectangle of dirt, grass, gravel which could also become a zone of augural observation (and the kind of sacred site, already set apart from the common, where a temple might be constructed). A space cut off from the rest—sanctified because separate—for the purpose of taking augury: a frame which circumscribes and inaugurates a space of reading. This is a notion that Jean-Luc Nancy identifies as fundamental to what an image is in Western tradition, a way of grounding the claim that opens his 2003 *Au fond des images* that "[l]'image est toujours sacrée," sacred because separate.[206]

In the text "Il rien" from his early work *Un privé à Tanger*, Hocquard introduces this idea of temple as nothing less than a model for countering the representational imperative in literature. He deploys it as a model that helps us to think concretely about how a text might be seen as *presenting* rather than representing its content. He designates the temple as an "espace inaugural," as an etymological wink to the action of the augur, and as a way of signaling the creation of a space of meaning with no precedent, with no reference.[207] Before the drawing of the temple, the sky is a place of utter insignificance to the augur. Indeed, he must draw himself a *new* sky, smaller, provisional, marked out virtually with his staff for immediate use, in order to read anything at all there. This *templum* is a space of presentation because it is only what, where, and when it is; it is not established on a scale with the real sky (this would be representation); the birds that pass through (or don't) are not seen as birds but as objects of sight tracing chance across the inaugural space of observation. Cut off from the possibility of reference, sky doesn't *mean* sky and birds don't *mean* birds, and the *templum* emerges as "non situable, non chiffrable" (unplaceable, unquantifiable), a space where things are seen or they aren't. We are moved to reflect here on Ponge's Provençal sky here, and on what Hocquard might diagnose as a deficiency in framing that makes it difficult (impossible even) to unhook entirely from the representational imperative that Ponge also holds in disdain. What becomes legible is a kind of ineradicable commitment on Ponge's part toward a kind of meaning-making that Hocquard has let go.

The movement of the cropping frame in fragment XXXI, this moment of framing which comes after the restriction of the photographic field in the original exposure, produces a kind of novel visibility—un *faire voir*, a surprise, a revelation—that is novel because it emerges from the framing itself, from the delimiting of the field of an image that has already been constituted. The act of framing makes the image a presentation, the way repeating "Les babouches de Marie sont vertes" transforms it into an *énoncé simple*. The secondariness of this action, its operation after the fact of utterance, or of photographic capture, presents differently in Hocquard's literal poetics than what we saw in Ponge's "note après coup" where the fact of this secondariness presents (somewhat exceptionally) as a site of loss. For Hocquard, the after-the-fact image or utterance carries with it not the slightest nostalgic trigger; nothing is lost for this poet in the secondariness of his material, much to the contrary it is in the repetitions he courts and performs that something for him is found. As we've developed here, this repetition is central to Hocquard's thinking about language-use (with Deleuze and Guattari: language in its entirety is indirect discourse) and of the literary usefulness of the principles of photographic image-making. Literature traffics in frames, in copying, in *tirages* (an awareness we observed in Francis Ponge as well). For Hocquard, the objective reality of literary text—the volume of a volume, the typeset *cliché*—makes literature a forum for probing the iterativity of print, the flat surface of the page, as well as the citational nature of language itself. Through his literal poetics, and its advance through volatile framing, the images of photography

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[206] Jean-Luc Nancy, *Au fond des images* (Paris: Galilée, 2003), 11.

[207] Emmanuel Hocquard, *Un privé à Tanger* (Paris: P.O.L., 1987), 54.

and linguistic representation are cut off from their referents, from the referential assumptions that chaperone our encounter with them, and become visible as only themselves. *Évidemment simple.*

The texts of Hocquard's that we have focused most on in this chapter were all published in the 2000s or 2010s. The centrality of analog photography and of manual typesetting within this poet's creative universe speak to an overwhelming preference for and attachment to concrete media, words and technical images approached in their most indisputably material forms. While I would not go so far as to describe Hocquard's work as expressing an implicit technological nostalgia (it is hard for this not to sound like an accusation), there is doubtless a correlation between the kind of attachment to these forms that we observe in Hocquard's work and the immovable ferocity of his rejection of lyricism and all its trappings. As I mentioned in my introduction, he was very close with Pierre Alferi, the poet whose work we will consider in the next chapter in relation to notions of remediation and intermediality. While Hocquard is evidently interested in the kind of interface that can form between language and concrete image forms, the nature of his interest in photography as a technology of the copy, as a technology that "[dit] ce qu'elle dit, et pas autre chose,"[208] implies that his preference for analog photography may lie in its potential to be approached as what I call elsewhere a "non-conductive surface." The photograph, for Hocquard, is not a site of passage for visualizable information but an object that is productively cut off from this kind of mediating function; precisely like his texts.

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[208] "Qu'est-ce qu'un énoncé simple ?," *BV.*

CHAPTER 3

Entre signal reçu et crypté:
Locating Cinema and Lyric in Pierre Alferi's Intermedial Poetics

Figure 3. *Intime.*

Figure 4. *Intime*

      Traveling through eastern Europe in the early 2000s, the poet Pierre Alferi found himself alone in a Budapest hotel room, filming the television with his Sony camcorder. He was struck by the sight of this black-and-white receiver at the dawn of the twenty-first century, by the graininess of its image, and by the abundance of local programming devoted to Hungarian horsemanship. At the time, Alferi was in the midst of a brief but notable foray into experimental filmmaking and the footage he shot off this mid-century TV set would resurface as the central sequence of his short film *Intime* (Figures 2 and 3).[210] The film's other sequences are similarly composed of footage shot by the poet while traveling. But whereas the others record literal movements in contact with various modes of transportation (trains, planes, buses, trams, pedestrian passages), Alferi's careful framing of the television screen in these shots looks beyond the people-moving function of the horse to summon the technical image itself as the vehicle for a different kind of transport. While an Eastern European viewer might identify the mounted rider as a Magyar cavalryman in traditional dress, to a French viewer of Alferi's generation (b. 1963) these noisy monochrome images would be more likely to conjure potent childhood memories of American and Italian Westerns viewed on a

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[209] Charles Baudelaire, "Les Fenêtres," in *Oeuvres complètes* (Paris: Éditions Robert Laffont, 1980), 198.
[210] Information about the circumstances of this sequence's filming comes from personal communication with Alferi.

television very much like this one.[211] What Alferi captures here is a moment of conjugated anachronism in which both the medium and the message collude to deliver his own memories to him—direct to his hotel room—via the live transmission of an analog television signal.

Analog television is a technology of conjugation, of coordinated protocols, governed by the broadcast standard. In the context of television, a standard designates the ensemble of technical specifications that must be coordinated across a broadcast system in order for signal transmission to occur: signal frequencies for image and audio, the number of horizontal lines composing the image, effective frame-rate, and so on, and all televisions are designed to be compatible with a particular standard (PAL in Europe, for instance). This standardization is what allows different kinds of information to pass synchronously from emitter to receiver; it constitutes in very literal terms the *medium* of television and allows it to function as such. The medium thus constituted is not understood in any high-modernist Greenbergian sense of artistic medium or cultural form that can be reduced to its material substrate. Rather, it is closer to medium in the sense of conveyance, or indeed channel. The real-time flow of images and sounds through the signal passageway of the standard binds television to the experience of the present: a visualization of time's passage in the inexorable scanning of rasterized light.[212] Indeed, the uncanniness of the images Alferi shot in that Budapest hotel room owes more than anything to the unarguable actuality of their transmission. The power of the nostalgic movement triggered by the appearance and subject-matter of these images is inseparable from a question implicit in the technical operations of television transmission: what is the quality of the present thus visualized?

Alferi created the film *Intime* to serve as the centerpiece of a 2002 exhibition of his audiovisual work at a gallery in northeastern France. This exhibit took the film's title as its own, rendered typographically as *inTIME*. The theme of intimacy is explored in the elliptical texts that accompany each of the film's image sequences, but Alferi asserts, in an interview for the exhibition brochure, that "le seul sujet de ce film […] c'est l'immersion dans le temps, le fait d'être dans le temps (*in time*)."[213] He instructs viewers here to read bilingually, not to think in translation but quite literally to receive one code (French) as another (English).[214] Further, the experience and representation of time is among his most central preoccupations, particularly in his poetry. Taking seriously his assertion that when he extends his poetic work into audiovisual formats it is in order to "essayer la même chose avec d'autres moyens,"[215] this chapter investigates what Alferi's experimentation across media might clarify about his approach to poetry as, above all, a collection of "moyens." This is an approach, of course, to which Ponge and Hocquard also subscribe, albeit with a different sense of the value of image-forms in testing or extending the medial limits of writing. A partisan of distinction more so than analogy, Ponge is drawn to differences between linguistic and visual mediums, those insuperable differences that inspire, as we've seen, a further

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[211] A more precise reference might be sounded here to the Franco-Romanian series *La Révolte des Haïdouks*, a period saga that first aired on French TV in 1972.

[212] In contrast to analog photography's association with the past, expressed through Roland Barthes's *ça-a-été*, film scholar Mary Ann Doane remarks that "the temporal dimension of television would seem to be that of 'present-ness'—a '*This-is-going-on*' rather than a '*That-has-been*,'" and further asserts that "time is television's basis, its principle of structuration, as well as its persistent reference" ("Information, Crisis, Catastrophe," in *Logics of Television* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1990), 251).

[213] Pierre Alferi, *inTIME : les cahiers de l'espace* (Belfort: Espace multimédia Gantner, 2002), 25. Hereafter *CE*.
[214] This particular demand is one that Alferi frequently makes of his readers. The most obvious example of this is surely his 1997 volume *Sentimentale journée* whose title presents a homophonic rendering (and, thus, *mis*translation) of "Sentimental Journey," a phrase which doubly refers to the Laurence Sterne novel and to the jazz standard of the big band era.
[215] *CE*, 17.

retreat into the material qualities of language. On the question of the representation of time's passage, we've noted that this part of Ponge's work in particular is not enriched or expanded by image technologies, rather it takes the temporal ontology of the snapshot as a foil in his understanding of the time of the text (and of the material world). For Hocquard, less concerned with the adequate representation of external phenomena than with the conditions of their contemplation, analog photography presents as a technology that makes visible the kind of logical space that he deploys citation and repetition to inaugurate in his texts. Photography drives a desirable wedge between perception and contemplation, as the process of development makes evident—active, visible—the deferral of the photographic instant. The near homology of these practices (writing and photography) for Hocquard—Ann Smock speaks of their "instantaneous reciprocity"[216]—allows him to move back and forth between them, exploring logical conundrums from one of these domains in the idiom of the other: an image of fertile and self-perpetuating intermedial exchange.

The relationship I've already begun to sketch between the televisual standard as a model of image mediation and the technical functioning of poetic signification is one that Alferi himself suggests in the famous essay "La mécanique lyrique," and it is a suggestion that the analyses to follow bring into sharper focus. The regular cross-contamination between audiovisual media and literature in Alferi's work has generally been accounted for in light of this poet's unveiled obsession with the celluloid cinematic image: lines of poetry are broken in pursuit of *montage* effects, the vertical seriality of the poem interpellates that of the film strip, etc. If I turn my attention instead to the televisual standard, it is in order to situate this interest in cinema in relation to the more varied media ecology within which Alferi's intermedial experiments actually take place. As we have already seen in the case of his televisual experience in Budapest, and as we will continue to observe going forward, the intellectual potency of technological images lies for Alferi in their remediating function—the ability of one kind of image to reproduce (via print, broadcast, video, digital) an image of a different technical origin[217]—which installs a citational logic at the heart of Alferi's experimental project. The following chapter unfolds in two parts. The first considers Alferi's literary and critical production and emphasizes how his experiments in video art emerge from preoccupations of long standing in his thinking on literature and poetry in particular. The second part offers an in-depth appraisal of the technical and theoretical foundations of Alferi's turn to the production of his own moving images.

PART ONE: Textual Transmissions

In 1995, Alferi and the contemporary poet Olivier Cadiot co-founded a journal entitled *La Revue de littérature générale*, and its arrival on the literary scene has been hailed by sympathetic critics as "un événement théorique," "a breath of fresh air," "the most influential statement of a new aesthetic in French poetry in the last twenty years," and as a kind of "manifeste de grève lyrique"

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[216] Ann Smock, *The Play of Light* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2021), 141.

