

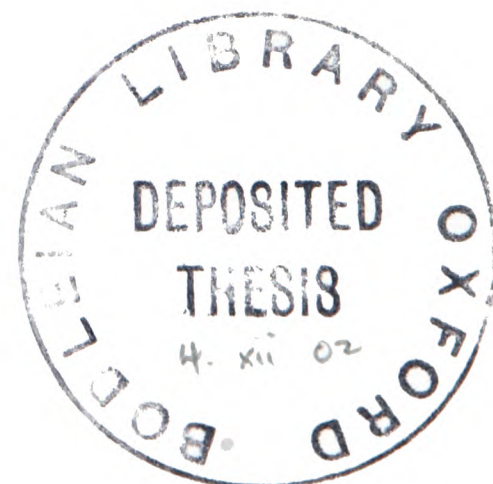
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**Speech and utopia: Spaces of poetic work in the writings of
Segalen, Daumal and Bonnefoy**

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Short Abstract

Speech and utopia: Spaces of poetic work in the writings of Segalen, Daumal and Bonnefoy

The thesis argues that a certain ‘locus’ of poetry is perceptible diachronically in the French literary field of the 20th Century and that this locus (elusive, fragmented, multi-layered) may be meaningfully focused upon via the interaction of the questionings centered around the terms ‘speech’ and ‘utopia’. In the introduction an argument is made for the conceptual validity of the term ‘utopia’ in relation to the diverse literary practices accruing around the pole of the ‘poetic’, which results in the derivation of the idea of a utopian dynamic – a vectorial addition to the conventionally static, figure-bound ‘utopia’.

Concentrating on three poets (Victor Segalen, René Daumal and Yves Bonnefoy) from three distinct generations and periods (pre-WWI, inter-War and post-WWII) which are standardly represented as discontinuous, the thesis proposes an analysis, ordered along three canonical sub-divisions of the utopian preoccupation (which are three distinct modalities of utopian space), of the utopian dynamic argued to be characteristic of the work of poetic writing. The three parts of the thesis thus examine the ‘poetic’ as occurring within social space (*lieu commun*), physical space (*haut lieu*) and textual space (*non lieu*) over the combined duration of the corpus.

Arguing for an intelligible continuity of preoccupation among the three poetic oeuvres discussed, the thesis concludes that that continuity enables, in return, a modification of our understanding of the utopian, of which a lucid practice of poetic writing can thus become the embodiment. Utopia, from being a synonym for illusionment in a century at all times supremely alive to the need for irony, becomes a creative embrace of disenchantment. The point of resolution (poetic foundation) at each stage in the individual oeuvres analysed being the ongoing representation of the ‘human’ as inner and outer limit to the poetic subject’s practice and to the aspiration from which it moves.

Long Abstract

Speech and utopia: Spaces of poetic work in the writings of Segalen, Daumal and Bonnefoy

The relative stability of words is no guarantee of the cohesiveness over time of their meanings. The object of this thesis is a homonym, and a certain continuity within the intellectual and artistic efforts made in the course of the last century to maintain it. The homonym [poetry], covering a vast and, with its freeing up in the cognate adjective [the 'poetic'], still-expanding area, embodies the question of the consistency of something as general as a 'genre' division in our discussions of the 'literary'.

The thesis offers a reading of three 20th Century oeuvres, which is at base an attempt to discern a specific difference of the 'poetic' with respect to other forms of writing. This difference, which historically was thinkable in terms of 'genre' and could be articulated in terms of form and formal prescription, becomes ever more elusive over the broad course of the evolution of 20th Century 'poetry' in France. In studies dealing with works from this century the reader encounters a certain degree of consensus as to a corpus of 'poetic' works, and the identity of 'poetic' writers (even where form offers no basis to such distinction) – but the grounding term of the 'poetic', of 'poetry' is in general taken to be understood and its value, its recuperative powers taken as accepted. One is thus confronted with two general types of study in the domain: the first moving from the biographical unity of the individual artistic output as an ordering principle (and resulting in monograph-type works on a given 'poet'), the second centering upon an isolated 'theme' thought proper to or prevalent within the 'poetic' corpus and in respect of which comparisons and parallels may be wrought between the works of different 'poets'.

The present study conforms to neither of these models, in that it is ordered not around a theme but a vocabulary developed in an attempt to describe a tension inherent in, foundational to what might be designated as 'poetic' work. The primary objective of the author at the outset was the development of a set of concepts and related vocabulary

which would offer some purchase to the activity of reading within a potentially very wide corpus. It is a vocabulary developed in the first instance from out of the term ‘utopia’ – which does not designate a ‘theme’ in any narrow sense in any of the three oeuvres studied. The hypothesis brought to bear on the activity of reading is that of the existence of a line of thought for which the ‘poetic’ is both thinkable and permanently refractory to secondary (external) discourses – its thinkable quality being grounded, precisely, in this characteristic, a principle (itself thus external) of the irreducible quality of poetic affirmation.

Two linked but independent areas of study / reading were inhabited from the start – viz. that of the French poetic text proper, with its related literature, and that suggested by the ‘terms’ of the thesis, and in particular the analytical metaphor of utopia. The thesis argues that a certain ‘locus’ of poetry is perceptible diachronically in the French literary field of the 20th Century and that this locus (elusive, fragmented, multi-layered) may be meaningfully focused upon via the interaction of the questionings centered around the terms ‘speech’ and ‘utopia’. In the introduction an argument is made for the conceptual validity of the term ‘utopia’ in relation to the diverse literary practices accruing around the pole of the ‘poetic’, which results in the derivation of the idea of a utopian dynamic – a vectorial addition to the conventionally static, figure-bound ‘utopia’.

‘Utopia’ inaugurates three kinds of space – social (*lieu commun*), physical (*haut lieu*) and textual (*non-lieu*) within which, in poetic work, a ‘utopian dynamic’ is observable. Utopia thus at one level designates a tension within the creative act (here: of writing thereby ‘poetic’) between the forces of realisation (‘foundation’) and those of negativity, de-realisation, escape. The organisational principle of the thesis is that of the division of space into three orders – social, physical, textual. It is constructed around these three cardinal ‘spaces’, within or in respect of which, it is argued, the extremity of aspiration or demand consonant with recognisably ‘poetic’ works is observable in each of the three (very different) oeuvres. In each of the three parts the first two sections are devoted to a general discussion of the issues involved, attempting to set them out as problems thinkable in terms of the ‘poetic’. The subsequent three sections of each part examine the

variations observable on the question, variations thinkable in terms of the utopian, in each of the three oeuvres in succession.

The outcome of the inaugural split between corpus and 'theoretical' vocabulary is a diachronic study, over three distinct periods of the century, with the confinement (save occasional or opportune references) of the actual 'poetic' corpus to the works of three poets – the thesis concentrates on the writings of Victor Segalen (1878 – 1919), René Daumal (1908 – 1944) and Yves Bonnefoy (b. 1923) three poets from three distinct generations and periods (pre-WWI, inter-War and post-WWII) which are standardly represented as discontinuous. In a manner that is in the first instance symbolic their works, without chronologically overlapping one another, give a coverage of the entire period. The 'poetic' works of each writer appear within an oeuvre presenting multiple forms of writing. Each has written, in semi-detachment from the 'poetic' aspect, what it is attempted to categorise as a utopian narrative or allegory of their work as a poet and the relation to language that that work entails.

The intention governing the choice of the three authors studied in detail is that of representing a certain intelligible continuity of the 'poetic' effort within writing, over an extended period, and leading to remarkably different artistic realisations. The diachronic nature of the study implies such a continuity over and between periods which are conventionally treated in isolation from one another, without reducing each oeuvre to a pre/reiteration of what can be discerned in the others. Furthermore, the choice of authors reflects the quality of each as a practitioner of multiple writings – all three are culturally designated as 'poets', but each does poetic work within a broader practice of writing both complementary to and distinct from the poetic. This point to emphasise the attempt to overcome any simple idea of a validation via the figure of the poet-author: but also out of a will to suggest that the 'poetic', even if it continues to be thought in terms of distinction from other forms/practices of writing, is reliant to a degree upon that other writing in the construction of its difference.

This multiplicity of writing observable in each author is material too to the ‘method’ of reading adopted in the thesis. The character of poetry as in continual renewal, re-beginning, is argued to exemplify the utopian dynamic. The generalisable quality of the poetic would thus be in the avoidance of all temptations of systematicity. This is different from saying that a certain logic appears to be at work in writings of the poetic order. There is a logic to the poetic elements of each oeuvre – no doubt enhanced, even exaggerated, by their being viewed in programmatic terms – which does not make of the oeuvre a system. Having attempted to define each ‘space’ of poetic writing broadly, with reference to various other writers in each case, the reading of each of the three studied authors attempts to balance affirmations and patterns observable elsewhere in their output (together with some reference to relevant criticism) with what can be said with some degree of confidence, in an affirmative mode, in respect of the ‘poetic’-tending work of each author. This reflects what is perhaps the grounding experience of the thesis-writer – the difficulty of constructing an affirmative discourse in the face of texts (poetic) which challenge the very workings of affirmation, both in the writing subject in question and in their subsequent reception.

Faced with this fundamental difficulty, the thesis does not resort to a particular critical discourse, but through the analytical metaphor of utopia and the spatial divisions to which it gives rise, attempts to do justice to the idea that the ‘poetic’ text is thinkable along several lines, according to several approaches (phenomenological, psychoanalytic, sociological, onto-philosophical etc.) which, rather than disqualify one another, potentially represent sources of mutual enrichment and/or rectification. The resistance of poetic work to readerly discourse forces the reader to assume responsibility for all such discursive projections, and hence for their limitations in the face of an irreducible text.

As the thesis is thus primarily the attempt to describe and rationalise a reading experience, its substantive ‘conclusions’ are necessarily limited. The Conclusion argues for the richness of an idea of utopia as a form of creative hope, a leavening energy, within a context of disenchantment, and attempts to relate a modern practice of poetic writing to this disposition.

[The state of the question at the time and possible ‘originality’ of the thesis.]

In general, as already stated, the studies available on modern French poetry in English divide along two lines – first the monograph, in which an individual life’s work or segment thereof is adopted as the guiding principle for the study; second the thematic study, in which one or a number of poetic works are read in terms of a unifying question. The present work is no doubt closer to the second than to the first, but conforms to neither one or other model. It could be thought in of as an attempt to think a complex object of study in terms of a principle (rather than a theme, or the readily-constituted unity of an oeuvre) which it claims is important, without being exclusive or explicative in its relation to the observed phenomena. In nevertheless focusing on three individual works, while attempting to maintain a minimum of reference to other works of the period(s) in question, it acknowledges the indispensability of the figure of the poet as a means of access to the modern and contemporary question(s) of the poetic.

The ‘theoretical’ relation between ‘speech’ and ‘utopia’ represents an innovative way of reconciling a discourse of the ‘modern’ with one which attempts to describe the movement proper to a particular writing practice. The dynamic of ‘modernity’ as it appears in the works can thereby also be reconciled with a generic as well as with a broad cultural-historical logic. The ‘utopian’ metaphor facilitates an approach of ‘poetry’ and the ‘poetic’ in terms primarily of discursive attitude rather than via formal or thematic considerations, which arguably continue to dominate the field. It also opens onto a treatment of the question of community in relation to the poetic text (a possible treatment, of which, in Part I, it is attempted to give an idea) and thus of the relations between versions of (imagined / ideal) poetic ‘language’ and different imagined models of ‘revolutionary’ or otherwise ‘authentic’ coexistence.

The success of the attempt to put forward something of the order of a principle of poetic work over such a period could only ever be partial. The difficulties of maintaining a clarity of focus as to the workings and limits of such a principle become great in the face

of the complexity and diversity of the works encountered. While there is a sense in which the theoretical vocabulary adopted represents a certain amount of violence done both to the self-conceptions of the oeuvres read and the critical vocabulary which they habitually attract (except perhaps for certain passages from Daumal they are in no great way referentially 'utopian' in any conventional sense), the confrontation of the utopian with the poetic does quite as much (salutary) violence in the other direction – re-dynamising in terms of a personal, fragmentary, constantly re-begun practice the question (which has become overly figural and static in many of its literary and essayistic treatments) of what might, in the constant turnover of paradigms, be salvaged from the domain of the utopian.

[Brief synopsis.]

The thesis proposes an analysis, ordered along three canonical sub-divisions of the utopian preoccupation (which are three distinct modalities of utopian space), of the utopian dynamic argued to be characteristic of the work of poetic writing.

The three parts of the thesis thus examine the 'poetic' as occurring within social space (*lieu commun*), physical space (*haut lieu*) and textual space (*non lieu*), over the combined duration of the corpus adopted.

Part I places in relation what is termed poetic foundation and the conceptual limits of the idea of community. The difficulty of poetic 'foundation', that public 'accession to speech' which is a prerequisite of a shared discourse of the 'poetic', is seen to reside in the coupling of an absolute rejection of convention with the desire for convention-like degrees of 'communicative' achievement.

Part II analyses physical space in terms of a typically 'poetic' experience and, in a discussion of what are termed 'utopian narratives of poetry', attempts to demonstrate how successive generations within modernity construct the poetic as utopian dynamic in terms of the poetic as inaccessible utopia.

Part III discusses the poetic text both in its construction as an extraordinary space within which particular relations may be performed, and as that which potentially transcends a spatial logic as a practice of transformational speech – within which the speaking subject attains a state of reconciliation that appears to result in the placing of the greatest of hopes in the practice, and anticipated achievement, of what occurs under the name of ‘poetry’.

Arguing for an intelligible continuity of preoccupation among the three poetic oeuvres discussed, the thesis concludes that that continuity enables, in return, a modification of our understanding of the utopian, of which a lucid practice of poetic writing can thus become the embodiment. Utopia, from being a synonym for illusionment in a century at all times supremely alive to the need for irony, becomes a creative embrace of disenchantment. The point of resolution (poetic foundation) at each stage in the individual oeuvres analysed being the ongoing representation of the ‘human’ as inner and outer limit to the poetic subject’s practice and to the aspiration from which it moves.

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Introduction. Poetic work and the utopian dynamic in writing.

...le point où ici coïncide avec nulle part. Écrire, c'est trouver ce point.¹

1. Confronting a variable term

Reflections on the practice(s) of literature which propose to maintain the integrity of a genre division and the ordering powers of its institutionalised terms can appear doomed, independently of their virtues, to being instantly exceeded. An example such as Gérard Genette's 1991 reflection around the opposition of 'fiction' and 'diction', which argues for the maintained possibility of a categorical approach based on formally articulable criteria, could, when contrasted with the pronouncements, for example, of Roland Barthes' *Leçon* (categorising literature as the radical refusal of 'power' within writing), authorise one in wondering whether discourse on the 'literary' is not the area in which two completely distinct rapports with the idea of the rule, of regularity, come into conflict. The rapport with the norm and with the problem of the norm – in the first instance the norm(s) conveyed in such discourse – suggests itself as the main underlying issue for clarification for a reader engaged in this direction. It is not easy to discern, in turn, to what extent this constitutes a specifically 'literary' question, if at all. Quoted, by way of illustration, are a selection of 'defining' moments. The parting of the waves as enacted by Genette maintains an option on explicative potential inside an established domain:

Est littérature de fiction celle qui s'impose essentiellement par le caractère imaginaire de ses objets, littérature de diction celle qui s'impose essentiellement par ses caractéristiques formelles – encore une fois, sans préjudice d'amalgame et de mixité; mais il me semble utile de maintenir la distinction au niveau des essences, et la possibilité théorique d'états purs: celui, par exemple, d'une histoire qui vous émeut quel qu'en soit le mode de représentation [...] ou celui,

¹ Blanchot, Maurice. *L'espace littéraire*. Paris: Gallimard, 1955: 52.

symétrique, d'une formule qui vous fascine hors de toute signification perceptible[.] ²

The selection operated by Barthes, through an apparent act of recognition, performs the category of the 'literary' itself, even as it appears to engulf all subsidiaries:

Si l'on appelle liberté, non seulement la puissance de se soustraire au pouvoir, mais aussi et surtout celle de ne soumettre personne, il ne peut donc y avoir de liberté que hors du langage. Malheureusement, le langage humain est sans extérieur ; c'est un huis clos [...] [A] nous, qui ne sommes ni des chevaliers de la foi, ni des surhommes, il ne reste, si je puis dire, qu'à tricher avec la langue, qu'à tricher la langue. Cette tricherie salutaire, cette esquive, ce leurre magnifique, qui permet d'entendre la langue hors pouvoir, dans la splendeur d'une révolution permanente du langage, je l'appelle pour ma part : littérature.³

Abandoning interrogations we might entertain on which, of these among many, is a more 'accurate' view of an order of texts, the interference between dissonant claims to normativity should probably be reassuring. It provides a reminder of what, stated baldly, seems a truism – namely, that the major terms in use in discourse on literary matters designate a locus of conflict rather than a haven of pure forms. That all references to the homonyms of the 'literary' field, such as the 'romanesque', the 'poetic' occur irretrievably within inverted commas once consideration is given to more than one instance of reflection, or even to different instances within a single authorial output. That whatever the difficulties arising for a writer who wishes to proceed through a reflection on an essence of practice, the difficulties for an ecumenical reader are perhaps prohibitive. That that prohibition calls for an attempt to reformulate the representation of the movement towards essence in a vocabulary of conflict and continual choice.

² Genette, Gérard. *Fiction et diction*. Paris: Seuil. 1991: 31-32.

³ Barthes, Roland. *Leçon*. Paris: Seuil, 1978: 16.

A notion of the literary, held as practitioner or commentator, can thus be thought of as that which one singles out, that which one discerns as central to or consonant with one's conception of something else, of a wider truth or form – whether one chooses to speak of it as individual vocation, the nature of language, the politics of the individual in language, or in some other way. It is the question of what one chooses to see. To cite Barthes again, making this decisional element explicit:

*Je vise donc en elle [la littérature], le texte, c'est-à-dire le tissu des signifiants qui constitue l'œuvre, parce que le texte est l'affleurement même de la langue, et que c'est à l'intérieur de la langue que la langue doit être combattue, dévoyée [...].*⁴

The attribution of such an un-final finality to 'literature', pronounced at the very heart of a culture's instituting machinery (Collège de France), subverts the institutional weight inchoate within the word 'literature' itself. It does not 'identify' literature, but rather hints at what literature can, exceptionally, do, as well as how, paradoxically, it *should*, in the view of the theorist, be read. This 'literature' is the principle whereby the given reader/critic thinks through the mass of the 'literary', of rendering a complex object intelligible and thus creating a way of envisaging individual instances of the literary without appearing to impose a particular meaning upon them. In the domain of 'theory', such conjunctions of a thinker and an itinerary tend to be identified with the thinker – who becomes a rather strong case of the necessary figure of the author – as much as to any set of 'literary' texts. The choice of ascription of quality, the ever-renewed recognition of the 'literary', is permanently suspended to the acts of reading and interpretation done according to criteria emergent, or long emerged, in this way.

The present work arises out of the encounter of a variety of such acts of reading, interpretation and commentary by others in respect of the *poetic*. The question of the poetic, as that of 'literature' as a whole, when considered in semi-autonomy from individual texts, becomes a matter of prescription. In my readings, I have become

⁴ Ibid. 17 (emphasis added.)

particularly interested in the inter-workings of prescription and practice in the ongoing creation of a sub-field identified by the adjective. My puzzlement in the face of ‘poetic’ texts, certainly not without a basis in the experience of many such texts in their apparent offer and withdrawal of meaning, has also abidingly been with the ascription of that qualification to the texts read. A sense of collaborating in the creation of a value whose origins, parameters and claims remained obscure, through the continued attempt to approach various texts in the French language under the sign, so to speak, of ‘the poetic’, is that for which it seemed most necessary to account.

As a counterpart to attempts at a criterion of the ‘literary’ such as those mentioned above, positions emerge which reclaim the term discussed in a denunciation of the project of developing a corresponding discourse. Henri Meschonnic, for example, quotes Paul Ricœur approvingly in the pursuit of such an enterprise: “L’apparition d’une ‘littérature’ qui prend ses propres opérations comme thème introduit l’illusion que le modèle structural épuise l’intelligence du langage”, before adding his own, more trenchant, view: “Réduire un texte à des modèles, c’est le voir à travers une logique plus pauvre que lui; [...] Un modèle qui est étroitement syntagmatique correspond à un écrivain-fabrication langagière, d’où formalisme, sinon académisme.”⁵ This seems to be the fate, then, of all analytical invocations of the generic name, or distillations of the quality. All criticism which invokes the generic names is destined to appear reductive, under a naïve misapprehension as to the consistency of words. The ‘poetic’ is a further condensation, refinement of this principle:

Toute tentative de réduire la sphère de la fonction poétique à la poésie, ou de confiner la poésie à la fonction poétique, n’aboutirait qu’à une simplification excessive et trompeuse.⁶

Thinking, perhaps, in the direction of this spirit of ecumenism, but from within a logic of and desire for category, P.O. Kristeller, in an essay on ‘the modern system of the arts’, traces the textual development of codifications of the ‘five major arts’ (which are named

⁵ Meschonnic, Henri. *Pour la poétique I*. Paris: Gallimard, 1970: 43, footnote.

as painting, sculpture, architecture, music and poetry) from antiquity to the present. This partition and its terms are points, it is affirmed, “on which all writers and thinkers seem to agree.” Belief here depends somewhat on who one considers ‘all writers and thinkers’ might be. Kristeller continues:

[C]ertain other arts are sometimes added to the scheme, but with less regularity, depending on the different views and interests of the authors concerned: gardening, engraving and the decorative arts, the dance and the theatre, sometimes the opera, and finally eloquence and prose literature.⁷

There is considerable subtlety involved in the grouping of a kind of ‘literature’ (‘poetry’), beyond the easy classifications of its medium, with other non-literary artistic activities. Indeed, many modern poets affirm this alternative formulation of affinity – with for example painting – in their texts. But it is a categorisation which seems to underline even in its possible pertinence the imaginary effort required for the maintenance of a categorical vocabulary in the face of human creativity. What remains is a sense of the utter malleability of the homonym, the concept-term ‘poetry’, according to the vector of the foregrounded affinity.

This very malleability is closer to a ‘definition’ of the poetic than any category-based attempt. It is also at the root of an ‘unthinkability’ of the poetic. For in those works which take ‘poetry’ for their object, irrespective of the many insights and perspectives they may offer, one is often prey to the feeling that a founding tautology remains unaddressed. Texts generally exhibiting a high level of indeterminacy are seen to exhibit, or reflect, the characteristics which, resolved in a critical discourse, will allow them to be thought of, and hence experienced, as ‘poetic’. The homonym ‘poetry’ and its adjectival form are the chief guarantors of an interpretative stability in the face of what remain radically indeterminate and different texts. On the one side it seems admissible to speak of ‘la poésie’, perhaps even with the assurance of a ‘moderne’ or ‘contemporaine’ thrown in,

⁶ Roman Jakobson cited in Meschonnic, op. cit. 28, footnote.

⁷ Kristeller, P.O. ‘The modern system of the Arts’ in Feagin and Maynard (eds). *Aesthetics*. Oxford University Press, 1997: 90 – 102: 90 and 91.

on the other lie the heterogeneity and indeterminacy which are constituted in accompanying discourses as a thinkable continuity – in relation to which critical points may be articulated, criteria of cohesion suggested – by the existence of these terms alone. ‘Modernity’ is accounted for or reduced to a number of grand traits. ‘Poetry’, the nominal postulate of a community of practice, marks the assumption that the ‘poetic’ can be experienced positively, by a writer and, by implication, a reader.

This assumption is likely to be less important or inaugural for the subject engaged in the production of ‘poetic’ writing than for one whose pretention is to maintain the appearance of discursive aplomb in the face of such production. We are before an incidence of the inversion of the priority writer-reader with respect to a guiding term in that the homonym can be understood as representing in the first place a stake of the interpretative community with respect to which primary ‘poetic’ actors / producers (reading of course being action/production, but dependent thus secondary in the industrial sense) are constituted in a process of ongoing recognition. It is above all a synonym for the consistency of an interpretative activity, the cohesion of a virtual ‘community’, rather than for that of an originary or creative questioning. This is a practical opinion for which one could see corroboration in the following remarks, made in the course of a critique of Gadamerian hermeneutics, by Vincent Descombes:

You will look in vain for a kernel common to the different hermeneutics [e.g. legal, theological, literary – MGK]. If it existed, such a kernel would derive from there being certain rules to follow in the reading of a text, whatever it might be. But, in fact, when we speak of interpreting a text, what we have in mind is a text drawn from a *Corpus* or a *Canon*. The word *Canon*, in the sense of an official collection of recognised books, has a religious origin, but it has since been extended to other domains. *A Canon is a collection of authentic writings*. [...] An authentic writing is a text whose author speaks *authentikôs*, which means: “with authority on a certain subject.” [...] Every time we agree to accept a certain canon, we give birth to a hermeneutics. There are as many hermeneutics as there

are canons. There are as many conceivable definitions of interpretation as there are ways of placing aspects of one's life under the authority of a canon.⁸

The structural requirement of a canonical position from which a hermeneutical practice can derive is relatively disturbing for a modern critical project, which has its own grand narrative in the death of the gods and of the absolute authority of any given text. This is also, critically, the main intellectual premise from which what is commonly recognised as modern poetic practice moves – even where the premise, within the divergence of the field, is not entirely accepted. There follows from this an especially complicated set of manoeuvres around the facilitating structure of interpretation, which could be caricatured in the simple arithmetical rule that the coincidence of two negatives engenders a positive:

For us moderns, there is still an authentic canon, since one has to engage in the task of interpretation, but this canon is empty, since none of the considered texts is recognised as authentic.