[217] Media theorists Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin are credited with coining the term remediation in the late 1990s; this term designates the principle which holds that all media operate by transmitting, translating, refashioning and reforming previous media forms. This theorization builds more specificity and elaboration into Marshall McLuhan's famous (pre-digital) assertion that "the 'content' of any medium is always another medium." See Bolter and Grusin, *Remediation: Understanding New Media* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999), 5 and *passim*; and McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (New York: Ginkgo Press, 2013 [1964]), 19.

bringing contemporary poetry and its metro maze of factional antagonisms to a screeching halt.[218] One might diagnose a bit of hyperbole here, were it not for the genuinely anomalous nature of this publication. The first issue of the *RLG*, 95/1 "La mécanique lyrique," explodes the form, aesthetic, codes and cultural/subcultural function of the contemporary poetry journal, as practiced in the mid-1990s.[219] Standing tall at over 400 pages, it bears no formal resemblance to the slim journals produced by and for partisans of particular poetic factions, and it resembles these even less in substance. Despite its explicit focus on poetry, 95/1 brings together experimental works from practitioners of a huge range of creative and intellectual disciplines (photography, music, land art, history, as well as poetry) that cross every imaginable generic and medial boundary and steer our attention to the technical possibilities opened up—for literary creation—by appliance manuals, photocopiers, digital cataloguing systems, and the topiary arts. Indeed, the sole text in its pages that presents itself in recognizably poetic form—Robert Duncan's "My mother would be a falconress"—is only there as a test subject in a "Torture Test" orchestrated by Alferi and Cadiot in which the poem's published French translation is translated back into English, initiating a chain of alternating translations of translations by Anglophone and French poets, to see how much mistreatment the poem can bear.[220] The vision of poetry that this journal materializes is uncompromisingly anti-hierarchical[221]; it privileges no form, style, genre, technique, or professional pedigree over any other, and conceives of poetry functionally as a field for literary experimentation that is exposed on all sides to multifarious creative practices and technological supports, and is radically open to their influence.

This inaugural issue borrows its title, "La mécanique lyrique," from the essay, co-signed by Alferi and Cadiot, that functions as its preface. In this text, the authors diagnose a "conceptual recession" plaguing contemporary French literature, with its roots in the resurgence of lyric poetry in the 1980s (in the work of poets like Jean-Claude Pinson) and the attendant revalorization of genre, voice, and personal expression in poetry.[222] In addition to contributing to the segmentation of the literary field, this ascendant neolyricism coincides with the increasing commercialization of the publishing industry and the multiplication of literary panel shows on TV.[223] As a result, the notion of expressive authenticity in poetry (its most telegenic face) makes an unlikely return to dominance, even among the would-be avant-garde. "Dans l'expérimental ou dans le néo-classique, il y a encore l'idée du naturel qui revient au galop"; "quoi de plus bête," the authors ask, with

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[218] Respectively: Philippe Mesnard, "La matière littéraire," *Vacarme* 97, 3 (juin/juillet 1997): 77; Jean-Jacques Thomas, "Pierre Alferi: A Bountiful Surface of Blues," *SubStance* 39, 3 (2010): 3; Nathalie Wourm, "Anticapitalism and the Poetic Function of Language," *L'Esprit Créateur* 49, 2 (Summer 2009): 124; Christophe Wall-Romana, "Dure poésie générale," *L'Esprit Créateur* 49, 2 (Summer 2009): 1. With this mention of "grève lyrique," Wall-Romana helpfully reminds readers that 1995 was the year of the biggest strikes in France since 1968 ("grève générale").

[219] For a detailed appraisal of the social and political background against which the *RLG* emerges, especially as regards the impact of Jack Lang's tenure as Minister of Culture during the 1980s and 90s, see Matthew Bingham Smith, "Patterns of Exchange: Translation, Periodicals and the Poetry Reading in Contemporary French and American Poetry" (Ph.D. dissertation, UC Berkeley, 2015): 31-37.

[220] *Revue de littérature générale* 95, 1: 277-287.

[221] Indeed, the index at the back of the volume includes a winking reference for "déhiérarchiser" that directs readers to pp. 3-411, which is to say every one of its pages.

[222] Pierre Alferi and Olivier Cadiot, "La mécanique lyrique" (*RLG* 1, 1995): 4. Unless otherwise noted, from this point forward all mentions of "La mécanique lyrique" will refer to the essay (not to the 95/1 issue as a whole), and will be indicated by the letters *ML*.

[223] The authors point to "Cercle de minuit," "Un livre un jour," and the figure of Bernard Pivot, longtime host of the biggest of these programs: *Apostrophes*.

rhetorical seriousness, "que les appels à l'artisanat mystérieux, le jargon de l'authentique, le retour à la vraie littérature […] ?" (4, 8). To the idea of *real* literature (which seems to refer to some specific, endangered form), Alferi and Cadiot's journal responds with an idea of "literature in general" founded on a leveling of generic and disciplinary hierarchies and a conception of literary expression as, above all, a technical undertaking.

That the authors should reference lyric in their title points to the practical nuance of the model of literary production they describe in this essay. For Alferi and Cadiot, this word lyric denotes a problem that all literature must grapple with: how is it that sensation or thought might get into literature? how do the interior, sensory, embodied reflections of a perceiving subject (the writer) get into the externalized form of text? Conventional lyric poetry, which enshrines "l'idée d'une littérature organique, qui se passerait de toute technique" (5), cannot take the problem of exteriorization seriously because the model of expression it relies upon is nothing other than the assumed transparency between inside and outside. Lyric inspiration installs the illusion of unmediated expression and, indeed, understands inspiration as that which frees language from the mediation of the rational mind. Alferi and Cadiot are ruthless in their rejection of such claims. But they don't posit any immunity to the problem these claims would seem to resolve. Nor do they deny the reality of the experience of creative inspiration. For our authors, the question of *how* insides get outside, how one person's thought—inspired or otherwise—might express itself in language legible to others, is the fundamental technical challenge of literature (in general). The lyric in mechanical lyricism names neither a pose nor a form, rather it names a conundrum endogenous to literary expression; the mechanics in mechanical lyricism points, for its part, to the creative activity this conundrum requires.

It is in a section of the essay titled "Standards" that the nuts and bolts of this activity are catalogued. Here, inspiration is a generative force. It produces the material for literary construction—not raw material ("le cru est un mythe"), but minimally mediated: "des boules de sensations-pensées-formes." Alferi and Cadiot refer to these balls as "Objets," which in order to enter functionally into a literary work must undergo a process of standardization:

> Pour qu'ils remplissent leur fonction matérielle de briques, de pions, il faut les passer à la machine. Singuliers de naissance, standardisés pour le travail. De l'emporte-pièce, les Objets ne sortent pas interchangeables: chacun sa découpe—en étoile, en rond ou en losange. Mais ils sortent à niveau, en formes du même ordre, capables d'agir l'un sur l'autre, de s'accoupler, de se corriger, bref, de fonctionner. (12)

The tension between singularity and the effective *functioning* of literary materials ("standardisés pour le travail") is developed in this section in terms of conflicting desires. "On veut de l'unique et on veut de l'égal, […] du juxtaposable" (13). The desire for innovative expression—the unheard-of, the aleatory, the unpredictable convergences in the Surrealist "trouvaille" (discovery)—is met with the desire for expressibility, the possibility of conveying one's discovery to others through language and having its uniqueness recognized as such. The authors continue, "Car l'unique, l'accident, la coïncidence, se différencie en soi-même indéfiniment. Il faut « arrêter » : couper, cadrer. Et la moins arbitraire des coupes, ce sera la plus évidemment arbitraire, la coupe standard, mécanique." They pursue: "Paradoxalement, c'est donc du sentiment *lyrique* de la différenciation indéfinie que vient ce besoin d'égalité" (14). The ceaseless self-differentiation of the unique must be stopped, isolated in its temporal unfolding (cut) and in its spatial extension (frame), in order for it to pass into literary expression.

While the standardization that Alferi and Cadiot describe in this section "Standards" is expressed in terms of manufacturing, the desire for transmission that translates "ce besoin d'égalité" brings us back to the television standard. The model of literary construction that "La mécanique lyrique" presents is conceived around the question of how the "boules de sensations-pensées-formes" might *pass* not only into language but into literature. It is the standard that allows for that passage. The Objects can be star-shaped, round, or oblong, just as long as they fit the standard, as long as they fit through its passageway. This principle of technical mediation is further illustrated in this section of the essay through an analogy with the cinematic image: "Comme au cinéma, où il faut '24 fois la vérité par seconde,' dans 24 fois la même fenêtre et le même laps" (14). The reference here, to Jean-Luc Godard's 1963 film *Le Petit soldat*, is a famous one. The full quote runs "la photographie c'est la vérité, et le cinéma c'est vingt-quatre fois la vérité par seconde" and it is invoked here, I think, ironically. In the film, the character Bruno (Michel Subor) says this while photographing Véronica (Anna Karina), and it is precisely the kind of faux-profundity that Godard's male protagonists like to spout when they find themselves alone with a beautiful woman. While Bruno describes the cinematic image as simply multiplying the truth-telling capacity of the photograph, Alferi and Cadiot's amendment to this line shifts our attention towards the technical features of the moving image that distinguish it from photography and point to the mechanical contingency of cinema's truths. The frame-rate of the celluloid moving image (24 frames per second) reflects the speed beyond which the human eye can no longer perceive the shift between consecutive frames and instead perceives seamless, continuous movement.[224] This perceptual limit dictates the rate at which an image reel is exposed in filming, and as such the world of movement reconstituted in the "real-time" of cinematic projection is one in which an instant is defined as precisely 1/24th of a second. Alferi and Cadiot's reminder of this constraint—"dans 24 fois la même fenêtre et le même laps"—offers a *précision* that accounts for cinema's difference from photography. By emphasizing frame-rate as a technical exigency that circumscribes the truth-claim of the cinematic image, they draw attention to the standardization of the putative raw material of cinematic representation (the photographic image, its truths) *as it enters this medium.*

Literature is not circumscribed by a mechanical *modus operandi* in the way that the cinematic image is: with a defined and obligatory technical standard through which all of its real and potential expressions must flow. It is perhaps for this reason that cinema's technical *dispositif* should be so seductive to a writer who is trying to think a technics of literature that has nothing to do with marks of generic belonging, and that is interested exclusively in the efficacy of a given approach in the face of a given challenge. Crucially, however, the *coupe standard* of the cinematic image surfaces in "La mécanique lyrique" as one standard among many, and the journal issue itself brings together works that look to appliance manuals, photocopiers, digital cataloguing systems, and the topiary arts as technical models for literary experimentation. As we shift attention to Alferi's poetry, this relativization of the significance of cinema's example is helpful. Most critics of Alferi's work identify the cinema as the beating heart of his creative imaginary. Michael Sheringham sees the cinema as a sort of "dream machine" for Alferi, "in which a highly material and cumbersome technology produces fantasies and illusions."[225] Agnès Disson describes cinema's influence upon Alferi's poetry as a system-wide "contamination": "coupe, montage et cadrage sont des procédés poétiques, l'enjambement est un fondu-enchaîné, l'image n'est plus rhétorique mais

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[224] See, for instance, Mary Ann Doane, *The Emergence of Cinematic Time* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2002), 71.
[225] Michael Sheringham, "Pierre Alferi and the Poetics of the Dissolve: Film and Visual Media in *Sentimentale journée*," in *'When familiar meanings dissolve…'* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2011), 52.

cinématographique."[226] Taking into account Alferi's poetry, multimedia works, and novels, Philippe Met goes further to designate his texts not as "unidentified verbal objects" but as "des 'ofnis'—des objets (quasi) filmiques non identifiés."[227] While the richness and complexity of Alferi's engagement with the cinema is without question, it is my contention here that the overwhelming ubiquity of this influence often distracts from broader questions of mediation that prove more pertinent in the analysis of how images (cinematic, but also photographic, televisual, commercial, plastic) manifest and circulate in his poetry.

What attracts in the model of the standard, and why I think it is one that is relevant to Alferi's literary production in a broad sense, is the idea that it is not the substance it manipulates (radio waves) that constitutes the medium; rather it is the standardization of that substance—with regard to certain criteria, certain aspects of the technical infrastructure—that transforms it into a medium of transmission and allows content to pass. For literature, it is always a question of defining the technical challenges that one's *Objet* poses, what about it might resist capture, resist language, and introducing technical strategies to address them. "S'approcher davantage," Alferi and Cadiot counsel, "de la résistance des matériaux de pensée mis en jeu. Et dès qu'apparaît un rouage trop délicat pour être réglé rhétoriquement par un seul discours, assembler plusieurs méthodes intuitives."[228] Finer-grained still than Francis Ponge's "une rhétorique par objet" which determines the form and functioning of the text devoted to it,[229] the mode of *réglage* that "La mécanique lyrique" imagines for its *Objets* ("sauvegarde […] d'Un-geste-et-d'une-réplique-et-d'une-température-x"[230]) is one in which each line of a text might display a different technical intervention. As many as necessary to reckon with the diversity and delicacy of those captures, to calibrate their passage into the medium of literature.

As we will see in the readings of Alferi's poetry volumes *Kub Or* and *Sentimentale journée* below, despite its persistent evocation, the cinematic image does not offer an operable technical model for the standardization of *Objets* in Alferi's poetry. Instead, the televisual standard emerges in that work as a way of thinking about how form and meaning—channel and programming—interact on the printed page. The usefulness of the televisual standard in clarifying Alferi's conception of literary expression is directly related to its function as a *re*-mediating medium which can freely incorporate other visual media into its transmissions. As we saw in the discussion of the horse sequence from *Intime* that opened this article, analog television transmission hides nothing of the transformation it imposes on its images. Where celluloid photography deals exclusively with light (exposure of the film, projection of the negative), analog television operates through the conversion of visual information to a different energetic substrate: electronic signal. Because it is premised on this kind of irreversible translation, television transmission offers a model for thinking about the mediation of experience and remediation of images through the language of lyric that necessarily rules out any claim to immediacy.

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[226] Agnès Disson, "Comme au cinéma, façonner des minutes réelles: Pierre Alferi," *Contemporary French and Francophone Studies*, 9:3 (2005): 257.