This is precisely the program of a modernist critic: to show that a text, whatever it might be, does not belong to the canon, by pointing out the impossible consequences that would have to be granted if the text were canonized. What we are left with then, in the different fields, is the empty form of a canon, the pure idea of the book, the illegible text of the law. And here we rediscover the fascinating myths of modern criticism: The book of the future which is for ever composed of blank pages, the sovereign law which is all the more imperative in that it does not tell us what we should do, and finally, Being, which, being nothing – no part – of what is, makes itself all the more manifest if nothing manifests it.⁹

Descombes catches the demeanour of the critical component of the sum in an accurate way, but one which requires modification in respect of our present 'object' of reflection. The denial of canonicity within the intellectual impossibility of doing away with a canon-

⁸ Descombes, Vincent. 'The Interpretative Text', in Hugh J. Silverman (ed.) *Gadamer and Hermeneutics*. London: Routledge, 1991. 247-68, 262-63 (emphasis in original.)

⁹ Ibid. 267-68.

structure (the idea that there is a textual embodiment of the authentic, somewhere out there) is a paradox which affords possibilities of recognition to critics working on many different kinds of text. Twentieth-century French 'poetry', which to a very considerable extent is thinkable as the development of and around the great modernist legacy to 'poetry' of the second half of the 19th, of Baudelaire, Rimbaud and Mallarmé in particular, is the aftermath of a canon which, perhaps more than any other in literature, diagnosed, explored and abandoned 'the empty form of a canon' (Descombes.) The canonical ethic passed on to the poetic writers of the following century, and which remained its principal source of nourishment throughout is the impossibility at the core of Rimbaud's "il faut être absolument moderne"¹⁰ (to the extent that the above-named might, for the sake of provocation, along with other revenants such as Lautréamont, Laforgue or Verlaine, be thought the most important poetic figures of 20th Century France.) As such, the adoption of a 'critical' position on the field has been an enterprise caught between the rock of tautology (and a pallid, discursive tautology at that) and the hard place of the assumption of retrograde or critically 'naïve' positions.

The 'authenticity' of 20th Century (French) poetry lay in its own disenchanted aspiration to the impossibility of 'canonical' status – and thereof has the 'canon' continued, as it were, to be made. It has been with respect to the variable and diffuse notion of perfectibility that the recognition of writers and readers under the sign of the 'poetic', self-consciously non-assimilable to the 'literary', has continued to this day.

Highlighting its unavoidably 'canonical' quality does not, however, greatly clarify anything of the order of the practical characteristics of the 'poetic'. A critical discourse on 'poetic' writing inevitably requires the elucidation through limitation of this adjective in the light of actual 'poetic' work. This in turn requires confrontation with the figure of the poetic 'worker' – the freeing-up of the literary from recognizable formal criteria having had the paradoxical effect, at the time when literary theory seems to have

¹⁰ Warning against the decontextualised reference to this byword, Meschonnic recalls its occurrence in the text titled 'Adieu': "Le 'il faut' signale que l'action se mène à partir d'un dehors du sujet. Ici un dehors qui écrase le sujet. [...] Loin qu'elle claironne une proclamation de modernisme poétique, elle dit la dérision

dispatched the activity of reading for authorial intention as a valid scholarly occupation, that in the question of the poetic, at least, the question of recognition and legitimation is often dealt with by recourse to notions of 'project' and individual 'poetics' (in the sense of a broadly philosophical discourse on the activity of poetic writing proper.)

The purpose of the present study, in passing via three such figures, is to represent a broad continuity within the domain of the 'poetic' in its mutation over the past century. A continuity, outside of the ideas of school, group or filiation, which could be described as representing the struggle to reconcile means and ideals, lucidity and the need to adhere, the sense of what is and the commitment to the 'poetic' as an achievement as yet, but constitutively, incomplete. Which is cognisant of a new, paradoxically 'founding' contingency of language, and attempts to come to terms with this while drawing energy from imperatives of individuation and experience which are also dominant parameters of modern self-conception.

To so do, it is proposed to focus on the works of three 'poets', from three non-overlapping periods encompassing the entire century, who are at the same time practitioners of multiple forms of 'writing'¹¹. The choice of three authors practising multiple forms of writing is justified in the light of the questions that remain over the notions of 'project' and 'poetics' as imputable to individual authors. Immersion within a broader practice of writing is what authorises speculation on poetic 'difference'. This 'difference' will be seen to be upheld through the operation of those other forms of writing¹² whereby what is latent or non-explicit in the 'poetic' is paralleled, allegorised or underlined, without thereby being rationalised to a level of pure systematicity.

The notion of poetic *work* may be advanced as complementing this emergence of the poetic (from) within the practice of writing thus qualified. 'Work' in the definition of

[...] l'acceptation, amère, du monde moderne." Meschonnic. *Les états de la poétique*. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1985: 125, 127.

¹¹ Segalen (1878-1919), Daumal (1908-1944), Bonnefoy (b. 1923).

¹² Of which, in Part II, a particular example, that of different forms of prose narrative, will be investigated.

elementary physics¹³ is thinkable in terms of the bridging of the difference between two points. As a metaphor this is useful for the rudimentary quality it is wished to impart to that term here. Work can be understood as tending towards the achievement of release through activity, work is the activity within which a certain order of release is sought – its ‘achievement’ is external to work, represents the limit thereof. ‘Poetic’ work is thinkable in terms of a pressure put upon writing within the wider practice of that activity of writing. It exists both by the differential and the integrative aspects of this relation, as that activity which, it will be argued, writing in respect of a certain pressure, does so along all the axes, in all domains, of the ‘espace logico-épistémologique’¹⁴ – the social, physical and textual spaces. It is not especially productive to speculate immediately on whether this pressure, occurring within writing, institutes a difference of nature or of degree. It is more interesting to observe how the aspiration to a difference of nature can institute and stabilise a perceived distance of degree – how essentialising and relativising discourses can provide mutual sustenance. Pierre Jean Jouve, a poet whose trajectory crossed all three of those given detailed consideration here, gives a practitioner’s account of ‘work’ worth considering in this connection:

Le travail a toujours été d’une grande dureté. L’impulsion me conduit à écrire, dans un état de force, jusqu’à l’achèvement aussi détaillé que possible. Mais aussi, quand est-ce l’achèvement? Au produit de ce travail je suis rapidement étranger. La page écrite, il ne reste que l’inquiétude, avec la faim de la page suivante. Un oubli se produit, aussi fort que l’impulsion première.[...]

Les divers recours tentés pour unifier et réconcilier par pleine conscience et espérance, le poète avec lui-même, ont constamment échoué. [...]

Le seul recours efficace fut dans *le travail*. Je me suis interdit toute dépense en dehors du travail. Le bourreau, comme le croyant, veulent que je travaille sans cesse.¹⁵

¹³ “Work (W) : The act of producing an effect by means of a force (F) whose point of application moves through a distance (s) in its own line of action, measured by the product of the force and the distance (W = Fs).” Chambers Dictionary, 1993 edition.

¹⁴ The term is Henri Lefèbvre’s. See section 5 below.

¹⁵ ‘En miroir. Journal sans date’ in Jouve. *Œuvres complètes II*. Paris: Mercure de France, 1987: 1051-1191, 1081-82 (emphasis in original.)

Jouve, a confirmed freudian, was obviously aware of the possible recuperation of this idea of work into a psychoanalytic account. In the overt association in his remarks of the process of ‘work’ with a continuous ‘drive’, inside a failed perspective of unification of a subject of such writing, a psychoanalytic discourse seems invited to suggest its own validity. Observing that this is the case, we are free to explore why it might be interesting to leave the work structure in (poetic) situ for the time being. The appeal to the notion of work (*travail* rather than *œuvre*) is in part an attempt to do justice to a number of intuitions regarding the perception of the ‘poetic’. The first is that, more than other literary forms, there is a tendency for the ‘poetic’ to cohere in the figure of the ‘poet’, the one who does poetic work, whose activity is of a certain order. More importantly, the notion of work is there to describe a horizon of practice which exists for the poet – it is literally ‘ce qui n’en finit pas’.¹⁶ Viewed as poetic ‘work’, the poetic dimension of the work is its status as an artefact or trace of a lived process. Once it is discontinued the work ceases to ‘solve’ anything, its ‘efficacy’ is synchronous to the time and attention given to the act(ivity), it becomes necessary, in an attempted reading thereof, to recontextualise it in terms of an event. This idea of work underlines how different the reader’s and writer’s experiences are. The writer approaches then abandons that from which the reader sets off. Whatever the nature and difficulty of the the reader’s activity, that of the writer with respect to the same artefact is different – temporally, affectively, instrumentally. It is these differences which make it impossible to conceptualise the text as a mere object among others, even if an aspiration to an objectal quality can be encountered in the reading of poetic work, and requires to be accounted for.

Controversy is the natural state of the homonym. The homonym ‘poésie’ and the associated adjectival form are those terms whose attribution is at stake in any given ‘poetic field’, if one can conceive of a segregated corner of some larger ‘field’ of autonomous endeavour which could be recognised as the ‘literary field’ in a given society, linguistic zone or economy. In addition, then, to a grounding function for the commentator, the use of the homonym is central to the questions of what is read, and to

¹⁶ To appropriate the title of a work by Michel Deguy (1995).

the inner dynamics of the controversy, which it serves in the first instance to hide. It would be appropriate, before going any further, to try to suggest how there could be links between this ‘agonistic’ understanding of the problem of the ‘poetic’ and considerations of a reading method, or approach of the ‘poetic’ artefact. Critical discourse is a claim to have read, possibly to offer a reading. As such it is an advocacy, with advocacy’s ethical attachment to the persons it concerns. That is, it represents what it thinks to be the position of its subject without necessarily coinciding with or adhering to that position. This is a distance at which it may be possible to operate in respect of the attempts to read the writings of the authors to be discussed here in terms of ‘poetic’ work. In corroboration is offered this reflection from the philosopher indirectly criticised by Descombes above, in a French translation:

Là où il y a de la compréhension, il n’y a pas seulement de l’identité. Comprendre veut plutôt dire que quelqu’un est capable de se mettre à la place de l’autre pour dire ce qu’il a compris et ce qu’il a à dire là-dessus. Cela ne veut justement pas dire que l’on répète ce qu’il a dit. Au sens le plus littéral du terme, comprendre c’est, en effet, représenter la cause de quelqu’un d’autre devant un tribunal ou n’importe quelle autre instance, se porter garant pour elle.¹⁷

An act of ‘comprehension’ in the mitigated sense developed here by Gadamer, one which might authorise a discourse on – without pretensions of being perfectly adequate to – a practice in language that is refractory to discursive recuperation, is thus necessarily the defence of a *version* of the poetic. Such a defence can begin to be developed, and be contextualised, by opening the adversarial field and illustrating that any given version, while recognising no barriers to its action other than the limits of ‘language’ itself, is capable, by its very existence, of being instituted as the antithesis of another version. That is, all attempts at fidelity are capable of intellectual reformulation as betrayal – and that a certain degree of sympathy is necessary to enter into the sense of fidelity to which each new work is an attempt to do justice. Controversy on the ‘poetic’ entails the momentary

¹⁷ Gadamer, Hans-Georg. *La philosophie herméneutique* (tr. J. Grondin). Paris: Presses Universitaires de France (Epithémée), 1996: 160.

(or periodic, or epochal) preferment of one perfectibility, or one discourse on perfectibility, over others. The homonym is constituted and replenished as against itself. Inside the field constituted around the demise of the absolute text the embodiment of legitimacy – the dynamics of legitimacy through authenticity – can be seen to continue as an object of work.

2. Scenes from a virtual polemic

An example of this stance is offered in the following remarks by the poet Bernard Noël which are arguably representative of a widely-held view on the matter within the poetic field. That view (paradoxically – in that it is tantamount to a discourse itself) thinks poetic work in terms of an emancipation within language from established discourses. Noël, denying that anything in poetic foundation could be regularised in terms exceeding it, casts poetic writing as a linguistic safety valve in the face of a dominant rapport with the accession to language.

Les média ne dominant qu'en ignorant ce qui les conteste, et la poésie, du simple fait qu'elle existe, les conteste parce qu'elle représente la qualité quand ils n'ont souci que de quantité. Les média sont l'actualité, toute l'actualité, et la poésie se moque de ce temps-là.

De ce fait, la poésie est le foyer de résistance de la langue vivante contre la langue consommée, réduite, univoque. La poésie est cette vitalité de la langue sans avoir besoin de l'affirmer: elle l'est naturellement, en elle-même, par sa situation, car elle est sans cesse réactivée par ce qui l'anime, et qui est source, qui est originel.¹⁸

'Poetry' is thus (by definition) in the minor position¹⁹, its minority being that in the spirit of which it deregulates what in language (that is, in the employment and deployment by

¹⁸ 'Où va la poésie?' in Kelley, David and Khalfa, Jean (eds.) *The New French Poetry*. Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Bloodaxe, 1996: 212-21, 212-14.

¹⁹ In the sense of Deleuze and Guattari's 'littérature mineure'. See Deleuze, Gilles and Guattari, Félix. *Kafka. Pour une littérature mineure*. Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1975.

individual and collective subjects of language) is dominant. It represents a critical practice revelatory of the availability of language to the illusions of its own consistencies, and its capacity to pass these consistencies off as those of its putative objects. To utilise another terminology associated with Deleuze/Guattari, the ‘poetic’ would thus be that entry into language which serves to ‘de-territorialize’ all that the supposedly ‘dominant’ forms of language use had served to ‘territorialize’, to impose upon the reader/addressee. Poetry’s minority to rhetoric’s majority; the dominance of language’s utility as the agent of conviction, adhesion, cohesion over language’s excess as an instrument of self-regulation. To go no further than a theorisation by opposition would be to reduce the ‘poetic’ to a purely reactive supplement to the given, the already-established. This requires that the poet undergo the risk of substantive theorisation. The question becomes that of how to theorise the negative, resisting movement of the ‘poetic’ together with the fact of its positive existence – the fact that it is both ‘vitalité’ and ‘foyer’ in the matter of our relations with language. The reader experiences these two aspects in the symbiosis of what is encountered as the work. It is a duality for which Noël accounts by recourse to the ‘origin’ – one, as we shall have occasion to observe, encountered in several meta-discourses of the poetic. Noël immediately takes this reconciling figure, however, and brings it to a new, almost playful extreme: “L’avenir de la poésie est d’être source d’avenir parce qu’elle est un perpétuel commencement.”²⁰ This accomplishes the feat of associating the attraction of the origin, of the source, with the pure prospection of a discourse of the future – again, one we shall have occasion to observe elsewhere. The ‘poetic’ effectuates a critical, salutary gesture *because* it occupies the cardinal position. It designates the future *because* it regains the source. It reconciles the subject with language *because* of its absolute refusal of the pre-formed, the conventional, the reductive. The profile of poetry as the site of maximal linguistic investment and personal hope, as a multi-faceted *état-limite*, quickly becomes apparent:

Qu’est-ce qu’une expression non-figurative dans un monde que les média transforment peu à peu en pure représentation, en pure apparence?

Qu’est-ce qu’une concrétion verbale?

²⁰ Op. cit. 214.

Et qu'est-ce bien sûr que l'espace mental?

Je travaille aux réponses avec la certitude lentement acquise que la poésie est l'expérience des limites intérieures de l'expression verbale: en touchant ces limites, la poésie touche à la fois l'origine et l'avenir.²¹

Pausing for reflection we can note the recuperability of the supposedly anti-discursive poetic gesture in a discursive text. The apologia continues to assign a function to an activity which it claims free from such considerations. The 'poetic' is a value upheld in a recourse to 'rhetoric'. From being a salutary practice it becomes a polemical concept. 'Poetry' in Noël's illustration opposes a good illusion to one to be overcome. The name of poetry is a name for this overcoming as much as of a destination of that action. It concretises a question of how poetry lives, how, as a desire for lucidity, it might validly entertain its own illusions. To what extent would an internalisation of these illusions constitute the canonicity at the heart of the reading act in their regard?

It is informative, faced with this question, to witness the reversibility of the polemical value of the homonym, the unavoidably conflictual recognition of the 'poetic'. Polemical writing has the advantage over 'poetry' (including that of the polemicists) of being considerably easier to consume, and of gratifying aspects of the intellect and reading reflexes which 'poetry' is often less keen to exercise. Yet writings such as those of Christian Prigent open up perspectives on the 'value' of poetry, the valency of which can be seen to be as much a matter of temperament and the direction of a particular line of radicalisation, as of any broader philosophical or extra-conjunctural necessity. In the course of a monograph on Denis Roche²², stigmatising what he terms 'l'idéologie poétique', Prigent, echoing Roche, connects what he terms the "vieux idéalisme" of the poetry of transcendence and presence (heroically imagined and serially frustrated) firstly – technically – with the creation of images, and secondly – teleologically – with an

²¹ Ibid. 218.

²² *Denis Roche*. Paris: Seghers, 1975.

attempted spectacle of unity and unification. Poetry's illusion is its disrepute, its steadfast maintenance thereof is what makes it 'ideological':

[L]a poésie détient un double privilège: genre «noble», du fait de l'habileté technique qu'elle semble nécessiter; discours «vrai» et comme «miraculeux», puisque serrant au plus près une «authenticité», celle du sujet-poète, réduit du même coup, selon une autre figure propre à cette métaphysique simplette, à son «intérieurité» psychologique, mais simultanément valorisé, puisque investi de ce pouvoir magique de toucher, dans ses transes ou ses mouillements d'âme, à la fibre de l'*être*. [...] Pour l'idéologie poétique, le signifiant est toujours secondaire et le poème toujours la manifestation parousiaque d'une essence transcendante à ce qu'en «traduit» la langue.²³

To this autistic and truncated rote by which the majority of poets happily, or otherwise, play out their textual existences it is Roche's response – that is, the response of the one who depicts himself and the end-point and liquidator of the entire 'tradition' crystallised around the term 'poetry' – to provide the reader with 'le spectacle de l'écriture', the pulsional printout that is the 'réel' of the individual subject made text (seemingly random, resolutely unintelligible and thus inexorably, quasi-scientifically, valid.) This in replacement of the 'illusion' furnished by the standardly 'poetic' text, drawn out under the voluntaristic imperatives of the 'idéologie'.

[L]'opération d'écriture (ce travail de terrassier ou de vieille taupe dans ce que Ponge appelle le trente-sixième dessous ou «la nuit des racines») ne produit qu'en creux, que rien n'est écrit qui ne soit en fait mécrit, dévoyé, travesti. C'est dire que le texte comme manifestation d'une présence, media soumis à la convention de communication, s'effondre dans un travail qui traverse l'obstacle de la représentation au profit d'un tracement brutal (mais dont la violence est lente

²³ Ibid. 15-16 (emphasis in original.)

différenciée, complexe), dont le fond pulsionnel est évident dès lors qu'il s'effectue au travers d'une scansion organisant des coupures et des répétitions [...] ²⁴

Pausing to note the conventionally avant-gardist move that sets out the current spectacle as both radically different and radically valid with respect to all preceding production – the 'geste avant-gardiste' whose apparent demise²⁵ is far from having extracted the oppositionality inherent in the poetic, both internally and externally – it is worth noting two aspects of the reproach being levelled here at the practitioners of the 'poetic ideology'.

The first is that of 'idealism' – which involves a tendency in the body 'poetic' to attribute superior value to ideal formulations and concepts, with their malleability and capacity for transformation and resolution, than to a given 'real' (external and / or internal²⁶.) The reactive power of ideas when set in motion against one another, their apparent ability to interact, meld and offer '(re)solutions', beguiles the poet with an eye-of-the-needle eschatology of perfect composition in the unspeakable chaos of the interminable, somatic, historical present. This proves far too tempting to the well-trained intelligence, which from the magma of an obligatory inaugural disquiet sets about the construction of a consoling window on possibility – even if only for the space of an exquisite lyrical moment. As an aesthetic move this never fails to gain the adhesion of a readership whose sole ambition in that role (again, as the denunciation would have it) is to adhere to their chosen, albeit demanding, comfort source. The ideology's 'idealistic' tendency achieves exactly the right dosages of sublimation and intellectual vagueness to ensure its distant authority as "perle de la pensée bourgeoise" in an unchallenged 'humanist' hegemony²⁷.

While idealism is thus the practice which quickens the orthodox 'poetic' sauce, its main ingredient – and the other point to be noted in this detour – is the image: that is, the

²⁴ Ibid. 28.

²⁵ See Kaufmann, Vincent. *Poétique des groupes littéraires*. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1997.

²⁶ And of which, in Hegelian 'idealism', ideas form an integral part. See Michael Forster: 'Hegel's dialectical method' in *The Cambridge Companion to Hegel*. Cambridge University Press, 1993. 130-70.

²⁷ Prigent op. cit. 15. We will be returning below to the origins and evolution of 'humanist' conventions, and to the questionable validity of that word as a term of abuse.

hopelessly ‘bourgeois’ insistence on the visible universe, its accredited elements, and their assumption into the language that will become poetic. Experience is assumed into stock projections onto a primary scene, a version of pastoral, as it were, or the wishful impressionism of an affirming ‘contact’ with the physical world, nature as articulable and durable form. The mistake here, in this version of events, is at base one of scale – ‘meaning’ (*sens*) is the illusion of meaning or of truth obtained by the manipulation of inadmissibly large blocks of inadequately analysed material. Particularly inadmissible are the repressive reiterations of the ‘human’ on a sanitised, human (*échelle humaine*) scale. This is, for example, what results in ‘poésie lyrique amoureuse’ – the interminable shuffling of the images which go to the achievement of an aesthetically pleasing, idealised resolution (the ‘poem’ as ‘ideological’ is that resolution, quite independently of what it might say, or diagnose as its own failure to say), rather than in a (presumably ‘admissible’) pulsional report – purified of images, of ideas, of the interactive propensities of these, and thus ‘real’ in a far more worrying and less negotiable sense.

‘Poetry’ is thus to be denounced as an agent of reassurance (even if in a renewal of vows to the impossible) where there is only material for ever greater uncertainty. The exercise of containment it becomes on the level of the text, and on the logically prior level of ‘experience’, serves to identify it as willed containment within a persisting convention. ‘Poetry’, an interaction inaugurated by that codename at each new turn, is the sublimation of a refusal to know into a conventional structure. The alibis ‘poetry’ provides itself in order to maintain something of the felt value of the activity, the supposed engagement in the practices of rupture, irregularity, non-communication, or withdrawal of meaning, all fall short of the transgressive pretention which would save them from an ‘ideological’ fate. They refuse to draw the obvious conclusion that language conspires at all times to overwhelm the agent of its employment, obliterating the figure of the subject in a parody of the inter-subjective. Worst of all, engagement in the ‘problematic’ simply encourages the maintenance of the illusion:

[C]onvenons bien – writes Denis Roche himself – que la poésie ne se connaît pas comme naissance, qu’elle ne se connaît pas comme emploi, qu’elle ne se connaît

plus comme science et qu'elle ne se connaît jamais que comme société [...] Défigurer la convention écrite c'est, en écrivant, témoigner de façon continue que la poésie est une convention (de genre) à l'intérieur d'une convention (de communication).²⁸

These characterisations refer in fact at base to the romantic inheritance of many attempts to conceptualise and legitimise the poetic 'act'. They contrast in their identification of the poetic with an 'ideology' with Noël's position above, not primarily in their demands of what would be a valid form of writing – in which the anti-poetic stance of Roche-Prigent seems comparable to Noël's 'pro-poetic' line – but in the rejection of a strategy attempting to reinstate the homonym in some form of functional legitimacy. Thus 'poetry' and the 'poetic', viewed with suspicion, in accordance with a modern poetic logic, can very readily become the values (diagnosed in others) against which what we seem forced to call 'poetic' work, for want of another term, is done.

The division of the poetic field, suggested in the contrast above, remains in some degree constitutive of the main lines of practice currently observable around the denomination 'poetry' – that is, the division between those who (in caricature) see 'poésie' as a supreme form of communicational attainment²⁹ and thus, in the current context, a threatened, fragile, elusive quality, and those who (in caricature) practice an anti-'poésie', an exploration of the act of 'writing' that seeks to exit the accredited structures and reflexes of what is conventionally read as poetic, and which interprets these as indicative of values which it is intellectually and perhaps even 'politically' necessary to undermine, in a continuation of authentic poetic values.³⁰ Curiously, then, much of what is classed as 'poésie' for practical, commercial, bibliographical and institutional purposes, and much –

²⁸ Roche, Denis. 'Éros Énergumène' in *La poésie est inadmissible (Œuvres poétiques complètes)*. Paris: Seuil, 1995: 284.

²⁹ See for example the discourse on a 'lyrisme critique' cultivated in the review *Le Nouveau Recueil*, and on which topic it has issued a semi-programmatic 'bilan' ('D'un lyrisme critique', *Nouveau Recueil* 52, September-November 1999.) Perhaps the most stimulating recent panorama of the contemporary French poetic scene is Meschonnic's pugnacious *Célébration de la poésie* (Lagrasse: Verdier, 2001.)

³⁰ See, along with Prigent's subsequent contributions to the reflection (*Ceux qui merdRent*. Paris: P.O.L., 1991; *A quoi bon encore des poètes?* Paris: P.O.L., 1996), the essay by Jean-Marie Gleize (*A noir. Poésie et littéralité*. Paris: Seuil, 1992) a proponent of what he terms 'littéralité' (pitched as the overcoming of a 'lyrisme' associated primarily with 'images') as an accession in writing to the indefinable 'réel'.

sociologically viewed – of what emerges from within a community of practice whose coherence lies in a reflection on a complex labelled ‘poésie’, is given over to the refutation of every possible basis upon which that entity might continue to claim to be viable. In the name, or place, of values – such as lucidity, doubt, truth, intellectual and symbolic ‘freedom’, human existence, meaning – which ‘poésie’ has, in the last century and more, made its concern.