[227] Philippe Met, "'Deffet' d'enfant : la famille du cinéma alferien." *Papiers Universitaires* n° 33 (1er trimestre 2006): http://papiersuniversitaires.wordpress.com/2012/05/26/audiovisuel-deffet-denfant-la-famille-du-cinema-alferien-par-philippe-met/

[228] *ML*, 4.

[229] See, for instance, Francis Ponge, *La tentative orale* (1947): "C'est-à-dire que si j'envisage une rhétorique, c'est une rhétorique par objet, pas seulement une rhétorique par poète, mais une rhétorique par objet. Il faut que ce mécanisme d'horlogerie (qui maintient l'objet) nous donne l'art poétique qui sera bon pour cet objet" (*OC* I, 668). This citation provides a timely reminder that for Ponge, too, composition is figured in terms of gears and clockwork.

[230] *ML*, 9-10.

Standard (in) Practice

      The poetry of Pierre Alferi has often been noted for its apparent formal character. His poems tend to look very much like poems. They are invariably versified, often broken into left-justified stanzas with a *majuscule* starting each line, and while his verses are always unrhymed they display a consistent, exuberant use of enjambment that for some critics renders Alferi's verse somewhat less than free. Jan Baetens, for instance, remarks that "[c]hez Pierre Alferi, le vers n'est pas libre, il est *de longueur variable*"—with line-length a measure, above all, of the number of syllables separating desirable instances of enjambment. "Ici, la bonne phrase est celle qui offre les meilleures possibilités de produire des effets de montage d'un vers à l'autre."[231] The alliance between the enjambment that is the most characteristic feature of Alferi's poetics and an idea of *montage*, film editing, is reinforced—at least glancingly—by all of the major voices in Alferi criticism.

      At the level of the collection, each of Alferi's seven poetry volumes is organized around an often explicit formal principle or conceit, which registers in some way the technological (or physiological, zoological) interests that color its content. For instance, Alferi's first book of poetry, *Les allures naturelles* (1991), sets out to describe and inscribe "les mouvements les plus quotidiens du corps, du regard et de la pensée" and names enjambment, which breaks his lines to create a sense of "gait" in the unfolding of meanings in each text, as the formal element employed to meet that charge.[232] A more recent book of poetry, *L'Estomac des poulpes est étonnant* (2008), presents something like the opposite: printed in landscape orientation, the lines do not enjamb, they go on and on "these tentacular verses" stretching into the whole length of the A4. In this volume, subtitled "Romance," the withholding of enjambment allows the astonishing stomach of the octopus ("capacité d'avaler n'importe quoi") to digest, in a certain sense, the rambling formlessness of a romance represented entirely through anecdote and sound bite.[233] I think Baetens is right when he says, with emphasis, that Alferi's verses are of variable length, rather than free, but I would specify further that the verses of each volume tend to unfold within a certain length-range; line length varies in ways particular to each volume, and presents on the page as a kind of identifying silhouette. Each volume is tuned to a different frequency or set of frequencies, according to the demands of the problems it is trying to work out, and each collects its poems as emissions that exploit the signal capacity to a greater or lesser extent. Throughout his poetic work, Alferi is engaged in a rigorous and ongoing experiment to see what passes, what it is possible to get into a text, when one restricts or expands—simplifies or *complicates*—the broadcast standard of a particular collection.

      The most formally standardized of Alferi's works is his 1994 volume *Kub Or*. Taking inspiration from its eponymous name-brand bouillon cube, the volume unfolds as a series of seven "cubes": sequences of seven poems each, with each poem composed of seven heptasyllabic lines. The central sequence is made up not of poems but of seven photos by Alferi's frequent collaborator Suzanne Doppelt, each one occupying precisely the same print-area as the poems. The first poem of the first sequence reads:

> au lieu de moquer marquise
> me font vos yeux beaux mourir
> penser images seconde
> arrangement d'étourneaux
> qui vont à la ligne haute

[231] Jan Baetens, "Entre récit et rhétorique : la phrase" *Cahier critique de poésie* 28 (2014): 28, 20.

[232] *Les allures naturelles* (Paris: P.O.L., 1991), back cover.

[233] *L'Estomac des poulpes est étonnant* (Paris: Éditions de l'Attente, 2008), n.p.

> tension battre le flip-book
> et revoir le mouvement
>
> *cinéma* (n.p.)

Critics have read this opening poem as paradigmatic of the way image technologies penetrate and shape Alferi's poetic and technical (lyricomechanical) imaginary. For Éric Trudel, who has written on speed as an important feature of Alferi's poetic preoccupations, the evocation of the optical toy of the flip-book in this opening poem, with a filial gesture towards the cinematic image, is decisive: "*Kub Or* […] is a sort of flip-book where split-second textual images pass in rapid succession and 'animate' the 'film' of reading if thumbed quickly enough."[234] That the first two lines of this first poem should offer a direct citation from Molière's *Le bourgeois gentilhomme* puts us squarely in mind of the remediating function of literary language. A source of comedy in the play, as the Bourgeois's philosophy teacher offers variations on the phrase "Belle Marquise, vos beaux yeux me font mourir d'amour," these lines' tortuous syntax is typical of *Kub Or*'s poems. This reference conjures syntax itself as a kind of standard that can only accommodate so much variation before its signals unsynch, and the infinitive phrase "penser images seconde" suggests we accelerate our thinking to match *this* technology's frame-rate. Already in these opening lines we see a confrontation between two artistic mediums—theatre and film—the latter of which regularly remediates the works of the former. But where one offers syntactic contortion and the demand for mobile, nonlinear reading, the other offers the sequential logic of the film reel (via the animation of the flip-book).

      In his book *Cinepoetics*, Christophe Wall-Romana digs further into image technologies, noting that "the genealogy of precinema and cinema in *Kub Or* is ultimately sublated into television—the cubical *gold* standard of global contemporary culture and experience."[235] He supports this claim with a compelling reading of the volume's final poem, in which we meet, at last, the bouillon cube.

> avant de plonger un kub
> or maggi l'on se met en
> état d'ébullition
> ah c'est si ah que c'est ah
> absorbant ces mots tampon
> périodique à déplier
> vite un autre un dernier vite
>
> *envoi*

Wall-Romana's close reading zeroes in on the odd dialectic between dissolution and absorption in the meeting of bouillon cube and tampon here and follows the metapoetic suggestion that the poem soaks up the words that might describe the ecstasy of this broth (*ah c'est si*), opening like a flower as it saturates to its limit. The analogy between "periodic secretions" and something one might ingest is "rescued from grossness" and brought back into the fold of literary-historical recuperation through a nod to Proust's madeleine, bathed in tisane. It is, however, his return to the relevance of television in his analysis that is of greatest interest to us here:

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[234] Éric Trudel, "Poems and Monsters: Pierre Alferi's 'Cinépoésie'," *SubStance* 39, 3 (2010): 41.

[235] Christophe Wall-Romana, *Cinépoetry: Imaginary Cinemas in French Poetry* (New York: Fordham UP, 2013), 289.

> *Kub Or* transforms the *madeleine*, via the tampon, into the cultural bouillon of the TV set and the TV program. […] The bouillon cube and the tampon function as allegorical objects, but they are likely to be recollections of ads seen on TV in the 1970s, and whose *unforeseen linkage* […] Alferi harnesses as a reversible model for the writing and reading of his postlyric poems.[236]

Instead of registering the bouillon cube and tampon as "split-second textual images" flashing by in a flip-book, Wall-Romana emphasizes their "unforeseen linkage" as consecutive commercials in the heterotopia of television images. Jean-Jacques Thomas has noted Alferi's general preference for metonymy over metaphor, and in this light the range of subjects and images that are brought into contiguous relation in television's flow seems destined to produce fortuitous convergences.[237] But, of course, the relationship between tampons and bouillon cubes in the context of television advertising is nothing if not foreseen. Here, Wall-Romana's reading requires a bit of extension. It is evident that these are products that "appeal" to women specifically through the interpellation of their biological function (reproduction) and one of their many household functions (food preparation).[238] The juxtaposition of these ads is above all evidence of the new frontier of targeted advertising that is opened up by the presence of the television in the home and of the tendency of these interests to communicate a consumer-demographic notion of identity.

The final lines of the poem stage a curious scene of lyric anxiety that brings the writing subject into view and recalls the quandary of literary expression detailed in "La mécanique lyrique" (written the year after *Kub Or*'s publication): the rush to sop up *this sensation* before it loses its potency ("vite un autre un dernier vite"). This anxiety is a real one in "La mécanique lyrique," one that motivates the need for technical interventions and experimentation. Here, though, it takes on a parodic quality as it seems to be triggered by the inarticulate boiling up of reported speech at the poem's center: "ah c'est si ah que c'est ah." With the advertising element in view, this expression of faux-astonishment, which reads like a sound-bite from such a commercial, suggests a critique of what passes for ecstasy, or for any feeling at all, in a society where desire is above all an achievement of marketing. And "these tampon words" tossed into the brew to soak up that sensory experience implicate, and satirize, the supposed absorptive qualities of a naive lyric expression through which empty pages are filled, as if by osmosis. The fully saturated tampons do indeed transform into a small bouquet: a trio of metaphorical flowers (of Tarbes?[239]), but soggy, flaccid, and at the end of their usefulness. "La mécanique lyrique" takes aim at a resurgent lyricism that is comorbid with the rapid commercialization of the literary market. As such, the analogy to the lyric portal of the madeleine would seem to have more to do with Alferi's literary present than with ennobling the tampon by positing a link to "its monumental literary antecedent."[240] If the tampon bears a relation to Proust's madeleine, it is a polemical one, one that points to the corruption of such devices in

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[236] Ibid*.,* 286. My emphasis.

[237] Jean-Jacques Thomas, "Pierre Alferi: A Bountiful Surface of Blues," *SubStance* 39:3 (2010): 17.

[238] The relationship between television and the gendered domestic economy has been much explored by media and cultural theorists. See, for instance: Lynn Spigel, *Make Room for TV: Television and the Family Ideal in Postwar America* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1992); David Morley, *Family Television: Cultural Power and Domestic Leisure* (London: Comedia/Routledge, 1986).

[239] The influence of Jean Paulhan's *Les Fleurs de Tarbes* looms large in "La mécanique lyrique," as Alferi and Cadiot try to make sense of the absurd repetition of the same conflicts generation after generation: "…le débat imbécile autour de la poésie oppose encore, sous divers déguisements, techniciens et inspirés" (*ML*, 11).

[240] *Cinepoetry*, 286.

the hands of neolyricists, to their commercial appeal, and more substantively to the newly suspect linking of images in what Alferi has elsewhere called "l'ère téléphage."[241] A tampon soaked in broth leaves us with nothing to savor, nothing to use: it makes the broth undrinkable and wastes a tampon. But their juxtaposition is something that we nevertheless ingest, alongside an episode of *Bouillon de culture* perhaps,[242] as the glowing world of television broadcast shows us who we are and what we want.

A poem subtitled "*préface*" shows the texts of *Kub Or* thinking of themselves, disparagingly, as analogous to TVs: "sept fois sept fois sept fois sept / […] cubes durs d'à peu près / n'importe quoi tiens comme à / la télé presque aussi bonne / que de comprimer l'ordure."[243] Television's infinite capacity to remediate images through an electronic signal that scans left to right and top to bottom suggests an obvious homology with writing, with its similar dis/advantage of welcoming just about anything into its transmissions.[244] As we've seen in the above analysis, reading the images of the name-brand bouillon cube and the tampon through a televisual lens clarifies to some extent what Alferi might consider to be rotten (*ordure*) in the content of television broadcasts, and especially in the telegenic wing of contemporary literature. But whereas that final poem cites television content to convey a certain pessimism about the horizons of desire in late capitalism, we find elsewhere in the volume an evocation of erotic apprenticeship in which the technical structure of the televisual image takes on notable significance.

> c'est donc ainsi dans la boîte
> noire entre signal reçu
> et crypté que la peau râpe
> la peau prédéchirée suivre
> pointillé d'un baladeur
> le très éloquent femelle
> ou mâle grésillement
>
> *film x*

The scene that emerges from this poem is one in which a pornographic film, scrambled to restrict access, is viewed clandestinely on the television, with its staticky audio coming through disjointedly over headphones. Part of what is memorable about such an experience (apart from the obvious) is the structural role the technical aspects of the television image play within it. The viewer takes in

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[241] Alferi, *Des enfants et des monstres* (Paris: P.O.L., 2004), 7.

[242] Direct successor to Bernard Pivot's *Apostrophes*, *Bouillon de culture* (also created and hosted by Pivot) ran 1991-2001 and introduced a more varied cultural program, not exclusively literary in focus. Alferi's title *Kub Or*, certainly intended to evoke this program, literalizes the link between cultural programming of this kind and the commercial sphere.

[243] This representation of the television as a trash compactor recalls Francis Ponge's similar likening of the radio to a "seconde boîte à ordures" ("La radio" in *Pièces*, *OC* I, 748).

[244] We can hear an echo here of my earlier comments on *L'Estomac des poulpes est étonnant*, where it is the octopus's "capacité à avaler n'importe quoi" that gives rise to the expansive formlessness of that volume's verses. This recurring emphasis on systems and technologies that can take in and integrate (ingest/digest) anything imaginable directs us to Alferi's interest in remediation, and from there to his more fundamental obsession with translation in all its forms. In the context of television and digital, this capacity to integrate any and all things becomes grounds for thinking—in more or less anxious terms—the end of medium itself (e.g. Friedrich Kittler, Rosalind Krauss, W.J.T. Mitchell). For Alferi, very much to the contrary, it is a pretense that attracts and energizes him.

what he can of this film as a voyeur, peeping not through a keyhole or a slit in the curtains but "entre signal reçu et crypté." The use of signal interference to scramble the image creates bands of distortion that run across the screen, and this distortion serves as a kind of technical reminder of transgression as the bodies on view are torn apart. Here, the structure of the televisual image—signal transmission, lateral scanning, the way access is controlled in such a system—gets tightly associated with titillation, and with the heightened titillation of accessing something forbidden. Just as the headphones silence the film's broken audio, the poem also works to keep the speaker's secret, offering the infinitive "suivre" where we might expect a confession conjugated in the first person (*je suis*).[245]

The disjointed syntax of "*film x*" seems to offer a similar representation, "en pointillé," to the one we imagine such a scrambling might produce. This evocation of hidden content—a full image of which we only get what makes it through the encryption—tempts the reader to see all of the poems of *Kub Or* as "scrambled," as transmitting a discursively coherent description that happens to be cut through with irregular bands of distortion. But the syntax of "*film x*" is no more scrambled than that of any other poem in the volume. What this poem describes is a disruption in television transmission that breaks the transparency of this medium in such a way as to reveal its technical structure. All image technologies are calibrated for transparency (if all goes well, the technology disappears so the viewer may imagine herself in the presence of the thing represented[246]), but the 7x7 standard of *Kub Or*'s poems seems calibrated to draw attention to the act of mediation itself. These poems collect the *n'importe quoi* of television images: batman t-shirts and merguez sausages, but also all manner of literal images and image technologies (especially those that are recognizable signposts in the history of the moving image). The *coupe standard* of their heptasyllables and the voicing of the *e muet* are rigorously enforced—and the rampant enjambments and contorted syntax these strictures oblige reroute the linear path of the television signal. Through this overt attention to the functioning of the televisual medium, these poems take a literal approach to the externalization of poetic images. By positing an "inside" filled with nothing but television images, *Kub Or* uses an uncompromising, asymmetrical, and patently insufficient standard to convey the radical mediatedness of our contemporary world.

Most critics have read *Kub Or* through the lens of film by way of the flipbook,[247] taking inspiration from the fixed 7x7 frame of each text and the well-noted emphasis Alferi brings to the mechanics of the film image ("24 fois la même fenêtre et le même laps"). But it is evident from what we've seen of these texts thus far that the kind of discontinuity *Kub Or*'s poems present is not that of discrete, sequential fragments that can be animated into continuity. The *coupe standard* provided by the heptasyllable, albeit anathema to French prosodic conventions and the preference for symmetrical hemistiches, is deployed with perfect regularity by Alferi as a technique for producing irregular, disjunctive effects. Meter here is enforced at the expense of referential

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245 We are reminded here of the grammatical transgression resulting in a similar elision of the first-person singular in Fragment XXXI of Emmanuel Hocquard's *Méditations photographiques sur l'idée simple de nudité*. In both cases we can read this as an upset of lyric expectation as the speaker refuses to claim possession of the perceptions reported in the text.

246 Medium transparency and immediacy are terms used interchangeably in media theory to describe the illusion that a technologically mediated image is in fact immediate to the viewer (in the sense of unmediated). See Bolter and Grusin, *Remediation. Understanding New Media* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999), *passim.*

247 In addition to Éric Trudel: François Berquin, "Un mauvais souvenir de Pierre Alferi," *Roman 20-50* (December 2006), 153-4; Agnès Disson, "Comme au cinéma, façonner des minutes réelles: Pierre Alferi," *Contemporary French and Francophone Studies* 9:3 (September 2005), 257; Heidi Peeters, "Visual Poetry, Poetic Visions and the Visionary Poetics of Pierre Alferi," *SubStance* 39:3 (2010), 53.

coherence, and the enjambment that the strict meter seems to oblige exacerbates the disarray. For Giorgio Agamben, an important thinker of enjambment and influence for Alferi, enjambment reveals "a disconnection between the metrical and syntactic elements, between sounding rhythm and meaning," a moment when meaning asserts itself beyond the limit of the verse's meter and pursues its course on the line below, which he refers to more evocatively as "a headlong dive into the abyss of meaning."[248] Under Alferi's pen, however, we can see that the instrumental alliance between enjambment and meaning is short-circuited by the metric limitations of the heptasyllable. Meaning in these poems comes through, like the disjointed audio of the *film x*, "en pointillé," as a result of the frequent omission of important elements of syntax and grammar (like the infinitive "suivre" given in the place of "je suis": one syllable is saved, but an important representational component is occluded). These omissions imposed by the syllabic economy of the meter (austerity cuts of a sort), obstruct the energetic flow of meaning that enjambment is supposed to enable. Yet, the perforated syntax of these poems, like the ubiquitous enjambment of their lines, can't help but give the sense that there is an underlying coherence, an uninterrupted flow, to which we would indeed have access, were it not for the uncompromising *coupe standard* of the heptasyllable.[249]

Changing Channels in *Sentimentale journée*

In 1997, Alferi publishes *Sentimentale journée*, a collection of poems "improvisés comme une conversation," each text representing multiple speakers who interrupt each other, ask and answer questions, pursue conversations already underway, with no external presence or narrator to establish the context which would bring coherence to these exchanges. The texts of this volume are quite long—often stretching onto a fourth page—, but irregularly so, and each is preceded by an epigraph—irregularly short—which presents the main topic (the best bits, the highlight reel) of the conversation to follow. The back-cover blurb explains: "Donc on voit en gros de quoi ils parlent (d'amour, du jour et de la nuit, de temps, de cinéma, de mouvement), et précisément ce qu'ils disent, mais pas très bien ce qu'ils veulent dire."[250] These poems are written, essentially, as transcriptions of dialogue, printing *precisely* what is said (in an act of what Hocquard might view as a kind of simulated literality), but without any of the contextual supports that would make this reported speech intelligible as such. Alferi casts us into a zone of personal references and unhinged deixis (the words "ça" and "voilà" appear with particular frequency, taunting us with their opaque indexical sufficiency); the volume is littered with context-dependent utterances that it presents without elaboration: so many reminders that the reader does not share the ground upon which these exchanges unfold. This conceit of the "conversation poem" brings with it a ready reference to Apollinaire and such famous texts as "Lundi rue Christine," but for Alferi it is one that relies not on a listener's attention being pulled from one conversation to another as he sits in a café scribbling snatches of eavesdropped exchanges, but on an imaginary technical support: the audio

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[248] Giorgio Agamben, *The Idea of Prose*, trans. Michael Sullivan and Sam Whitsitt (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1995), 40. Alferi's 1991 book-length essay *Chercher une phrase* is heavily influenced by this and other works by Agamben.

[249] This suggestion of an underlying referential coherence is reinforced, perhaps most visibly, in these poems by the regular appearance of long conjunctive phrases and markers of oral discursivity in their opening lines. A sample: "ce qu'il y a c'est…" (*pied*), "on se demande alors qui…" (*enseigne*), "le hic c'est que…" (*l'amour selon jules verne*), "or ce qu'il y a de dur…" (*sandwich*). These expressions strike the reader as curious, not only because they seem to situate the language of their poem within a coherent communicative frame in which certain kinds of explanation or description are called for, but also because they are long and grammatically unwieldy in a way that makes them seem glaringly out of place in the economy of the heptasyllable.

[250] Pierre Alferi, *Sentimentale journée* (Paris: P.O.L., 1997), back cover. Hereafter *SJ*.

track. Alferi has referred to these texts as "home movies"—movies documenting specific moments, captured *in medias res*, and perhaps sold off by accident in a yard sale. But if the audio is all that enters into these texts, of that we get only a transcript, and therefore we have no access to timbre, tone or delivery, and no way to be sure how many voices we're meant to be hearing. Apart from the frequent occurrence of questions (followed, usually, by replies) to indicate a plurality of voices, changes in speaker are only inconsistently marked by conventional long-dashes. As such, in addition to the invisibility of the image track of these home movies, much remains inaudible in what the poems give us to hear.

The technical conceit of the audio track is a useful one here, as it allows for the destabilization of reference and forces readers to cling fiercely to the references to pop culture, especially film, that scatter proper nouns across these texts (Fay Wray, *Titanic*, Buster Keaton) to anchor understanding. Within this audio track, though, we see a kind of formal variation that suggests a shift in channel, a shift in standard. While *Sentimentale journée* has received extensive critical treatment centering on its obsessive evocation of film images, production elements, and technology, or on its particularly spirited practice of enjambment, the inclusion in its pages of two very distinct types of poems has alluded analysis. The first type, the dominant form, are the conversation poems described above. These poems are wordy and each one has its particular thickness on the page, its own average line-length around which its verses vary irregularly. The second type is of a noticeably slimmer aspect on the page—with average line lengths of just six syllables or so—, extremely rare punctuation, often with a stanza structure that the conversation poems lack, and, critically, these poems appear to feature only one speaker. While these "monologue" poems still tend to have a certain discursive intention, they are much more elliptical in their approach to their theme or subject, which lends them an ambiguousness that is different in quality from the incomplete understanding of the eavesdropped conversation. If the conversations are talk, these monologues are more lyrical, more like song: "Et pouvoir tout / Vouloir sans / Savoir que / Vouloir si / Tu veux des choses médiocres."[251] By including these texts in and among the conversation poems, it is as if Alferi is not only signaling that he can switch to a more recognizably "poetic" standard whenever he pleases, but is also presenting this shift to a single speaker as generating a kind of formal constraint, a different technical standard that requires a different signal configuration.

If the ambiguities of the monologue poems strike us as somehow more comfortably poetic, those of the conversation poems integrate less easily. What references we can glean from these texts are often related to film and other technologies, although these usually emerge as metaphors in the description of other phenomena, often scenes of motion and communication that remain half-obscure. The poem "Allegria" provides a particularly interesting example. It opens, as do many of these texts, with a question:

> Quel est cet élan que tu prends dévalant
> L'escalier, marches enjambées du souffle habituel
> Quand tu aspires « hi », expires « han » jusqu'au tremplin
> De la rue ?[252]

This movement, the *élan* of the person addressed, is the central preoccupation of this text, and as we can see in this opening passage, it allows Alferi to bring together rhythms and breath in a description where the movement itself is punctuated with enjambment as one line after the next

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[251] *SJ*, 38.
[252] Ibid., 97.

takes the stairs to its downstairs neighbor. Each step is syncopated with a breath, in or out, and indeed it is the reader, speaking aloud, who "expire « han »" every third syllable in that first line ("cet él*an* que tu pr*ends* déval*ant* / L'escalier"). But if we're meant to accompany the figure with our breath here, the enjambment of these lines troubles our "souffle habituel" which doesn't know which set of habits to follow: breathing at the line-break or holding our breath as we make Agamben's "headlong dive into meaning"?

This text alternates between attempts to describe the movement of this person—bounding down the stairs and emerging on a city sidewalk—and considerations of how such a thing could be interrogated—how the questions could be asked. In venturing descriptions of this *élan*, "Allegria" displays an extraordinary attention to questions of physical movement and its observation, and on this latter count it kicks off a veritable parade of technical images.

> […] — À l'instant où tu rebondis
> Sur le trottoir après la dernière marche
> Tu n'es qu'un photogramme et le paysage avec toi
> Gelé par la touche « pause » du magnétoscope
> Mais qui ne veut pas s'arrêter, tremble comme une feuille
> Ou un rongeur piégé qui gigote pour rejoindre
> Ses semblables. L'image aussi veut rentrer dans la danse
> Des images/seconde. […][253]

As soon as the figure emerges at street level, he is registered as nothing more than a photogram, a film frame.[254] This "nothing more" is just as quickly amended, however, as the figure and his surroundings together find themselves not fixed in the film still, but frozen—"gelé"—by the pause button on the VCR. The still image, which in the cinematic context *precedes* the moving image it helps construct, shifts here from a photochemical image to a video image that has no intrinsic relation to stillness. The stillness of the paused video is registered here as stopped motion that retains its forward-moving energy, its desire to carry on, trembling like a leaf or a captive rodent hoping to wriggle out of his unnatural arrest. This image *wants* to get back to its *semblables*, wants to return to the flow of the moving image—to its frame rate. But something important has broken down in this slide from one kind of image to another. The concept of a photogram as the basic discrete unit for the creation of a moving image simply doesn't apply to video. The art critic Bruce Kurtz has remarked that "film, with its twenty-four complete still frames per second, reflects an illusion of movement, while television, with its constantly changing configuration of dots of light, provides an illusion of stillness."[255] Any still image presented in video or on television is in fact moving, the rasterized light making it visible never ceases to scan left to right. And in the moving video image, what we might call a "frame"—the mostly still image one sees when one pauses video playback, for instance—is not a coherent unit. In video, each frame is made up of interlaced fields based on two consecutive images, with one image coming through on odd numbered lines and the other coming through on evens. Video does not and cannot visualize the spatiotemporal unity of the film still; the paused image has one foot on either side of an instant—locating both sides and

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[253] Ibid., 98.