It would be wrong, however, to present this as a phenomenon peculiar to the contemporary scene. An awareness of the paradox seems, rather, to delimit what at any particular time in the ‘modern’ period passes for the ‘contemporary’. Thus Henri Michaux, in a talk given in 1940, reveals something approaching the same logic at work, and at the same time a psychology of the ‘modern’ preoccupation with innovation and the ‘poetic’ drive to the limit of the established ‘poetic’. Michaux:

[L]a vraie Poésie se fait contre la Poésie, contre la Poésie de l’époque précédente, non par haine sans doute, quoiqu’elle en prenne naïvement parfois l’apparence, mais appelée qu’elle est à montrer sa double tendance, qui est premièrement d’apporter le feu, le nouvel élan, la prise de conscience nouvelle de l’époque, deuxièmement, de libérer l’homme d’une atmosphère vieille, usée, devenue mauvaise.³¹

Thus having inserted this movement and countermovement into the social register of literary polemic, we are confronted with another aspect of the differentiating / innovating drive – one which identifies the ‘poetic’ with a need of the individual mind for renewal in difference. Gaston Bachelard privileges the ‘image’ in making a comparable point at around the same time: “Le poème est essentiellement une aspiration à des images

³¹ ‘L’avenir de la poésie’ in Michaux, Henri. *Œuvres complètes* (Vol. 1). Paris: Gallimard (Bibliothèque de la Pléiade), 1998: 966-70, 970. Harold Bloom puts his own stamp on this process of distinction: “Poetic history [is] indistinguishable from poetic influence, since strong poets make that history by misreading one another, so as to clear imaginative space for themselves.” This process of ongoing poetic foundation through a refusal of ‘influence’ is reinforced through an extension from the intertextual to the existential domain: “[E]very poet begins (however ‘unconsciously’) by rebelling more strongly against the consciousness of death’s necessity than all other men and women do.” *The Anxiety of Influence. A Theory of Poetry*. Oxford University Press, 1973: 6, 10.

nouvelles. Il correspond au besoin essentiel de nouveauté qui caractérise le psychisme humain.”³² This orientation of the poetic can be taken to the extreme of identifying that term with the futurity of the event, as does for example Meschonnic: “La poésie est plus ce qui n’est pas encore dans le langage que son propre passé, le passé de la poésie, avec quoi certains la confondent.”³³ It is not usual to conflate these two registers, of the social and psychological effects of ‘novelty’ but it is tempting to ask whether, on reflection, it is possible to suppress one entirely in the face of the other, to think perfectibility and legitimacy in imaginary separation from one another.

3. ‘Utopia’ as a complex discursive position

It is in the attempt to think the general notions of perfectibility and legitimacy together that the potential of utopia as a theoretical metaphor in relation to the poetic first appeared to the present author to warrant consideration in relation to the ‘poetic’. The term requires some unpacking because, at first sight, there would seem no greater clash of styles, temperaments and objectives imaginable within the literary field than that apparent between ‘poetic’ and ‘utopian’ genres.

The topos has, since the formalisation of reflection on language production in rhetorics, linked the origins of discourse to a spatial metaphor. It denotes a general ordering or structuring which draws language, through speech, into a communicative act. The prefix u-, brought into currency in a work of fiction elaborately and especially connected with the pragmatic horizon of its author, dynamises this spatial rendering of convention. It brings a new principle to bear among those operative on the employment of the topos. On a first rendering it could be said to undermine the topos, to take it out of itself. Utopia would be recognisable not as a product, or a figure, but as a spirit or principle brought to a given practice via the duality it instates. Utopia, connoting a figure of an as yet

³² *L’air et les songes*. Paris: José Corti, 1943: 6.

³³ *Les états de la poétique*, op. cit. 227.

unattained space, initiates a dynamic away from the given, a principle of difference guided by a postulate of perfection.

The generic Utopia has its origins in the imagining of an optimal arrangement of human coexistence. Before being a theory, or a 'practice', it is, as Louis Marin has remarked³⁴, a 'figure' and an 'affabulation'. A space is delimited, appropriated for the imagination as a *tabula rasa* within which the elements of the human problem achieve an optimal economy through the observance of rules or practices which, in the theorist's mind, articulate the arrangement of the fragments (monad, subject, agent, individual etc.) with and within the whole (which is in the first place a product of the abstraction – or projection – that is one of the resources of the literary text). The *a priori*, then, as imagined by the utopian theorist, is what that theorist understands to be the true parameters of the human phenomenon – the consideration of the subject and the set of all subjects under the aspect of 'possibility'. Into a highly artificial situation, 'unreal' but expressive of the constructive capabilities and/or delirium of the human mind as itself an integral, governing part of human 'reality', is thus introduced a formulation of the grounding conditions imposed by the fact of being human. This formulation is always of necessity a hypothesis as to what the human being 'is' or 'can be' – and most utopias fail radically in the eyes of the reader because of the feebleness, or extremism (which is possibly the same thing) of the chosen or implicit hypothesis.

The generic utopia will typically include details of social organisation – of how wealth is distributed, work divided up, disputes resolved, decisions taken etc. The rules governing these are either ingrained custom or miraculously non-conflicting examples of positive legal utterance. The problem of interpretation and of the unarticulated is evacuated in a scenario where the public uses of language are ritualised, seemingly transparent, and perfectly contained in their pre-ordained functions. Utopias attract socio-historical readings, and it is common to link their origin with other phenomena emerging at the time – capitalism, discovery of the globe, the precepts of humanist learning. The aforementioned presumption of transparency in the utopian law is for example something

³⁴ In *Utopiques: Jeux d'espaces*. Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1973.

strongly mirrored, in the humanist cultures of early modernity which gave rise to the generic utopia, in the creation or imagination of community between writers and their readers. The demise of this version of literary communication, mirrored in the transparency of the utopian rule, is one which has been repeatedly observed. Peter Sloterdijk, for example, in a recent discussion of culture which, he alleges, consonant in that with Roche's denunciation of 'humanism' above, is fully into the aftermath of the collapse of such a model, depicts something like its basic setting. He begins with a reference to Jean Paul's remark to the effect that books are long letters addressed to one's friends, and continues:

En écrivant cette phrase il a désigné par son nom, dans sa quintessence et avec beaucoup de grâce, la nature et la fonction de l'humanisme: il constitue une télécommunication créatrice d'amitié utilisant le média de l'écrit. Ce qui, depuis le temps de Cicéron, porte le nom *d'humanitas*, constitue au sens le plus strict et le plus large l'une des conséquences de l'alphabétisation. Depuis que la philosophie existe comme genre littéraire, elle recrute ses partisans en écrivant sur l'amour et l'amitié, et le faisant d'une manière contagieuse – car elle veut aussi inciter d'autres personnes à cet amour.³⁵

The humanist postulate is one, notwithstanding Sloterdijk (and Roche), that retains a certain hold over those still participating in the 'culture of literacy' (Godzich) upon which written poetic practice is dependent.³⁶ It is one with regard to which the poetic may stand in a critical relation, but which it is an act of simple bad faith to appear to eschew entirely. But it seems undeniable that, similar to the discredit of utopian optimism in the

³⁵ Sloterdijk, Peter. *Règles pour le parc humain* (tr. fr. O. Mannoni), Mille et une nuits, Fayard, 1999. 7 (*Regeln für den Menschenpark*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1999.)

³⁶ Wlad Godzich (*The Culture of Literacy*. Harvard University Press, 1994) treats the contemporary question of literary teleologies – the end of humanism as a universality of address and the wellbeing of contemporary (and in the first place American) consciousness in language – within what he describes as the Postliterate State. Here, specialised literacies, distributed according to demand by a 'new-vocationalist' third-level education system, give the marketplace its end-of-history veneer. In the new-vocationalist model, every actor (a.k.a. subject; citizen) speaks a perfectly functional sectoral jargon. This includes those actors 'specialising' in literature and in politics. The universalisation of specialisation diagnosed here is an epoch-making development. It marks the end point of language as 'universal mediator' which has characterised (Western) societies and cultures since the Renaissance, the end, thus, of what Godzich calls 'the culture of literacy'.

20th Century, the unquestioningly ‘humanistic’ model of publication as address is, without more, insufficient as a way of thinking about texts. What this conclusion leads to, however, is not an abandonment but a reappraisal. The migration of the poetic from an identifiable form to a quality whose recognition is a matter of constant questioning, is mirrored, over the last century, by the migration of utopia into its adjectival mode. Utopia as an economy of figures, the description of imaginary spaces, is replaced by utopia as a position in respect of ‘reality’, an angle from which it is approached and challenged, a momentum of thought as it hits the given, a *dynamic*³⁷.

The emergence of this dynamic can be understood in terms of the relations of utopia to politicising descriptions of discourse which purports to transparently convey the reality of things instituted – ‘ideology’.³⁸ The correlation of ideology and utopia, first established by Karl Mannheim in the 1920s, is re-articulated and developed by Paul Ricœur in a series of *Lectures on Ideology and Utopia*. For Ricœur, following on from an analysis of the canon of reflection on the subject, this modern sense of ‘utopia’ is to be understood not as a genre or a figural economy, but as something of the order of a rhetorical position – emergent in relation to its ‘dominant’ other. ‘Utopia’ is thus conceptualised as characterising the more minor, newer, dynamic element of a dialectical couple. In his commentary of Mannheim’s work Ricoeur reflects upon the ambiguous usage of the epithet ‘utopian’ in respect of certain discourses, sometimes to suggest an absolute vitality in respect of the possible, but equally to condemn as ‘unrealisable’ or for the ubiquitous ‘lack of realism’. What this requires us to clarify is a positional essence of the utopian, which emerges as an antidote to a dominant discursive position and takes its identity from this positionality: “the conflict between dominant and ascendant involves the polemics, the dialectics, of utopia and ideology.”³⁹

³⁷ A transmutation which can be dated from the early 20th Century with Ernst Bloch’s association of the utopian concept with music. See, for example, Bloch, Ernst. *L’Esprit de l’utopie* (tr. A-M. Lang et C. Piron-Audard), Paris, Gallimard, 1977.

³⁸ See Kavanagh, James H. ‘Ideology’ in Lentricchia and McLaughlin (eds.) *Critical Terms for Literary Study* (2nd. Edition). The University of Chicago Press, 1995: 306-20.

³⁹ Ricœur, Paul. *Lectures on Ideology and Utopia*. Columbia University Press, 1986. 178. (English-language original.)

This understanding serves to associate the utopian position with the explicit goal of lucidity, and with a principle of linguistic difference vis-à-vis what is objectified as the dominant, instituted ‘illusion’ of the real. The artistic postures of disquiet, of rupture, of denunciation and systemic preferment of the (functionally, if not historically) new, characteristic of the ‘modernist’ type, sit well with this positionality of utopia. What is in turn illusory in the utopian position is absolved by its difference – by the fact that it is, at least, not (seen as) a received illusion. The celebratedly ‘unrealised’ character of the utopian object is what is fundamental here. Whereas for those who decry ‘utopianism’ this is the trait which disqualifies the position definitively – thus roping legitimate speech back into a defined order of what ‘is’ – apologists of the ‘concept’ of utopia maintain its validity in terms of a qualified relation to the real (and thus to the question of its eventual realisation.)

The theoretical metaphor of utopia thus has the resources to allow us to think the inner, polemical difference of ‘poetry’ through. Mirroring a supposed outer difference, that inner difference is an equally pressing social reality against which the readings that follow emerge. It would be possible to move from the example of a cleft in the ‘poetic’ (the pointed finger of ‘ideology’) to argue that both sides of the cleft are ‘utopian’ in their own ways, and maintain a utopian sense of their own practice. This may have the drawback of replacing textual, first-degree indeterminacy with a critical indeterminacy – ‘utopia’ can be made to express more, perhaps, than any one notion has a right to. But this open quality mirrors that of the diversity within the notion (the ‘poetic’) it is attempting to circumscribe. Utopia, in other words – like ‘poetry’ – functions as a polemical concept⁴⁰, which, while attempting to articulate positively a view of its object, attempts at the same time to acknowledge the dissimilarity of those texts which fall under the homonym – which, indeed, suggests that the homonym can only, in the end, be thought to reliably name that incessant difference within its attribution. It imports the imperative of openness from the practice of poetic work to the level of the describing vocabulary. In so doing it may give rise to more questions than it could even purport to

⁴⁰ One might thus contrast the valencies of the term as used by Cioran in *Histoire et utopie* (Paris: Gallimard, 1960) and Miguel Benasayag in *Utopie et liberté* (Paris: La Découverte, 1986.)

answer – but to see this as a fault in one's own reflection would be to disavow what is perhaps the one conventional 'lesson' the present writer can claim to having learned in the course of a prolonged effort of reading 'poetic' works.

Indeed, the 'question' can be understood as the mode of utopian 'realisation'. Marin, basing himself on a reading of More's inaugural text⁴¹, placing a renewed emphasis on the spatial aspects of the concept and genre of utopia, remarks that the emergence of the genre is contemporaneous with the discovery of the New World. It draws directly on that enlargement of the real so as to set up a kind of counter-example in a space of 'the possible'. This counter-example represents a critical force, a subversive potential vis-à-vis an established version of reality, represented in More's text by a discussion of the political situation of the time. The realised figure of utopia, in its relation to the intellectual self-image as a virtual point outside the certainties of the ambient discourse, is a focus for projections of a will-to-lucidity which has not entirely renounced the desire for verbal intervention in its turn. Utopia becomes a byword for a certain idea of a book's possible efficacy, not in an immediate or direct way, but as the beginning of a way out of the encrustation of received ideas, an invitation to independent thought. It is thus not, for Marin, 'outside' what can be termed ideology, but rather harbours the premises of such an exit by force of critical practice. It is in terms of this critical practice, for which it serves as a purchase or inaugural scene, rather than as a truth value in itself, that the textual utopia is justified and necessary:

La force critique de la figure utopique qu'au début des temps modernes More avait dressée *dans un livre* restait efficace, même si nous disposions d'une théorie scientifique, voire d'une pratique qui permettrait non pas d'en réaliser les objectifs – car l'utopie n'est pas un projet politique et social et ne comporte ni une stratégie ni une tactique de réalisation –, mais d'accomplir dans le concept ce qu'elle retraçait pluriellement et à vide dans la figure. Ainsi un livre pouvait-il avoir médiatement, indirectement, une force critique, fût-elle prise encore dans

⁴¹ More, Thomas. 'Utopia' (1516) in Bruce (ed.) *Three Early Modern Utopias*. Oxford University Press, 1999. See also Servier, Jean. *Histoire de l'utopie*. Paris: Gallimard, 1991.

l'idéologie: à plus forte raison, un livre du livre qui cherche à retourner la figure portée par le premier et à construire ou à déconstruire son texte.⁴²

Ricoeur, meanwhile, distances the question of realisation in a different manner. The utopian dynamic as he describes it, glossing Mannheim, turns into a philosophy of the life-cycle of the political itself: "Politics is not a descriptive concept but a polemical concept provided by the dialectics between utopia and ideology. [...] The decisive trait of utopia is then not realizability but the preservation of *opposition*. The entropy of utopia in the present situation, the threatened loss of total perspective resulting from the disappearance of utopia, is leading to a situation where scattered events no longer have meaning."⁴³ The oppositional force of the utopian is thus depicted as an agent of 'total perspective', a sense of something approaching an objective rapport with the constant transformation of events. The resolution of this opposition in the realisation / disappearance of the utopian entails the demise of such a perspective – and more importantly, of its imaginability. Opposition brings about a unity of perspective (thus also a 'unity' of the subject of perception), whereas resolution leaves the world infinitely fragmented in things and events. Realisation is the antithesis of what, on this reading, the utopian function – a leavening of the present reality – has become. The question of 'realisation' for the artwork, in any case, being inseparable if not indistinguishable from that of the execution, or making, or writing of the work itself.

It is clear that these formulations of the 'utopian', developed retrospectively by Marin and Ricœur in the 1970s, describe a fundamentally political attempt which, in the face of subsequent discourses on the post-modern, seems even more problematic and pressured today than it did to the theorists at the time. Theory now prefers to focus on the apparently generative links between informational hyper-saturation and reality deficit – an implosion of all sense of 'utopian' possibility in the face of the exponential growth of available 'choice'. This should not lead to a mass application of the term 'political' to writing understood in terms of a utopian dynamic – but the distant 'political' significance

⁴² Marin, Louis. *Utopiques: Jeux d'espaces*, op. cit. 48 (italics in original, emphasis added.)

⁴³ Ricœur, op. cit. 179-80.

of apparently apolitical texts lies in their engaging with the experience of language as determined by the memory of what has already been established in it, what has already been said, or written. To bring a utopian disposition to the problem of entry into language in one's turn is thus to imply a basic 'political' validity of the speaking subject. Whether this can have any standard or substantive meaning is a problem of another order. More immediately, however, the dialectic of 'utopia' and 'ideology' is arguably a valid conceptual framework for the approach of the practice and self-conception of a wide variety of poetic work.

Work is that whereby the subject attempts to enter into the flux of the present – the 'given' of the world understood as the scene of constant becoming and unbecoming. The replacement dialectic of speech and 'utopia' can be understood as a way of figuring the relation of the 'poetic' to the question, or the obscure pressure, of the 'possible' that is an available human dimension of every present / real. In a purely textualist view, the experience of 'possibility' standardly sets up a problematic of play and contingency. The experience of the contingency of the signifier-signified relationship provokes an ontological vertigo followed typically by full entry into the autonomising powers of language. Verbal art as it relates to the question and experience of language itself is the exploration of the virtualities opened up by this contingency; art potentially becomes the source of its own experience, its own questionings – many 'narratives' end here. But this experience, carried beyond a certain logic, re-ignites the problem of the real, of what exceeds and/or precedes the text. Possibility stands to be worked on and against in the context of a given which is first and foremost the experience of a world, and a relation to it, awaiting the language of a subject of that relation.

4. Utopia as an articulation of spaces

While a cardinal resource of utopia is this contrastive dynamic perspective imparted to the field into which it is introduced, the original multiply spatial character of utopia is equally important, in the following analysis, to an organisation of an approach of poetic

work. The ‘space’ of the utopia as pure figure, as counter-example, born in its coupling of a journey with a figuration of an ideal polity / political space, is typically of a highly idealised or rationalised kind, expressing meliorative, even maximalist energies. It foregrounds a symbolic authenticity and the ideal strength of this, over and against an organic, formless power of the real – an act of human willing is seen to overcome the forces of animality lurking in the individual and collective unconscious and to bring the ‘human’ to what is understood by the utopian author as its highest thinkable achievement. The validity of the project, of a broadly-understood reason, is affirmed over and against unthinking inheritance. More’s original utopian space is, moreover, the creature of testimony rather than direct authorial experience – not engaging the narrative voice directly and thus providing the author with an unspoken but obvious distance from the substance of the text, a distance which might be qualified as ironic. Through this distancing technique, the utopian narrative, rather than a simple polarisation between possible and impossible, or the alternative of full adhesion or rejection *en bloc* of an ideological configuration within which it is inserted, establishes in itself, *qua* text, a space which Marin terms ‘neutral’:

[Le neutre] est le troisième terme absent et supplémentaire de l’opposition, de l’affirmation et de la négation: entre oui et non, il y aurait une «place» inoccupable que le neutre occuperait. [...] Le neutre est, en fin de compte, l’opération de prise en compte de la différence entre positif et négatif, union de l’un et de l’autre, non pas au sens de la synthèse par *aufhebung* hégélienne, mais au contraire de la distanciation réciproque de l’un et de l’autre: l’opération productive de la limite, différenciation des éléments complémentaires de la totalité par laquelle la métaphysique retournée par l’acte critique découvre son envers.⁴⁴

The space of the utopian text and its figures is seen here, in terms of ‘neutrality’, to hold together – embodying without reconciling – elements of the equation established in the subject between the given and the possible. It therefore *appears*, is established, not as an

⁴⁴ Op. cit. 37 and 39.

immediately dialectical concept but a tension, a relation, a spacing. There is thus more, or something else, to the materialised utopian gesture than a denial of the status quo. It proffers its own body as an intermediary reality engaging the processes which will create consciousness – and thus transform the given in a positive act. The neutral, which should be thinkable as a textual ‘space’, is a space of representation inseparable from a process moving from negative to positive moments. Again, its function is assimilable, and assimilated, to a process of work:

L’utopie n’est pas de l’ordre du concept, mais elle n’appartient pas non plus à celui de l’image: elle est une figure, un schème de l’imagination, une fiction «produite-productrice» dont nous ne pouvons approcher les formes polysémiques qu’à travers l’imaginaire, tout en marquant comment la pratique utopique signifiante, *le travail du neutre*, se poursuivent à ce niveau, dans et par la même ambiguïté.⁴⁵

But as well as requiring that we question the status of representation with respect to the real, the ‘figures’ of utopia represent a first order reflection on the experience of physical, phenomenological space. The utopian fiction confronts the reader with referential spaces which are so many questionings of the spaces available to our experience, or solicitations to look differently. As ‘lieu’ or ‘scene’ of a certain rapport with the ubiquitous ‘ideology’, a utopian ‘space’ also involves an ordering which is potentially productive of meaning. It is thus of the order of a ‘haut lieu’, in that referential space attains to the level of meaning – it becomes a ‘space’ in and of which experience can translate into meaning. In beginning a study of Disneyland as an example of what he terms ‘la dégénérescence utopique’, Marin formulates the following set of conceptual relations, where he privileges in utopia its especially spatial qualities over any progressive or regressive valency that might otherwise be assigned:

Proposition:

Une utopie dégénérée est une idéologie réalisée sous la forme d’un mythe.

⁴⁵ Ibid. 41 (emphasis added.)

Rappels:

1. L'idéologie est la représentation du rapport imaginaire des individus à leurs conditions réelles d'existence.
2. L'utopie est un lieu idéologique: l'utopie est une espèce de discours idéologique.
3. L'utopie est un lieu idéologique où l'idéologie est mise en jeu: l'utopie est une scène de représentation de l'idéologie.
4. Le mythe est un récit formulant structurellement la solution d'une contradiction sociale fondamentale.⁴⁶

It is worthwhile observing here that the qualities attributed to the 'degenerate' utopian space are all thinkable under the species of 'realisation'. The utopian scene or *lieu* 'realises' an ideology (not normally subject to the accusation of un-realisability reserved for the condemnation of 'utopias'.) The 'myth' which gives form to this realisation is itself the structural formulation of a 'solution' to a 'fundamental social contradiction'. In other words, the spatial realisations of such a utopia (and in this case the utopian 'text' is indeed a fully-'realised' theme park) liquidate anxiety in the subject by soliciting adhesion rather than reflection. Their self-containment (a spurious autonomy) mirrors the reassurance they seek to generate. The 'degenerate' utopia is that artificial (transformed) space which attempts to exclude the critical energies of the 'utopian dynamic' from its territory.

If, maintaining this end-point of 'degeneracy' in mind, we return to the question of the poetic and its relations with a 'non-degenerate' form of utopia, we are faced with what looks like a problem of distinction: what gap, what contradictions exist between the idea of a utopian dynamic or movement as that of one of negation / rupture and a conceptualisation of the utopian space as a 'lieu neutre', one in which all the elements in a given range of possibilities would be maintained in coexistence at the moment at which the references on which they depend are swept away? The gap, the contradiction, it could be argued, is that upon which poetic *foundation* – the coming into public existence of

⁴⁶ Ibid. 297.

what are read as ‘poetic’ texts – occurs. The product of poetic work, in other words, is the attempt in writing to maintain a practice both of the dynamic and of the space, and to assume the (social) conflict and contradictions this entails.

The dosage of the elements of this contradiction is not always constant. Poetic foundation can tend towards a pole of pure rupture, of impossibility, just as it can accentuate the territorial qualities of the foundational act. If we were to think this latter as an essentially ‘positive’ reflex, the idea of a ‘lieu neutre’, existing and evolving between positive and negative postulates of an existence in language, becomes one of enriched possibility – it would be that ‘lieu’, site of eternal reinvention, where positive and negative postulates balance – or cancel – one another out. Neutrality would characterise the space of poetic work done with a sense of irony – work which acknowledges and nurtures its own drives towards either pole, which acknowledges their validity as fundamental structures of human experience, and which yet manages to contain them, to view them from a point reminiscent of the ‘total perspective’ which Ricoeur attributes to the utopian leavening of the accredited reality. The poetic text will become readable in terms of the modulations of such tension.

5. Application of a spatial discourse to the ‘poetic’

Taking its lead from this multiplicity of spaces which go to make up the ‘utopian’ space, this thesis proposes to investigate ‘spaces of poetic work’ in three individual oeuvres as spaces within which a utopian dynamic is observable, and attributable to the ‘poetic’. This being the case, the seductions of a spatial discourse should be acknowledged and as far as possible dispelled. Jean- Marc Ghitti makes the point that ‘space’ (l’espace) is a late-coming abstraction which readily usurps the ‘territories’ of an earlier, more particularised, consciousness “jusqu’à créer l’illusion de son universalité”, thereby giving the speaker access to a spurious breadth of ‘critical’ jurisdiction:

L'espace, dont la genèse reste obscure, ne s'impose effectivement qu'avec la pensée moderne et, en même temps qu'il en dérive par des voies à reconstituer, il recouvre une pensée plus ancienne du lieu.⁴⁷

In remarks introductory to his major work on *La production de l'espace*, Henri Lefèbvre had likewise denounced the annexation of a discourse on space, empowered with the force of abstraction highlighted by Ghitti, to a rhetorical performance of scientific rigour, a kind of discount *supplément d'objectivité* to be had from its mere invocation. Assumed into language, the 'spatialising' reflex knows literally no limits, but in particular it facilitates an ill-conceived tendency to conflate the physical and the social in the category of an undefined 'espace mental':

Avec la raison cartésienne, l'espace entre dans l'absolu. [...] Mal explicité, mêlant selon les auteurs la cohérence logique, la cohésion pratique, l'auto-régulation et les rapports des parties au tout, l'engendrement du semblable par le semblable dans un ensemble de lieux, la logique du contenant et celle du contenu, le concept d'espace mental se généralise dès lors [acception par l'épistémologie du statut de l'espace comme «chose mentale»] sans qu'aucun garde-fou lui assigne des bornes.⁴⁸

The structures of the debate on utopia are already in place in the epistemological argument on the validity of discourses of 'space'. Most especially, the double-sidedness of any discourse which proffers itself as outside ideology. The casual adoption of a spatial discourse as denounced in different ways by Lefèbvre and Ghitti is a discursive mirroring of what writing in and around the 'poetic', in a less defensively 'objectivist' mode, can repeatedly be seen to attempt to do – that is, set the 'poetic' up as a radically different, *sui generis* textual space; to construct it as occupying, in other words, a utopian position. In its rhetorical performance of objectivity the theoretical discourse of space could be seen as attempting to establish a certain category of 'scientific' speaker in a

⁴⁷ Ghitti, Jean-Marc. *La parole et le lieu. Topique de l'inspiration*. Paris: Minuit, 1998: 64.