[254] While there's nothing stopping us from reading "photogramme" as a reference to the early photographic form, and the contact-print silhouettes it creates, in French the use of this term to refer to a film frame is much more common.

[255] Cited in Helen Westgeest, *Video Art Theory: A Comparative Approach* (Malden, MA: Wiley & Sons, 2016), 31.

neither—which is to say that an "instant" is something different when mediated by way of electromagnetism. And indeed, the isolated certainty of the film still emerges in "Allegria" in the isolated certainty of the instant—"à l'instant où"—but this certainty is quickly swapped for the undecidable instant of the video image which offers a more apt figure for the sense of potential energy that characterizes this *élan*, and triggers the analogies to a leaf and a trapped rodent that thread back to the "danse / Des images/second." If this movement must be captured—stopped—in order to be considered, the intrinsic dynamism of video beats film's intrinsic stillness. This metonymic slide from film to video not only demonstrates Alferi's tendency toward building poetic images out of extant or imagined technical images—his bent towards remediation as a general metaphorical principle—but also stages an instance of image remediation that supports in technologically specific ways this poem's attempt to get this particular quality of movement to pass from perception to language.

PART TWO: Moving Images

If the primary technical charge of literature, as "La mécanique lyrique" suggests, is figuring out how interior, "sensory-affective" agglutinations come to be exteriorized in literary form, Alferi adds as its secondary technical charge the production of movement in a text. As we've seen, this is a challenge he addresses in his poetry by experimenting widely with the technical possibilities provided by enjambment. But this preoccupation takes him further. What Alferi describes as "le besoin de matérialiser davantage le rythme et le mouvement d'un texte écrit, dans l'espace et dans le temps" motivates him, in the late nineties, to start experimenting with the time-constrained formats of public readings, live performance, and musical collaborations.[256] He is interested, in this work, in a "modelage du temps," in staging encounters between the virtualities of linguistic representation and the "palpable time" of the spectator.[257] After familiarizing himself with emerging tools for amateur video production, Alferi moves these investigations to the screen. This progression, from text to performance to film, is a logical one, he tells us, "comme de continuer à essayer la même chose avec d'autres moyens."[258]

Alferi's start as a filmmaker, at the turn of the millennium, coincides with his participation in another project: a weekly column commissioned for the now-defunct website of the *Cahiers du cinéma*, pieces eventually collected in the 2004 volume *Des enfants et des monstres*. The brief was simple: he would select a film from among those programmed to play on television that week and write a short article about it. As Alferi describes in the volume's preface, "L'éternelle reprise," his own interest in the series lay in a fascination, anchored in childhood, for the experience of watching films on television: "Les films y sont des souvenirs, déchets, carlingues de vieux vaisseaux encombrant le ciel cathodique. Ils y tournent et se heurtent, rognés au bord, grisés."[259] Writing in a lexicon borrowed from the sci-fi and genre films Alferi finds himself reviewing, he emphasizes the diminished quality of televised films—"souvenir d'une séance, mais sans son sex-appeal"—, as if the journey from celluloid to signal, and eternally thereafter from transmitter to receiver, were wearing them down little by little, or alternately plying them with drink till they see double (*grisés*). This is not a difference of quality that we would think much of today, as analog television fades into obsolescent oblivion, but in the 1960s and 70s (when Alferi was a child watching westerns in

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[256] Éric Trudel, "'Un grand livre d'images ouvert': Correspondance avec Pierre Alferi," 166. Hereafter *GL.*
[257] Ibid.
[258] *CE,* 17.
[259] Pierre Alferi, *Des enfants et des monstres* (Paris: P.O.L., 2004), 7.

his living room) the mismatched standards of film and TV still yielded a noticeably altered viewing experience, which *Intime*'s horse sequence which helped open this chapter captures as a kind of technological *déjà-vu*.

This encounter between film and television, a major presence in Alferi's childhood, forces an awareness of the technological difference of these media, of what passes and what doesn't in the conversion from film to TV, and with it the sense that the movement of film from the cinema into people's homes comes at a price. In addition to the scan line effect—the visibility of lines composing the television image—that can score the image and the color standard of a given TV that might have nothing of celluloid's richness, television requires a faster frame-rate than film (25-30 frames per second compared with film's 24). As a result, films converted for broadcast on analog television had a visual aspect that was distinct both from their own cinematic version and from programming shot directly on video cameras. Because movie cameras shoot at 24 frames-per-second, the film image contains less "information" than what video's interlaced fields require to play smoothly. This mismatch in the effective frame-rate produces, for television viewers, either a flicker effect (because the television camera catches some of the black film that is invisible to us at 24 fps) or a film that has been literally sped up, such that its audio track plays at a half-tone higher frequency than in the original and its running time is contracted. Most television systems opted for this latter compromise, preferring slightly shorter and shriller film broadcasts to a flickering image that made the incomplete compatibility of film and television difficult to ignore. A televised film is a banal instance of what the artist and cultural theorist Hito Steyerl refers to as "poor images," images whose quality has been exchanged for mobility and accessibility.[260] The inferior quality of these images indexes not only the event of their remediation as signal for television broadcast, but also the parameters of their initial mediation as film. This experience of remediation is primary and foundational for Alferi, a kind of awakening to the mediated-ness of visual media. The series for *Cahiers du cinéma* prompts him to revisit the dynamics of this experience and take its measure, just as the tools of amateur video production fall into his hands. The directed attention to mediation and remediation, audiovisual standards, and the *technical* functioning of medium that this weekly commitment occasions is the backdrop against which Alferi's own filmmaking activity takes shape.

His *films parlants*—the first films Alferi made with his editing software—are described, on the back of their DVD case, as "des réminiscences cinématographiques." Each of the four films of this type proposes a radical re-editing of an old Hollywood film, producing an often dreamlike remix of shots suggestive of the form these films have taken on in Alferi's memory. The talkies he "remembers" in these *films parlants*, and which the name of the form indexes, find themselves paradoxically silenced, rendered *muets*, with a new text—Alferi's—superimposed as subtitles or, in two cases, read aloud by the author as voice-over. The *cinépoèmes*, for their part, are a simpler form. Where the *films parlants* are films, made to speak a strange poetry, the *cinépoèmes* are poems that extend their work into the cinematic medium. They are composed exclusively of text, generally with no photographic component. The words are animated on the screen, appearing and disappearing, to produce visual rhythms that disrupt the sequential coherence of the sentence. These *cinépoèmes* "ne cachent rien de leur intention" (hide nothing of their intention), each one testing out different procedures—fades and superpositions, rate and rhythm of the appearance of the text, interaction with sonic elements, simultaneous demands on the viewer's reading attention—in order to explore the possibilities produced out of the confrontation "entre le fil temporel qui déroule les phrases et l'espace de l'image."[261]

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[260] Hito Steyerl, "In Defense of the Poor Image," *The Wretched of the Screen* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2012), 32.
[261] *CE*, 12.

Both of these forms are entirely computer-generated, and each makes use of a subset of the specific technical capabilities of the digital format. The *films parlants*, composed of "found" celluloid footage that is converted to digital and submitted to the kind of free-wheeling editing that this format makes possible, present a particularly interesting case in this regard.[262] Indeed, their remediation of existing cultural images points to the paradoxes surrounding the digital medium that so effortlessly appropriates and repurposes all others. What some media critics see as a regrettable "convergence of media" in the digital format—the reduction of all different kinds of inputs to the numerical language of code—that might harken the end-times of the notion of medium itself,[263] Alferi praises as "une chance." This "traductibilité générale des objets visuels, écrits et sonores"[264] afforded by digital is a lucky strike for his investigative pursuits, opening up an array of tools to "materialize" his research into the interactions between meaning, image, and time. Éric Trudel has emphasized the role of translation in the *films parlants*, whose name translates "talkies," reading the film "La Berceuse de Broadway" and its reappropriation of the movie musical *Gold Diggers of 1935* and translation of the lyrics to the song "The Lullaby of Broadway" as an example of "translation at a price": the silencing of the soundtrack and the editing out of the famous Busby Berkeley dance sequence with which the song is associated.[265] This chapter intervenes to extend this reading in view of Alferi's thinking on technique. The self-conscious presence of translation that Trudel draws out in his reading of "La Berceuse de Broadway" seems to me to index, perhaps most of all, the specific medial translation that the celluloid film undergoes to become fodder for Alferi's digital experiments.

Figure 5. Alferi, *La Protection des animaux* (2000).

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[262] Éric Trudel refers to Alferi's reappropriation of film images in these works as "highjackings," the forceful commandeering of an old film, turning it towards his own purposes. I might characterize them rather as "joyrides" given the gleefulness with which Alferi explores the editing tools newly available to him. See Trudel, "Poems and Monsters," 44.

[263] See, for instance, Mary Ann Doane, "Indexicality: Trace and Sign," 3.

[264] *CE*, 9.

[265] "Thus, in 'La Berceuse de Broadway,' Winifred Shaw sings in vain, and it is useless to listen, as we are enjoined to do by the subtitle: 'tendez l'oreille et écoutez' ['Come on along and listen to…']. For the soundtrack offers nothing more than the sound of a projector running—a sound more associated with silent films and which we naturally associate with the origins of cinema" ("Poems and Monsters," 44-5).

The passage of the *films parlants*' images from recognizable origins on celluloid to video and then to digital presents a legible chain of remediations. Figure 4, for instance, shows a *film parlant* that is entirely composed of shots from the 1955 Charles Laughton film *Night of the Hunter*. The appropriation of these more or less recognizable images serves the express purpose of reproducing them as reminiscences, as images already transformed by time (an effect which the obvious remediation of celluloid through video produces as a kind of technological analogy of remembrance). If I reached for *Intime* at the top of this chapter to illustrate Alferi's inclination towards remediated images, rather than for the *films parlants*, it is in part because of the illegibility of the chain of remediations in the former case. The standard of the Hungarian television renders the original format of the horse footage simply indiscernible. Where the *films parlants* work with film images to convey how they deform and take on new meaning (and hallucinatory potential) as they lodge in the memory of an obsessive cinephile, *Intime* bypasses the cinematic image entirely as it summons television, video and digital to evoke the putative origins of the moving photographic image in Marey's chronophotographic studies. The horse sequence of *Intime* asserts an explicit logic of image remediation that does not take the celluloid moving image as its center (its ground), but rather embraces the groundlessness of this television's wonky, contingent translation of footage that can no longer refer us to its origins. The effect achieved in this sequence, as I have noted, is one of uncanny disjunction between the expectation of "presentness" from the television broadcast (the continuous near-instantaneity of signal transmission), and the unplaceable pastness of the images thus transmitted. Whereas the *films parlants* are overtly past-facing as their images index not only the "that-has-been" of their factual, datable origins but also that of the specific event(s) of Alferi's viewing of them registered in the shimmering, oracular condensation they take on as they make their mark on his imagination,[266] *Intime* deploys other kinds of images to interrogate how technological mediation shapes, and deforms, the experience of the "this-is-going-on" of the present.

The de-centering of the cinematic image in *Intime* is notable, not only for the point of contrast it provides with respect to the *films parlants*, but also because, as I noted above, the cinematic image is unanimously viewed by critics as a center of gravity for this author and his imaginary. As we will see in the reading to follow, Alferi's exploration of the technical features of digital film is accompanied and spurred on not only by his fascinations with the film-based cinematic image, but by his keen awareness of the mediated quality of images in general. This move into the domain of the audio-visual creates a moment of convergence in his creative activity where we can observe, better than anywhere else, his approach to medium, his awareness of the technical possibilities that open up when he takes his creative work out of the "temps libre du livre" and into the "temps mesurable, fixé du film,"[267] and of the specific profile—the unique *standard*—of both digital and photochemical technologies of the moving image.

Intime

In 2002, with his *Cinépoèmes & films parlants* soon to be released on DVD,[268] Alferi creates the short film *Intime* as an occasional and site-specific component for a solo exhibition of his audio-visual work at L'Espace Multimédia Gantner in the village of Bourogne in northeastern France. A DVD of *Intime* accompanies the 2013 re-publication of a collection of poems bearing the same

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[266] Éric Trudel notes, along these lines: "The practice of the *Films parlants*—borrowing, quoting, hijacking and re-editing various films[…]—far from proclaiming its originality, seems simply to lean on an anterior reality" (ibid, 42).
[267] *CE*, 44.
[268] *Cinépoèmes & films parlants*, DVD (Aubervilliers: Les Laboratoires d'Aubervilliers, 2003).

title, and the blurb on its back-cover classes the film among the "cinépoèmes de Pierre Alferi."[269] Within the ecosystem of his filmmaking, however, *Intime* is remarkably distinct. It is composed of footage shot by Alferi himself as he traveled through Central and Eastern Europe. While these images were filmed prior to Alferi's conception and realization of this film project, it is notable that they are not "found" images as in the case of the *films parlants* but are rather *his* images, associated with his perspective, with the situation of his own body as it traveled through space along particular trajectories. And while the text that accompanies these images in subtitle does indeed constrain its reading to a particular "cadence," in keeping with the brief of the *cinépoèmes*, this cadence is so slow that one is tempted to judge the orchestration of the text to be of secondary importance to the treatment of the images on which it is superimposed. *Intime* does not fit comfortably into either of these forms, and as such any understanding of the work this film does must begin with a careful appraisal of its formal and thematic features.