⁴⁸ Lefèbvre, Henri. 'La production de l'espace' in *L'Homme et la Société*, janvier-juin 1974, no. 31-32, Anthropos, Paris: 15-32. 15-17.

utopian position in the sense developed by Ricoeur – within a space somehow outside of ‘ideology’ and ideological claims. Lefèbvre denounces in this what he describes as a “sophisme fondamental” of a number of post-structuralist writers:

[L]’espace d’origine philosophico-épistémologique se fétichise *et le mental enveloppe le social avec le physique*. Si certains de ces auteurs soupçonnent l’existence ou l’exigence d’une médiation [...] la plupart sautent sans autre forme de procès du mental au social.

Une certaine «pratique théorique» engendre un espace mental, illusoirement extérieur à l’idéologie. Par un inévitable circuit ou cercle, cet espace mental devient à son tour le lieu d’une «pratique théorique» distincte de la pratique sociale, qui s’érige en axe, pivot ou centre du Savoir.⁴⁹

The turning to a ‘savoir absolu’ in philosophy, exemplified here in the conceptual conflation of the ‘espace mental’, is described by Lefèbvre as a reductionist ‘repliement’: “Un tel savoir se séparerait et de l’idéologie et du non-savoir, c’est-à-dire du «vécu».” These objections formulated, he goes on to set out the horizon (of which it would be difficult to get a broader example) of his own quest for theoretical unity. He thereby puts theory in the position of that which, among discursive practices, unifies the diverse intuitions and information stemming from the several ‘fields’ of experience. And names the over-arching space within which this theoretical unity, in his own work, can be envisaged:

La théorie qui se cherche, qui se manque faute d’un moment critique et qui dès lors retombe vers le savoir en miettes, cette théorie peut se désigner, par analogie, comme «théorie unitaire». Il s’agit de découvrir ou d’engendrer l’unité théorique entre des «champs» qui se donnent séparément, de même qu’en physique les forces moléculaires, électromagnétiques, gravitationnelles. De quels champs s’agit-il? D’abord du *physique*, la nature, le cosmos – ensuite du *mental* (y compris la logique et l’abstraction formelle) – enfin du *social*. Autrement dit, la

⁴⁹ Ibid. 18-19 (emphasis added.)

recherche concerne l'espace *logico-épistémologique*, – l'espace de la pratique sociale – celui qu'occupent les phénomènes sensibles, sans exclure l'imaginaire, les projets et projections, les symboles, les utopies.⁵⁰

Again we can observe as emergent the intimation of 'total perspective', unmistakably utopian, and central to the theoretical intelligence of a certain 'modernity'. Lefèbvre's version gives him a view of the 'space of social practice'. The basic articulation from which he derives this, that of the physical, mental and social spaces, enables an analysis of practice as entirely 'social'. If it were permissible to admit to intellectual fantasies, the present author would put forward the chosen axes of analysis as, viewed together, making possible an attempt to reflect on poetic work as an inescapably 'social' practice. As it turns out, once a certain distance has been established with the ready abstractions of 'space', Lefèbvre's own reflection goes further towards a fully 'utopian' approach to space – that is, towards seeing this space as unthinkable in separation from a constituting 'energy'. Leaving us with the sense that, for an analysis of poetic work, the 'utopian' dynamic and the varieties of 'utopian' space are alternative ways of looking at the one energy – form and content, as it were, being yet again thinkable only together:

Que l'espace physique n'ait aucune «réalité» sans l'énergie qui se déploie, cela semble acquis. Les modalités de ce déploiement, les relations physiques entre les centres, les noyaux, les condensations, et d'autre part les périphéries, restent conjecturaux. [...] Un centre unique du cosmos, soit originel soit final, est inconcevable. L'énergie-espace-temps se condense en une multiplicité indéfinie de lieux (espaces-temps locaux).

Dans la mesure où la théorie de l'espace dit humain peut se relier à une théorie physique, ne serait-ce pas à celle-ci? L'espace se considère comme produit de l'énergie. Cette dernière ne peut se comparer à un contenu occupant un contenant vide. [...] Le cosmos offre déjà une multiplicité d'espaces qualifiés, dont la diversité relève cependant d'une théorie unitaire, la cosmologie.⁵¹

⁵⁰ Ibid. 19, 22-23 (emphasis in original.)

⁵¹ Ibid. 24.

Utopia has the particularity of both abstracting and notionally circumscribing the 'space'(topos) it designates, before associating that space with an idea of extremity. While the u- is interpreted by commentators both in terms of non-existence (utopia as 'nulle part') and of the quality of goodness (utopia as 'meilleur des mondes') to these etymological derivations must be added the idea of utopia as the open set of limit-versions of the topos. The conventionally utopian text provides such an articulation of 'spaces', which are so many axes along which the effect of the utopian dynamic can be observed – physical, social and textual spaces. In reading successively in terms of what will be termed *lieu commun* (social), *haut lieu* (physical) and *non lieu* (textual), the thesis covers the bases of Lefèbvre's 'espace logico-épistémologique', that is, it attempts to observe the complex activity of poetic work as a 'social practice' insofar as a 'social practice' is the synthesis of work along these three axes.

The thesis will be constructed according to these divisions notwithstanding an arguably metaphorical aspect to their relatedness. Utopia's articulation of these spaces is a quintessentially literary rather than theoretical achievement, and part of its attractiveness as a basis for reflection lies in this flexibility, this ability to contain heterogeneous, inconsistent elements – what Marin might call its 'ideological' implication. One is not limited, however, to recourse to the utopian text or utopian discourse in order to find precedent for this articulated division of space. In his reappropriation of a phenomenological perspective on the poetic effort since Baudelaire, Michel Collot makes the valid point that one of modern French poetry's great concerns is the maintenance of the articulation between physical, textual and intersubjective horizons – their nexus being in the writing subject: the work of the writing subject, to rephrase, being the constant reaffirmation of such a continuum of concern between these vastly different conceptualisations of 'space' within the 'monde vécu' (*Lebenswelt*) of the writing subject⁵². The formulations for the multiple theatres of the subject's activity in this respect are themselves multiple – but the basic triad is recurrent. Each component or axis

⁵² Collot, Michel. *La poésie moderne et la structure d'horizon*. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1989. 15.

of which, it will be attempted to argue in the following three parts, represents a ‘space of poetic work’: a ‘space’ of the other utopian quality, the utopian dynamic indivisible from the ‘poetic’ effort. The present introductory remarks conclude with a brief depiction of each of these three axes of analysis.

The first axis considered, then, is that of social space, rendered by the (directly eponymous) topos of the ‘*lieu commun*’. For poetry the ‘*contradiction sociale fondamentale*’ of which Marin makes a defining principle could be argued to be the question of the sociability of the written as such – that is, of a putative ‘*langage*’ or ‘*parole poétique*’ as transitive, other-directed rather than intransitive or purely autistic language production. In this respect the ‘poetic’ will be seen, in Part I, to attempt to work the reconciliation of two opposites – the figure of the individual speaker/author – individual subject evolving within and reacting to the modern world; and the spectre of absolute community – community conceived and experienced as in the first place a transcending of the individual subject position. This ambition is played out in the framework of a social space, that into which the poetic utterance is understood to be emergent. Poetic individuality, in a liminal position through the processes of distinction from any form of dissolution in the communal, is placed, by the work and fact of poetic foundation – the passage from negative to positive, the establishment of a poetic text – in relation to contrasting limits of community: the total community of its self-imagining, and the incipient community to which it may, as a singular articulation, give rise.

The second axis considered is that of referential space, ordered via the topos of the ‘*haut lieu*’. The purpose in Part II is to sketch something like the maintenance within decline of the *haut lieu* in the utopian logic of poetic experience. This will be done with reference to a number of what could be termed utopian narratives of poetry. As prosaic approaches of the *haut lieu* their form serves to ironise their allegorical content as topologicalisations or mappings of the utopian dynamic it is being attempted to identify with the poetic. It is interesting to observe the accomplishment in a literary setting, but outside of poetry, of those mytho-rhetorical structurings of the poetic by one who is elsewhere the signatory of poetic texts. There exists an identifiable practice, if not a genre, of the allegory of the

poetic quest which, from seminal texts such as the *Conte du Graal* via major texts of the romantic period such as Novalis' *Heinrich von Öfterdingen*, can be seen to have a certain 20th Century posterity. Among such a posterity it would be possible to class *René Leys* by Victor Segalen, *Le Mont Analogue* by René Daumal and *L'Arrière-pays* by Yves Bonnefoy. It is tempting to say that those narratives are remarkable for their very amenability to schematisation. That the practically mythical structures they display in their respective constructions of space, and which is readily interpretable in terms of the prospective qualities of the 'modern' poetic subject, are broadly congruent with the topoi – of limit, transgression, of a perpetual movement towards and renunciation of the given in a differential movement – which allow one to conceptualise the 'modern' as something culturally recognisable, and the practice of 'poetry' therein⁵³.

Critically, for the 'modernity' of the 'poetic' discussed, what is common to all three utopian narratives mentioned is a renunciation of the accomplishment of the logic 'set up' in the referential schema. The narratives culminate in variations on the 'failure', 'non-completion' or outright 'refusal' of that very logic. As if, in order to avoid the 'ideological degeneration' of their utopias (to echo Marin) those writer-poets, true to the utopian dynamic, had willed their deviation from pre-ordained finalities. With the effect that they keep their distance from the 'poetic' work proper – or, rather, constitute that work as poetic in the keeping of this distance. Those narratives become thus open to an 'allegorical' reading, as working towards a mytho-rhetorical construction of the poetic where this emerges as what eludes writing, as that which, in the constitution of self through intentionality, cannot seem to find confirmation or correspondence in the material world – does not adhere to exterior 'forms'. The aporia at the heart (or the summit) of the text is the locus of the 'poetic' as both literary and existential value.

The third axis considered is the space of the written work itself. Part III deals with the question of a 'textual' space and the poetic imagination of its practice as spatial in a manner specific to the text as 'non-lieu'. There are a number of levels to the spatial

⁵³ Often annexing and modifying the traditional typologies which associate the practice of poetry with certain spatial metaphors such as depth and the movement in depth, or of ecstatic ascent (the canonical vector of the 'lyrical' voice)

analysis as it relates to the poetic text. Firstly, there is the sense of a textual poetic ‘space’ promoted in view of the demise of stronger formal characterisations – ‘space’, literally, as a replacement prosodic paradigm. In this ‘promoted’ sense, the ‘space’ of the poetic text is a formal euphemism allowing the speaker to posit an overriding unity within which discontinuities, heterogeneities, contradictions fall to be considered, run together, reconciled ... in a reading. At the inception of each such space – or attribution of spatiality – there is then something in the nature of a cosmic principle which operates in two ways. Firstly, the ‘unit’ is that within which meaning arises, and therefore in respect of which ‘meaning’ must be sought. Secondly, every recognisable ‘element’ in the unit is the bearer of relative significance – the concept of the ‘unit’ retrospectively decrees non-irrelevance on its own substance. From this second consequence to the maximalist turn of every element having all possible relevance / -cies, the myth of a ‘poetic’ language with quasi-magical properties, is a short distance to travel within the logic at work.

By pressurising this way of conceiving of the poetic text as a space (and thus suggesting for it a somehow consolatory insertion in the fabric of the ‘real’) one is soon confronted with the negation of the guiding metaphor – a move which has the merit of preserving the dignity conferred on the poetic text by the original, while enhancing its suggestive power. Hence, the stability of the *lieu* of the poem leads to a conceptualisation of the poem as *non-lieu*. This is, of course, the inaugural move of ‘utopia’ proper. Paradoxically, it reinforces the apprehension of the text in spatial terms as discussed above – by establishing a discontinuity, and thus a change of rules, between the ‘inside’ and the ‘outside’ of the textual space. The text takes on the above-mentioned virtues of the *lieu*, and simultaneously rids itself of the disadvantages – arrogating the power to progress in non-linear, fusional or contradictory instalments. Demarcating its own ‘possibility’ within the greater natural and human economy, the textual *non-lieu* embodies language’s dimension, language’s rights on the ‘real’. Thus the *non-lieu* is unmistakably ‘humanist’ in its origins, attempting to both optimise and circumscribe the integration of language with experience – the notionally non- or pre-linguistic, the world of which it becomes the primary locus of knowledge – in an attempt to establish and connect the ‘human’ with what it describes as exceeding it.