    Intime was commissioned specifically for the solo exhibition mentioned above, and ultimately lends its title to the exhibition as a whole. The film features ten distinct image sequences, each with a minimal text superimposed on its surface, and accompanied by musical and sound compositions by Rodolphe Burger. The images are digital, shot on a Sony camcorder as Alferi traveled eastward from Paris, and they record literal movements through space and time in contact with different mediums of personal transport: three sequences shot from inside a moving train; a brief view of clouds seen from a plane window; exterior shots of a busy street with buses, trams and cyclists passing; or of a city square traversed and re-traversed by pedestrians. The texts are short and elliptical, composed of no more than six lines per image-sequence. While never in clear referential relation to the images they hover over, these lines largely evoke the kind of suspended or dilated time one can experience while traveling: a deferred landing as your airplane circles above a busy airport, a meeting postponed as soon as you arrive in the foreign city where it was to be held. These texts unfold in the interval of deferred communication imposed on two people—lovers, perhaps—separated in space and time, between departure and return. They sketch a kind of one-sided correspondence, the chatter of the lonely traveler, full of questions—alternately banal and quasi-profound—that go unanswered, full of second-person pronouns that perform a communicative relation but that may just as readily point to the apostrophic tendencies of the *journal intime*. The film's eponymous intimacy hovers here between isolation and relationality, posing the full paradox of the role played by virtuality and mediation within the intimate address, which is constantly negotiating between presence and absence, between self and other, and relying on communicative channels to perform or perhaps rehearse a virtual closeness in the face of actual separation.

    The thematic investments suggested by the content of *Intime*'s images and text, together with the title itself, provide a perhaps misleading introduction to this work, however. When one views the film, its fictional premise and its affective implications take a backseat to the overwhelming primacy of the film's formal features. Consider this still from early in the opening sequence.

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[269] Pierre Alferi, *Intime* (Paris: Argol Éditions, 2013 [2004]). Hereafter *IT*. We will note in passing here that the volume referenced is a re-edition of a poetry collection Alferi originally published shortly after the film's exhibition, which collects and expands upon the texts from the film. The 2013 re-edition from Argol Éditions includes the DVD of the film (not included with the 2004 volume) and represents this audiovisual work's only official publication.

Figure 6. *Intime.*

The outside world flashes by rapidly, right to left, as the train travels express, bypassing the Vesoul train station whose sign we can barely make out. Alferi splits his moving image into vertical panels each of which is set deliberately out of sync with the others. At their normal playback speed, these images move quickly enough to conceal the logic of their *montage*, but not so quickly that the viewer gives up groping for that understanding. Our eyes flit back and forth, trying to track the left-bound movement of details across the panels, but these efforts rarely bear fruit. This study of the images' composition is frustrated further by the arrival of text, which must be read left-to-right, against the current of the passing façades. The editing techniques that Alferi applies to his images here, as well as the carefully timed titles delivering a sparse text, suggest an experimental project which hooks into several of the preoccupations that readers of his poetry will recognize as central to that work: the unfolding of images and meanings in time, the principle of montage as it relates to poetic enjambment, the temporalities of viewing and reading, the animation of text that here becomes literal.

Alferi refers to the editing technique applied to these images as a "montage feuilleté." This expression suggests not only a layering and puffing (in reference to the lamination of puff pastry: *la pâte feuilletée*) but also, activating its participial sense, something "flipped through," conjuring the flipbook and the potency of that form in Alferi's imaginary. The innovation of this technique in the context of *Intime*, however, is that here the flipping happens not between image frames—as in the flipbook or indeed the cinematic image—but *within* the space of the image frame itself. In preparatory notes for *Intime*, reproduced in the exhibition brochure, Alferi describes an act of cutting "dans le sens du film, le sens du temps."[270] In the opening sequence, pictured above, this cutting into the "direction of time" is significantly determined by the direction of the train's travel; the "direction of the film" is the direction of the movement it represents: building façades and greenery swiftly passing, right-to-left. This action on time, in which slices of different frames are made to coexist and play back their footage side by side in endless *décalage*, is described by Alferi as a means to explore a notion of *instant* "dont l'élasticité devient visible par la dilatation, le feuilletage dans l'image, et non plus seulement le ralenti."[271] This reference to slow-motion effects serves to define Alferi's *montage feuilleté* against the limitations of analog film—tied to an illusion of continuity that it can only speed up or slow down— and to indicate something of the technical potential of his new digital tools. This introduction of disjuncture within the image-frame of *Intime* allows Alferi both to draw attention to the discontinuity that undergirds the illusions of the moving image and

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[270] *CE,* 45.
[271] Ibid., 44.

to suggest something about the potential of the digital image to represent, through its distinct means, a distinct experience of time: "le fait d'être dans le temps (*in time*)."

Alferi, a savvy observer and thinker of media, is well aware of the disputed status of the digital image when it comes to its relation to time. Where the photochemical image has an internal and necessary relation to time through the contingency of its exposure, the digital image can make no such claim. Because digital cameras convert light patterns into code, they operate via translation and computation rather than contact, and digital code has an immateriality that slips easily into a purported sense of timelessness. The film *Intime* explores the capacity of the digital image (specific to the digital image) to represent time and in doing so probes the indexical features of the moving image, its relation to photography, the historical development of the cinematic image and the various forms of technical mediation that contribute to the "évidence audio-visuelle" of film.

The Cinematic Index

In 2007, film scholar Mary Ann Doane edited a special issue of the journal *differences* entitled "Indexicality: Trace and Sign" which tracks a revalorization of the concept of indexicality in contemporary photographic, film and media studies as a way for critics and creators to grapple with the status and specificity of photochemical images (and of the image in general) in the digital era. In her introduction to the volume as well as in the essay she contributes to it, Doane turns to semiotic theorist Charles Sanders Peirce's taxonomy of signs—icon, symbol, and index—and draws out the complexities of this latter sign as instructive in our thinking of photographic media today.[272] Where the icon signifies by its resemblance to its object (a painted portrait, for example), the symbol signifies via a conventional and arbitrary system of meaning (most words, but also the H sign indicating the proximity of a hospital even in places where the word for hospital does not begin with an h). The index, distinct from these more straightforward signs, is a sign defined by the physical, material relationship it bears to its object, and it is most often thought of as a kind of trace: a footprint, a death mask, a photochemical image traced by the physical effects of the light it records. This kind of index, Doane specifies, functions in part as an icon, because these traces resemble the objects they point to (foot, face, luminous field). But Peirce himself emphasizes another kind of index: the deictic or shifter in language (personal and demonstrative pronouns, words like "here" and "now," a pointing finger, etc.), and indeed he points to the sentence "Look at this!" as not just one example of an indexical utterance (language pointing to something), but an *exemplary* instance of the index in general. The index as deictic, operating not through resemblance but through linguistic meaning, participates in the logic of the symbol. But even here, the index as deictic retains a crucial physical relationship to its object, even if the causal link is weaker than in the trace, in that these signs can only signify within the spatiotemporal frame of their articulation.[273]

Classic theorizations of the ontology of the photographic image have emphasized the trace aspect of the photochemical image as its defining feature. André Bazin, in his seminal 1945 essay "Ontologie de l'image photographique," sees the photograph as benefitting from a *transfer* (a contact print) of the object's reality onto its reproduction; for Roland Barthes, in *La chambre claire*, "[l]a photographie est littéralement une émanation de son référent."[274] The photograph is not only proof of its object's existence, it is made out of its object's visibility: the light the object reflects, the light that makes it visible, becomes visible again in the photograph. It is the consistency of

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[272] Mary Ann Doane, "Indexicality: Trace and Sign: An Introduction" and "The Indexical and the Concept of Medium Specificity," *d i f f e r e n c e s* 18, 1 (2007): 1-6, 128-152. Hereafter *ITS*.

[273] *ITS*, 2.

[274] André Bazin, "Ontologie de l'image photographique," in *Qu'est-ce que le cinéma ?* (Paris: Les Éditions du Cerf, 1958), 14; Roland Barthes, *La Chambre claire. Note sur la photographie* (Paris: Gallimard Seuil, 1980), 126.

material here—light to light, exposure of the negative to exposure of the photo paper—that allows one to think of the photograph as a *literal* trace, an *identical* copy, of its referent. The perfect resemblance that photography achieves with respect to its referent is what dazzled the public most in the early days of photography, and this strong link between the index-as-trace and a certain iconic perfection has dominated thinking on photographic indexicality. Doane emphasizes, though, that, for Peirce, however exact the resemblance between the photograph and its object—however precise this trace—it is the fact of physical connection between the object and its photographic sign that secures its status as an index (the iconic valence, while present, is secondary to the rule of physical relation).[275] This is because the principle that unifies the index as a type of sign including both physical traces and deictic gestures and utterances is the principle of *contiguity*—a necessary physical proximity, a shared context—between sign and referent. Where icons and symbols can signify at a distance, the index is the sign of the same-place-at-the-same-time, a physical coincidence in which traces can be made and deictic meaning can be stabilized. Speaking of the spatiotemporal contingency of personal and demonstrative pronouns, Doane explains that the word "'this' can only be defined, can only achieve its referent, in relation to a specific and unique situation of discourse, the here and now of speech."[276] In deictic expressions, language abandons its symbolic self-sufficiency and "seems to touch ground," to ground its meanings as completely as possible in the present reality of its utterance. But where the index as trace outlasts the moment of contiguity in which it was produced, the index as deixis exhausts itself in that moment and on that ground. It is emptied of its meaning as its utterance becomes past.

If Doane makes these precisions, emphasizing this other side to the index, it is because the cinematic image, with its reproduction of "life itself," real actions unfolding in time as they would in real perception, is overwhelmingly identified with the index as trace, with little critical attention paid to the significance of the deictic acceptation of the index. But Doane argues that deixis, too, is central to the question of the specificity of the medium of film. The demonstrative function of the film image is active in the act of shooting film footage, but perhaps more crucially in the actualized present of viewing. In both instances it is the frame of the image, selecting *this* field, *this* focal point and *this* degree of zoom, that we can see something of Peirce's indexical imperative: "Look at this!" In the constrained temporality of film-viewing, where spectators do not have the power to intervene in the image to rewind and re-watch the sequences that pass them by, the ephemeral quality of the deictic is apparent. Look at this, now this, now this, the film reel says. The shifter shifts with each frame. Bringing together these two valences of the index, Doane explains: "The frame directs the spectator to look here, now, while the trace reconfirms that something exists to be looked at."[277] Doane is working here to produce a more thorough accounting of the centrality of the index to the specificity of these photochemical media. And if the index is elevated as a core concept for defining the particularity of photochemical media, it is to define these media *against* the increasing prevalence and cultural dominance of the digital image, which is considered to be *non-indexical*.

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[275] Doane cites Peirce explaining that the perfect resemblance achieved by the photograph is secondary to its physical, indexical relation to its referent: "…this resemblance is due to the photographs having been produced under such circumstances that they were physically forced to correspond point by point to nature. In that aspect, then, they belong to the second class of signs, those by physical connection" (*ITS*, 134).

[276] Ibid*., 136.

[277] Ibid*., 140.

Digital Indexicality: the pointing finger

The non-indexicality of the digital image is argued as a lack of *necessary* relation, or internal necessity, between the image and the field of reality it purports to represent. I will be speaking here about digital *photography*, but it is an important part of the problematic nature of digital images that they are by no means necessarily photographic—images can be created from scratch, or out of existing photographic material, and a photographic effect can be simulated without recourse to a camera. As far as the digital photograph is concerned, the instability of its indexical function is due to the translation of the image into binary code, which unlike the film negative bears no *resemblance* to its object, is itself invisible and immaterial, and which can be easily manipulated without leaving any trace that a manipulation has occurred. The potential alterability of the digital image file means that the trace function of the photograph, which "reconfirms that something *exists* to be looked at," is contaminated. The digital format, based as it is on translation, invisibility, and alterability, cannot in itself *guarantee* the existence of what is depicted in a digital photograph. And because the index is founded on a principle of contiguity in time and space, the digital photograph—unable to attest to the verifiable existence of the forms it represents—is understood consequently to be *atemporal* or *de-temporalized*. Doane asserts that "the digital image has no internal, necessary, or inalterable relation to time since its temporal specificity is 'guaranteed' only by an external system, subject to manipulation."[278] Because of its recourse to binary code—a translation that creates a disjunction of format where the photochemical process maintains a kind of material continuity throughout (all is light and photosensitivity)—the digital photograph cannot claim an indexical relationship to time. This timelessness is, of course, related to the supposed immateriality of the digital format, which is part of its attraction and promise: a "medium" sheltered from material decay. If Doane views the digital era as a potentially dangerous one, it is because the dream of immateriality and timelessness associated with information technologies (data that survives, unchanged and forever accessible, despite the rapid transformation of hardware and software) points to a receding awareness of historicity, of matter and bodies as things subject to time, degradation and death.

But as Doane herself sought to underline in her essays on indexicality and medium specificity, the indexicality of the cinematic medium is not only about its relationship to matter and its preservation of past moments of contact and exposure (index-as-trace); it is also about the actualized presence of deixis that operates in the moment of viewing. It is, after all, the production of this "present" of visualization in which the viewer observes the *movement* of the moving image that distinguishes this form from the still photograph, and adds complexity to the operation of its indexical features. Accepting for now the fact that digital photography lacks any claim to the indexicality of the trace (and indeed it could be argued that because it traffics in intersemiotic translation it is organized more on the model of symbolic signs than indexical ones), it is less obvious that the index-as-deixis wouldn't have some relevance to the digital image. Doane stops short of making this argument, however, focusing only on how this feature of the index might elaborate critics' formulation of the specificity of the celluloid cinematic image.

Considering the specificity of the digital moving image, art historian and media theorist Boris Groys argues, in his 2008 essay "From Image to Image File—and Back: Art in the Age of Digitization," that it is in the here and now of visualization that the digital image shows its most defining feature. Focusing specifically on digital video installations, Groys's approach provides a useful counterpoint to Doane's emphasis on the cinematic image. His argument rests on the ideas of timelessness, immateriality and invisibility associated with the digital image file. Reduced to the 1s and 0s of binary code, hidden inside a computer, phone or memory chip, the digital image file

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[278] Ibid.*,* 150.

is an invisible "original" from which a visible "copy" (the visualized image) is produced. "[B]ecause the digital copy is a copy that has no visible original," Groys extrapolates, "the event of its visualization [each time its file is decoded to present the visible correlate of the invisible code] *is an original event*."[279] This claim to originality is based not only on the relation between the visible and the invisible, but also on a relation between the unchanging and the contingent. Even if the image file itself is extraordinarily stable over time, the tools—hardware and software—deployed to read that file and visualize its contents are ceaselessly in flux. This means that any given visualization is subject to changes in resolution, clarity, color richness, etc. depending on the specific "generation", condition, and technical profile of the support on which it is viewed. These variations operate as readings or interpretations of the digital file, which is decoded into the technical idiom of each screen (think of a DVD player hooked up to an HD screen: such screens can visualize *more* image data than others and the DVD player "reads" the data in view of the specifications of the viewing technology; the same player would read out the data differently for a different screen). The here and now of visualization must therefore be understood to be grounded not only in the actualized indication operated by the image's frame and replicated each time a video is played (Look at this, now this, now this!), but also in the technical specificity underlying the circumstances of each individual visualization (Look at this, here, on *this* screen, with *this* number of pixels, etc.). Groys's argument shifts the discussion of indexicality entirely away from the trace feature of the photochemical image—the relation to the real world and the guarantee of its existence, then and there—and towards the index-as-deictic, the pointing finger implicit in the act of visualizing digital images. In doing so, he diverts attention from the ontological claim of the photochemical image in favor of the ontological specificity and situatedness of the hardware that makes digital images visible.

Intime's investigation of the index

It is not in ignorance of the debates around indexicality and the digital image that Alferi sets out to create a film exploring the condition of being submerged in time, and titled "In time," in the digital format. And the relevance of digital to the conception and execution of this film is not merely incidental, as a format that gives amateurs access to filmmaking, even ones like Alferi who admits that his "compétences dans ce domaine sont ridicules."[280] Rather, I argue here that, more than any other of his films, *Intime* can be seen as exploring the specific medial contours of celluloid and digital, very explicitly as they relate to the representation of time and to the relation to time that each of these formats claims. As we've seen in our turn to Mary Ann Doane and Boris Groys in the previous section, the specificity of the mediums of celluloid and digital (celluloid *against* digital, for Doane) is debated on the grounds of their respective indexical claims, and the different ways these claims are formulated to privilege either the trace feature of the photographic image or the deictic features of the digital. It is with this in mind that we turn back to *Intime*.

The *montage feuilleté* that Alferi employs as the dominant formal principle of this film is central to its investigation of the indexical properties of its own images. Most notably, it is a technique that deploys digital editing tools in order to manipulate the moving image in ways that would not be achievable on celluloid. The editing of celluloid happens between its discrete frames, in the stripe of blank film that links the *photogrammes* while separating them one from the next. The cuts are horizontal across the vertical axis of the filmstrip. When the projection of a celluloid image says "look at this, now this, now this," as the frames track through the projection gate fast enough to render their separateness invisible, the seriality it creates is vertical. This is part of the power the

[279] Boris Groys, *Art Power* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2008), 85.
[280] *CE,* 13.

cinematic image exerts on Alferi's poetics, as this verticality relates to the sequencing of lines in a poem. Here, though, Alferi cuts into the image frame itself. The seriality he produces is horizontal, and backwards-facing, as each panel begins its playback "behind" that of the one to its right, as if each one were perpetually failing to "catch up" to its neighbor. And, of course, where the vertical seriality of film frames is erased from view in their projection, this horizontal seriality is not only eminently visible (one could argue that it is the beginning and end of "what there is to see" in these images) but it indeed impedes—definitively—the viewing of continuous movement that this technical principle makes possible in film.

In splicing the image in this way, Alferi references the discontinuity of film frames that underlies the effect of real-time continuity that the cinematic image achieves. In his notes, he describes these cuts as operating an "action sur le temps," an action that subverts the indexical coherence of the moving image by breaching the unity of the film frame and the uniqueness of the "instant" with which this photographic unit is associated.[281] Alferi's instant is multiple and unresolving. The train window provides a frame that confirms the position occupied by the camera (within the space of the train car), and establishes a point of view that seems to be fixed in space but not in time. We seem to know where we're looking from, but not when. For Doane, "indexicality is inevitably linked with the singular, the unique, with the imprint of time and all its differentiating force."[282] In these images, which deprive the viewer of a temporally stable point of view, it is precisely the singularity of the instant that is contested.

In addition to subverting the indexical integrity of the image frame, this editing technique also draws attention to the treacherousness of the digital image with its "ease of manipulation" and inability to guarantee the spatiotemporal unity of the forms it captures. Because this technique amounts to stitching together specific portions of four different frames, it brings with it the possibility of juxtaposing footage from non-contiguous points along the train's path, footage taken on different occasions along that same train line, or indeed footage from merely resemblant locations—close enough to "pass" as part of the same landscape when viewed at full speed.

Figure 7. *Intime.*

The images remain ambiguous on this point, but we can see in this shot contrasts in the illumination of the seatback, for example, that might suggest shoots from different times of day or under

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[281] This association, and the model of time as composed of discrete, immobile units that it proposes, has been a famously contested one, since the earliest days of photography. Henri Bergson is the figure most strongly associated with the refutation of this view and its supposition of the divisibility and rationalization of time. See Suzanne Guerlac, *Thinking in Time* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2006) and Mary Ann Doane, *The Emergence of Cinematic Time* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2002).

[282] Doane, *The Emergence of Cinematic Time*, 208.

different atmospheric conditions. Variations in light register in the reflectivity of the train window, such that in three of the four bands the image that dominates is in fact the reflection of the brighter, whiter exterior seen through the opposing window of the train car (this is especially distinct in the far-right segment). As the film plays, however, the bands move too swiftly for the viewer to recognize this distinction between view-of-exterior and view-of-reflected-exterior. The general impression is one of mobility and change, of details reappearing, suggesting a coherence of field, but disappearing again so quickly that it's difficult to know if we're looking at a single continuous shoot edited into disjunction, or two or three or four different shoots edited into a kind of sideways coherence.

The by-passing of the Vesoul train station with which this sequence begins calls to mind how indistinct the areas around many small-city train stations can seem, how the stations themselves can blend together, especially when viewed by a Parisian, traveling express. The specificity of that station name, which is visible if not easily legible at the very beginning of the sequence, is echoed, albeit virtually, in the SNCF destination placard for Vittel at the bottom right corner of the image. It is one of many, superimposed graphically on the image's surface, which flip by rapidly (yet another flipbook for Alferi's collection). The place names indicated all correspond to towns and cities in eastern and northeastern France (e.g. Nancy, Metz, Mulhouse), and they cycle back and forth, simulating a passage into and through precisely the region where the Espace Multimédia Gantner—the exhibition site for *Intime*—is located. The splintering and *décalage* of time in this sequence is thus paradoxically embedded within an exaggerated fiction of spatial specificity. The effect achieved here, through the unsynced heterogeneous images and destination placards flipping through every imaginable train stop between Paris and Basel, is not one of a single journey—not a unique trajectory through space and time—but many repeated, circling trajectories. It presents an experience of time and place that seems to intentionally dismantle the foundations of photographic indexicality: the unique and contingent convergence of place and time that allows the photograph to stand as proof of the existence of its object at the precise moment of the photographic capture (the photograph is *here now* as proof that its object was *there then*).

The heavy-handed specificity of the train trajectory, given in the destination placards, is tempered, however, by the significant site-specificity of *Intime*'s formal aspect. The *montage feuilleté* that Alferi imposes on the images of this film and which is so central to its treatment of time and space was indeed inspired by the wall of windows in the gallery, partly made up of French doors, upon which this film was to be projected. As a projection surface, it offers up a kind of grid formed by the door frame and the muntins dividing up the window panes. The opening train sequence, with its four vertical bands of equal width, "a été spécialement conçu pour ce lieu, cette porte-fenêtre."[283] In this way, the situatedness of the image in space and time—its projection on *that* surface, on *that* occasion—is not only indexed in the structure of the image itself but in fact engenders the specific treatment of time and space that the film proposes. The *feuilletage* of the image, incidental to its site-specificity, to what it is to be in that windowed space, is what allows the film to dilate and multiply the instant. It explodes the spatiotemporal coherence of the frame, rules out the indexical trace, even as it inscribes the deictic context of its first visualization on its surface. This editing technique is also, as we've seen, the technical intervention that most clearly defies what is possible on celluloid, thereby indicating something of the potential of digital to interrogate certain

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[283] *CE,* 25. This *montage feuilleté* technique is in force in all but one of the film's sequences, but in many of the others, the seams that divide the image from within (or that stitch together slightly different bits of footage) are mobile, more or less numerous, more or less disjunctive. It is the stable four-band form of the opening train sequence that overlays perfectly with the gallery windows and that was determined by their form.

of the *évidences* associated with the cinematic image (its singularity and situatedness, the divisibility of time, the equation of the eye and the camera).

The "general translatability" of sensory objects that is cause for celebration as Alferi begins work with digital editing software recalls the *mise à niveau* of textual elements that his and Cadiot's "La Mécanique lyrique" called for, and indeed their mechanical vision of literary composition was glossed, in that essay, through a reference to binary code:

> Il s'agit simplement de la démocratie du langage, de son emporte-pièce qui met heureusement tout à niveau, comme les ordinateurs changent toute séquence de signes en une série de 0/1. S'il faut les mettre sur le même pied, ce n'est pas pour élever le niveau, mais pour gagner une liberté supplémentaire.[284]

That this very same *nivellement* should have been expressed in that text in relation to the cinematic image—"24 fois la vérité par seconde, dans 24 fois la même fenêtre et le même laps"—should not surprise us. The rejection of the digital image's indexicality is almost always made as part of a nostalgic argument for the grain of the image and the tactile mechanics of the cinematic apparatus.[285] But this kind of hierarchical thinking, as well as the nostalgia it expresses, are anathema to mechanical lyricism. The intervention of the 0s and 1s as a model for a certain democracy of signs is a boon for Alferi's personal creative project, and its association with the "general translatability" of different kinds of media is, for him, not a harbinger of the death of the notion of medium as we know it, but rather something that forces our attention to the fact of mediation itself.

Turning back to Alferi's horses and the suggestion that the film *Intime* pursues a reflection of what it is to be in time, we can conclude our thinking of standard through the relationship between image-mediation and the mediation of time implicit in its technical operation. The television set in Alferi's hotel room ages images to conform to *its* standard. Even if the images were transmitted in color, *this* television could only show them in black and white. It is as if the standard of this television were working to rule out the sense of present-ness associated with the televisual medium, to point to the constructedness of that present and rephrase it as a technical question that Alferi takes up and pursues. Moreover, these images of horses on the move are themselves redolent of pastness. Not only do they activate various forms of cultural nostalgia in Hungarian and French viewers, they also form an uncanny appeal to the technological past of the moving image. Shot off of this television screen, via this transmission, the footage is blurred in such a way that the horses' legs appear shadowed by their own consecutive positions (Figure 2). In addition to contributing a certain oneiric quality to their movements, this effect generates a striking evocation of Étienne-Jules Marey's chronophotographic studies of animals in motion, an important precursor to moving image technologies and favorite reference of Alferi's (Figure 7). Rather than affirming the stable present of television transmission, Alferi's horses, like Marey's, spread their movements out beyond the instant and, in doing so, conjure a time when the photographic representation of movement was not yet a technological banality.

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[284] *ML*, 15.
[285] See, especially, W.J.T. Mitchell, *The Reconfigured Eye: Visual Truth in the Post-Photographic Era* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1992).

Figure 8. *Cheval blanc monté au galop* (1886). Étienne-Jules Marey.
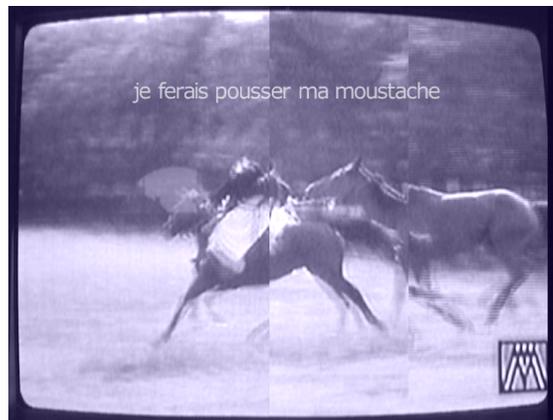
Figure 9. *Intime.*

The reference to Marey is redoubled in Alferi's editing of the footage. The successive exposures of the photographic plate in the above chronophotograph destroy the spatiotemporal unity of the frame by representing multiple captures of one animal's movement within a single space.[286] Alferi creates a similar effect in this sequence by splitting his frame down the middle, then splitting it again, to juxtapose two (then three, then four) playbacks of the same footage set off one from the next. As he sews the successive positions of the horses' bodies into novel combinations, Alferi seems to be chasing a particular convergence in which all four of a horse's legs are simultaneously aloft and outstretched. The body position just described, and that we can see achieved here in Figure 8, was one that many in the late nineteenth century assumed to be achieved by horses at a galop (as it is when they execute jumps). Marey's locomotion studies—and those of his better-known contemporary Eadweard Muybridge—famously showed that when all of a horse's hooves are aloft at a gallop they are tucked under the body, *not* outstretched, as some assumed.[287] In *Intime*, Alferi is able to falsify the claims of these proto-cinematic motion studies through the use of digital editing tools that have no equivalent in either celluloid or video formats. He cuts *into*

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[286] In her book on Marey, media theorist Marta Braun, remarks on the historical significance of this: "Since the advent of linear perspective in the Renaissance, the frame of an image has, with rare exceptions, been understood to enclose a temporal and spatial unity. […] Marey's photographs shattered that unity" (*Picturing Time: The Work of Étienne-Jules Marey (1830-1904)*, 66).

[287] See horse studies in Marey, *La machine animale* (1888); Muybridge, *Animal Locomotion* (1887).

the frame of his moving image, brings together different moments of ongoing footage, exploding its spatiotemporal unity in ways that the chronophotographic plate hardly anticipates. It is only through the special capacities of the digital that these images are made to speak, unequivocally, to the whole history of moving image technologies. The experience of time that *Intime* offers us is one that is represented through and *as* image mediation.

As Alferi trains his camcorder on that antiquated screen and its unlikely programming, and later as he edits the footage, we can imagine a passageway opening up, on the model of the signal pathway created by the television standard. This one pierces through the broadcast standard, the TV's degraded cathode ray tubes and the compression of video signals in Mini DV tapes to emerge in digital translation on a computer screen (Alferi's, or indeed mine). At each juncture the passageway changes shape irreversibly: it crinkles or straightens, restricts the image or makes room for post-production maneuver. This dizzying imbrication of image technologies, as much as the overdetermined footage of galloping horses, opens a portal to a technological back-in-time, to a time before images could move, to when photography was in the business of taking movement apart rather than restoring its illusion. And indeed, the text that Alferi superimposes on the images of this sequence considers strategies of time travel: "pour remonter le temps / serais-tu un saumon / ou un horloger?" To travel back in time, would you do like a salmon and mistake space for time, retracing your steps—with effort—to return to where you started? Or would you do like the clock specialist and take time to be a product of human tinkering, the winding of springs? The text offers an earnest reply: "moi je descendrais dans la plaine / je mettrais un joli bonnet / je ferais pousser ma moustache," as if to say: For my part, I would try my best to pass as a Hungarian horseman so that I might live among them in the hinterlands of time. The speaker here seems carried away by the imaginary potential of these images (the nostalgic power of cowboy dreams); Pierre Alferi would no doubt speak of their technical potential.

CONCLUSION

Literality is not a term that Pierre Alferi relies upon much in discussions of his poetics. The world of poetry that he entered into in the late 1980s was Emmanuel Hocquard's world, one in which the elaboration of the concept of literality was already so advanced that the term was for all intents and purposes a proper noun. Indeed, the word literality only rarely passes under this younger poet's pen (and then it is often explicitly in reference to Hocquard's conception of it). Even so, the final chapter of this dissertation has shown that the role of literal images (in the sense of actual—technologically produced—images) in Alferi's poetry and broader artistic practice is fundamental to his reflection on the poetic image (the fate of the post-literalist poetic image, we might say) as well as to his critique and reformulation of contemporary lyricism. We might remark an inverse tendency in the work of Francis Ponge, for whom the "literal image" is exclusively an affair of language, understood and pursued in opposition to the facile access to the real claimed by the analog photograph (with the fate of the post-surrealist image also at stake).[288] I opened this dissertation by emphasizing the image as a perennial problem in French poetry, especially since surrealism, a problem to which literalist poetics proposes, among other solutions: *remplacer l'image par le* mot *image.* In Chapter 1, we observe Francis Ponge refashioning the image in non-specular terms, as something that emerges from language itself (as something intrinsic to language), and that can be made to function as a component part within a larger logical construction. Emmanuel Hocquard summons photographs (concrete, external images that he takes and develops and manipulates) to provide the image-content of *Méditations photographiques…*, images that by virtue of being withheld from the reader are rendered every bit as internal and abstract as the conventional poetic image. Likewise, we've seen Pierre Alferi desacralize any high-minded notion of the poetic image by summoning, for his part, all manner of aesthetic and media images (structuralist avant-garde films, 70s TV shows, advertisements, soft-core porn, B movies, paused VHS tapes, etc.) into texts that demonstrate their own generic and medial properties through sophisticated experiments in poetic form.

One of the most significant threads running through my study of Pierre Alferi has to do with the issue of nostalgia. I noted in my introduction that Alferi and Cadiot's critique of neolyricism in their essay "Mécanique lyrique" identifies this literary turn as expressing a nostalgia for the fulsome musicality and license to self-expression of traditional lyric forms, that is simultaneously legible as a nostalgia for a state of language that would allow it to serve as the channel for such expression. Writing from the dawn of the digital age, Alferi and Cadiot are especially critical of this willful naïvety regarding structures of mediation, and it is precisely by bringing a sophisticated understanding of technological mediation to bear on their account of lyric that these authors propose to rehabilitate this term. This aversion to technological as well as literary nostalgia is a constant across Alferi's *oevure* and is nowhere better expressed than in the preface to *Des enfants et des monstres,* a collection of weekly columns he wrote for the website of *Cahiers du cinéma*, on films that happened to be slated for television broadcast each week. Describing this assignment, which he carried out faithfully for most of a year, he questions whether this exposure to mass-

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[288] As we saw in Chapter 1, for Ponge it is important that the literal image is not specular, but instead marks a moment of asymptotic contact between language and the world it would designate, an access-point between these worlds that is figured as fundamentally exterior to the intention of a speaking subject.

media programming might be an "occasion d'un retour critique," but chooses instead a different approach: "Plutôt, comme on enfourche un cheval de manège, [occasion] d'en saisir un au vol et de jouer la curiosité contre la nostalgie."[289] To play curiosity against nostalgia means playing the (potential) interest of the present against the banal self-reflection of reminiscence. This is also a way of freeing oneself of the media nostalgia that might keep one from engaging with televised film out of loyalty to cinematic projection.[290]

The relation between old and new media forms is a fertile site for nostalgic longing. Emerging technologies are well-known as a site where broader social, political and economic anxieties tend to express themselves, and find their emblems. Consider, for instance, an early and somewhat hysterical response to digital image production from media theorist and literary critic W.J.T. Mitchell, who declares in 1992: "The currency of the great bank of nature has left the gold standard: images are no longer guaranteed as visual truth—or even as signifiers with stable meaning and value—and we endlessly print more of them."[291] We can see here a reflexive move to register the arrival of this new image form as triggering a *loss of value* to be felt at the level of society as a whole. Twenty years of hand-wringing over the termination of the gold standard in the U.S. had already elapsed at the time of this book's publication, yet the anxiety that here gets projected onto the digital image is evidently still vital (e.g. the ongoing anxiety about the printing of cash). What is at stake is the loss of the photograph's indexical character, its trace feature, in its conversion to binary code. The philosopher Peter Osborne offers the more cogent critique when he remarks, in reference to the ontological anxiety triggered by the advent of digital photography: "The basic source of such anxiety has nothing to do with photography itself. Rather, […] it has to do with the nature of *the abstraction of social relations* characteristic of societies based on relations of exchange." This abstraction is emblematized in the fact that "the most decisive sectors of the capitalist economy, associated with finance capital, are *not 'real,'*" recalling how journalistic rhetoric around the 2008 financial crisis would speak incessantly of the point at which the banking meltdown filtered through and began affecting the "real" economy.[292] While Mitchell's statement establishes the link between changes to the image environment and economic anxieties, Osborne would recognize in the evocation of the gold standard yet another talisman of concreteness whose loss merely exposed the abstraction of social relations that was already propping up the exchange economy. To lament the loss of the concrete, natural meaningfulness of the photochemical trace (or bank notes) is to betray an underlying belief, or need to believe, that such an object was indeed naturally meaningful.

The relation between old and new technologies asserts itself in the studies I've collected here. For both Ponge and Hocquard, the resistance to dominant media forms and nostalgia for more established ones is palpable. I linger in my first chapter on Ponge's aversion to photography, which develops out of a sense that it is more an instrument of subterfuge than of revelation. Thinking photography from before the immateriality of the televisual image made it a revered emblem of concreteness, Ponge contests the photograph's claim to visual truth by emphasizing

[289] Pierre Alferi, *Des enfants et des monstres* (Paris: P.O.L., 2004), 8.

[290] When Alferi begins experimenting with video by shooting old Hollywood films off of a VHS playback with his digital camcorder, I believe it is in this spirit of "jouer la curiosité contre la nostalgie [technologique]."

[291] W.J.T. Mitchell, *The Reconfigured Eye: visual truth in the post-photographic era* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1992), 57. Mitchell is riffing here—but earnestly—on a citation from Oliver Wendell Holmes in which he describes stereographic prints as "these bank notes […] which the sun has engraved for the great Bank of Nature" (idem).

[292] Peter Osborne, *Anywhere or Not at all* (London: Verso Books, 2012), 128. Original emphasis.

that its exact inscription of appearance comes at the (extortionary) cost of the object's temporal life (that such a representation is only granted truth-value because viewers are willing to pay this ransom). Wary of the elevation of visibility as the privileged modality for registering being, it is as if Ponge's commitment to the irreducible material complexity and dynamism of things compels him to challenge photography's status as the dominant medium for representing the physical world—and to deploy his own medium in a way that allows it to succeed where the photograph fails. In the case of Hocquard, writing in the televisual era, it is the logic of transmission that his conception of literality, and the place assigned to analog photography therein, seem to take on. As we saw in Chapter 2, literal repetition (the word-for-word copying of text or utterance) is a procedure that interrupts reference and expression and folds language back upon itself, thus stopping up any communicative potential and reducing the text to pure surface. Hocquard's obsession with copying conveys an intention to withdraw language from the diachronic unfolding of utterance as a way of achieving the kind of abstraction and spatialization required for the pursuit of the questions of grammar and logic that interest him.

For Alferi, as we've seen, it seems important to integrate rather than reject the image-forms that dominate cultural production and consumption in his contemporary moment. His poetry emerges from a world in which to live is to be immersed in a flow of images, and his textual and audiovisual work alike seek to reckon in particular with the naturalization of the kind of viewing and reading demanded by moving-image formats. Instead of bemoaning the ontological poverty of the digital image, Alferi identifies in the digital image file "le cheval de Troie d'une ontologie autre, encore silencieuse."[293] And perhaps this alternative ontology was already on view when past and present converged in the movement of horses across the TV screen in his Budapest hotel room. A glimpse of a world cut loose from the naturalized equivalences of the photographic era (the real = the visible = the photographable), no longer in thrall to the indexical image, that emblem *par excellence* of nostalgic regret.

I see Alferi's reclamation of lyric through the recognition of its technicity as another Trojan horse. The entrenched opposition between literality and lyricism in the 1980s and 90s relies, in my account, on the related opposition between concepts of medium and mediation as they relate to language. A poetics of literality (within which I situate Ponge as well as Hocquard) is necessarily logocentric, with language conceived and approached as a material medium that functions for the poet as a closed system. In lyricism, language is approached as a channel of expression, a mediating structure through which content can pass more or less freely. Alferi (when he advances a vision, with Olivier Cadiot, of a "mécanique lyrique") exposes the fallacies underlying these oppositions. Attending to the material and logical complexities of language need not preclude the activation of its mediating function. And it is possible to write in a lyrical mode (motivated by the desire to express an interior state, e.g.) in a way that takes into account the technical nature of poetic composition. Likewise, the medium/mediation opposition loses its pertinence when we are reminded that no medium can exist in isolation from others, that the properties of a given medium are only of interest in a world where media are multiple and between which mediation can occur. Nuancing the antagonism between literality and lyricism (as one that is most pertinently understood in terms of resistance vs. succumbing to a nostalgia for a certain kind of expressive possibility) and encouraging a kind of traffic between these positions allows poetry to better reflect on a world of images within which the opposition between medium and mediation no longer serves.

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[293] Pierre Alferi, *Brefs* (Paris: P.O.L., 2016), 226.

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