The second development of the ‘spatiality’ of the poetic text involves an assertion of the mimetic principle by which spatiality and materiality are conflated in a way that consolidates a view of the poetic unit as ‘real’, durable, and transcendent in respect of its originating instances. At its simplest this could be traced to an atavistic belief in a consubstantiality of things and their names, an aspiration or nostalgia visible in the modern line of speculations on the ideogram for example – but which is of course encountered widely in attempts to distinguish characteristics of ‘poetic’ language in a disenchanted context. Extended from the individual sign to the level of the text as a whole⁵⁴ the identificatory principle leads to an idea of the text as an embodiment as well as an inscription of the mind’s activity with a mimetic materiality (the stone of the *stèle* (Segalen) or the *pierre écrite* (Bonnefoy), for example) in complex relation with the ‘poetic’ properties of the language itself. The poetic text is proffered as the spectacle of its own foundedness, in a movement where the play on a complex of spatiality and materiality is key.

This movement is linked to a third development in which space can be analysed as foundational to the engineering of a ‘poetic’ text and language – that is, the proclamation of poetic space in what resembles a ‘speech act’ or performance of ‘truth’. In this move, the dual characteristic of the poetic space as *lieu* and *non-lieu* becomes amenable to resolution as a *vrai lieu* (the term is borrowed from Bonnefoy), where ‘poetry’ is both the creature and creator of a notion of ‘truth’ which it becomes poetry’s justification to hold out to those who read, and to those who write it. From the imaginably ‘critical’ function of the sui generis, founded poetic text, in which dissimilar or contradictory elements are held together, one moves, under this unifying idea of the *vrai lieu*, towards the virtuality, or hope, of a reconciled poetic unity. Poetic work then becomes the discursive activity within which, by acting as if ‘truth’ of a certain order were available, poet and reader come to regard poetry as engaging most fully the individual subject in its multiplicity-malleability and hence to find sustenance in a ‘truth’ of the poetic movement, the idea of

⁵⁴ It should become possible to observe that while the distinction can be made, the links between a reflection on the sign and on the text are in this instance attributable to a line of thought which does not allow for an absolute distinction.

‘poetry’ as a privileged locus of ‘truth’. This belief in the possibility of ‘truth’ for the subject, showing an interpenetration of the notional ‘axes’ of our analysis, means in turn that the ultimate *lieu* of poetry is neither purely the *ici* nor simply some real or imaginary *au-delà*, but in the process of opening up which the writing and reading of poetry can in turn be thought to represent. Poetic work abandons the *lieu* as fixity and end-state in favour of a pursuit of the promise of poetry, a deferral in favour of the possibility of the *lieu* – establishing ‘poésie’ as that which writes on indefinitely towards the space in which it will attain ‘itself’, and the working, writing subject an objective of the same order.

I. Lieu commun: Poetic foundation and the limits of community.

aigu d'absolu
épuisé de solitude
vivre avec les moyens de la mort¹

1. Community, speech, *parole poétique*.

The critical identification of the poetic, we have seen (Descombes), involves thinking the 'poetic' as an institutional fact. The variously stocked canon implies an agreement, not necessarily always conscious or explicit, in the critical community on the proper basis for secondary discourse(s). In this sense, poetic 'foundation' – in the sense of a multiple establishment, of artwork, literary/authorial subject, identifiable 'position' or territory, through the identified literary phenomenon of 'poetry' – is always capable of being subsumed to a reader-centered version in which the 'poetic' qualification is necessarily subsequent to the work done. The decision to view poetic writing here in terms of 'work' is, however, an attempt to recognise its character as process, a process which materialises, in the 'moment' of *foundation*, as a certain autonomy of the 'poetic text' from its authorial source. The divisions thus established retain their validity only while the work is viewed in terms of process – the creative experience terminating, as it were, exactly where the created work, that which is constituted as 'poetry' upon entering an economy of interpretation, begins. Once the text is encountered within this economy, those divisions conferring autonomy on the subject, on the written work, indeed on the theoretical aspirations of poetic writing as a differential practice within writing as a whole, invite knowing scepticism. Critical experience has a different temporal perspective and a different sense of presentation from the processes of poetic 'work'. The quality of the utopian dynamic in the latter, among other factors, favours an affective over and against a legalistic apprehension of language, an affective apprehension of

¹ Lewinter, Roger. 'Du travail de poésie' in *Travail de poésie* Nos. 1-2, Brussels, 1979: 62.

which the sole possible guarantor is the ‘poet’ and the sole possible authority the figure of the poet – the public credibility afforded one whose gesture inaugurates, or renews, an ‘interpretative community’.

To privilege an approach to the question of poetic foundation via the moment of a text’s becoming a social object through publication is however to simplify or even elide the perspective on sociability that exists at the point and moment of writing – the problem of poetic foundation as readable within poetic work. The de facto foundation of poetic work as ‘poetic’ in its acceptance in relation to a variable body of other texts by a number of actual readers is preceded in the praxis that is poetic work, the conjoined action and reflection of the ‘poet’, by a confrontation of postulates and demands that can in their turn be thought, it will be argued, in terms of *community* and the horizons to which that term provides access. This immanent perspective – the stance of ‘poetic’ work, and of the ‘worker’ concerned, towards the nature and limits of discursive space – is prior to the logically related question of ‘recognition’ for a definition of the poetic. It will be argued that poetic foundation – that entry of writing into the domain of interpretability as ‘poetic’ – associates the subject of poetic ‘work’ and the figure of poetic authority (one recognised as a ‘poet’) through a utopian dynamic. It is through such a dynamic that the former can come to be the latter.

Even where ‘poetic’ work is pursued in states of exaggerated solipsism (such being the position characteristically associated with the figure of the poet) the simple question of an accession to speech presupposes a ‘community’ in respect of which this ‘speech’ can be in some way operative. The admirable statement of Frantz Fanon, “[n]ous estimons qu’un individu doit tendre à assumer l’universalisme inhérent à la condition humaine”², though it would be greeted differently by the different poets discussed here, suggests a possible absolute setting for ‘community’ latent in the very structure of the literary gesture – the writer enters an open-ended, indeterminate relation with all-comers. That relation is one compressed onto the plane of language and spaced out over the temporality of the literary

² Fanon, Franz. *Peau noire, masques blancs*. Paris: Seuil, 1952: 8.

interaction. Foucault, commenting a text of Blanchot's, describes a limit-state of this 'relation' in terms of a pure deficit:

Il ['celui qui ne m'accompagnait pas'] n'est pas en effet un interlocuteur privilégié, quelque'autre sujet parlant, mais la limite sans nom contre laquelle vient buter le langage. Encore cette limite n'a-t-elle rien de positif; elle est plutôt le fond démesuré vers lequel le langage ne cesse de se perdre mais pour revenir identique à soi, comme l'écho d'un autre discours disant la même chose, d'un même discours disant autre chose.³

Despite this sense the writing subject may have of being delivered up to language outside any actual linguistic exchange, 'community' can still be thought to constitute a 'limit' of sorts to the signifying work of the subject. The idealised continuum between the oral and written text, condensed in the commonplace of commentary on modern poetic writing that is the 'parole poétique' of one or other poet, introduces a practically limitless elasticity to a concept of community as the locus of all valid addressees of one's speech, even as it suggests the utter proximity of each of poetry's addressees. Yves Bonnefoy, for example, warns against entrenching poetic writing in the space beyond the shared and shareable, oblivious to the world outside the sect – to which, as *parole*, for all its marginality, it must continue to have imaginable resort. Thus, for example: "[Rimbaud] rappelait trop fort et trop bien qu'en poésie une *parole* – une présence, un appel lancé à autrui – est possible, et peut-être l'essentiel."⁴ To begin with, then, community could be thought simply to designate the open-ended problem of the plurality of subjects within a notionally shared language: that which emanates, therefore, from the messy fact of linguistic community – in continual mutation and/or crisis itself, anterior to and foundational to any more formally political or affinity-based discursive 'community' in any case. As such, it is already the imaginary collective embodiment of the 'law', the tendency of 'language' as an imagined shared totality to migrate towards discursive regularity and hence a dominant sense of speech as collective mechanics rather than

³ Foucault, Michel. *La pensée du dehors*. Montpellier: Fata Morgana, 1986: 53.

⁴ Bonnefoy, Yves. 'Rimbaud encore' in *La Vérité de parole et autres essais*. Paris: Mercure de France (Folio), 1995: 443-51, 445.

subjective alchemy.⁵ In the encounter of the language as constraint, the encounter of the collective rule within the irregularity of individual work, poetic writing is already in a dynamic of definition and difference vis-à-vis a limit of ‘community’. It is in respect of this limit, for one, that ‘foundation’ occurs.

Community, then, at its barest, would be that order of being together in which individual accession to speech becomes a practical possibility. This ‘practice’ can however be envisaged at various levels of abstraction. The Saussurean term ‘parole’, which would appear to fit seamlessly into a reflection on the vast set of ‘paroles’ aspiring to the condition of ‘parole poétique’, allows us to imagine each individual accession to speech as a demonstration of possibility on the purely linguistic plane. The *énoncé* is thinkable purely in terms of how it relates to a linguistic system, and thus as being purely of the order of language itself – that is, as exhibiting only linguistic constraints. This is not unflattering for a certain vector of the utopian dynamic within poetic work, whereby the linguistic production of a subject is presented to the reader as reflective of language in its pristine state of matrix of all textual possibility. Yet the condition of such accession is that of a ‘descent’ from pure possibility, a confrontation of this idea of the possible not only with the given-ness of the language (which can always in any case be deformed or rendered absurd) but that of the positionality and becoming of the speaking subject *per se*.

The Bakhtinian idea of ‘addressivity’ translates a more implicated, embattled view of possibility and purity than does Saussure’s inaugural version of the problem, allowing us to move beyond the abstraction of the accession to speech as a purely textual operation by linking the situation of each ‘utterance’ to that of each speaker – that is, “the situation of not only being preceded by a language system that is “always already there”, but preceded as well by all of existence, making it necessary for me to answer for the

⁵ ‘Les grandes régularités discursives’ (after Foucault. *L’archéologie du savoir*. Paris: Gallimard, 1969) are the object of a certain strand of social science. Whereas poetic speech generically occurs, in the modern period, under the moveable sign of ‘dérèglement’ and the antithetical ‘grande irrégularité discursive’ (a byword of the TXT poets e.g. Jean-Pierre Verheggen, Prigent.)

particular place I occupy.”⁶ This conception of ‘utterance’ allows us to unite in the idea of accession to speech that of language both as an abstract absolute system, and one within which there exist at the same time cultural boundaries, forms, sub-systems, with their own normative realities. The ‘poetic’ accession to speech, even when constructing itself or constructed as occurring within the absolute domain of ‘parole’, is thereby thinkable as already occurring within a cultural topos of ‘poetic’ utterance as foundation, as adding to or materially altering the given. As Michael Holquist explains:

[I]n so far as utterance is not merely what is said, it does not passively reflect a situation that lies outside language. Rather, the utterance is a deed, it is active, productive: it resolves a situation, brings it to an evaluative conclusion (for the moment at least), or extends action into the future. In other words, consciousness is the medium and utterance the specific means by which two otherwise disparate elements – the quickness of experience and the materiality of language – are harnessed into a volatile unity. [...] Cultural specificity is able to penetrate the otherwise abstract system of language because *utterances in dialogism are not (as in Saussure’s parole) unfettered speech*: Saussure ignores the fact that [per Bakhtin] “in addition to the forms of language there exist as well forms of combinations of these forms.”⁷

The salutary effects of this development for a consideration of communicative practices seem evident. The assumption of the self into the ‘instance of discourse’ is the elementary feature of convention, in its tragically double-edged reality. Benveniste’s remarks on the *sui generis* category of the personal pronouns help to crystallise this affirmation. Their constitutive indissociability from the linguistic event in which they come about is seen by that author to found their centrally ethical quality as pure singularity and pure genericity united through encounter:

⁶ Holquist, Michael. *Dialogism: Bakhtin and his World*. London: Routledge (New Accents), 1990: 60.

⁷ Ibid. 63 (emphasis added.)

On est en présence d'une classe de mots, les 'pronoms personnels', qui échappent au statut de tous les autres signes du langage. A quoi donc 'je' se réfère-t-il? A quelque chose de très singulier, qui est exclusivement linguistique: je se réfère à l'acte de discours individuel où il est prononcé, et il en désigne le contenu. C'est un terme qui ne peut être identifié que dans ce que nous avons appelé une instance du discours.⁸

The promise of establishment both of a subject and something exceeding that subject, the assumption of the self in the accession to speech, also embodies what Derrida, in a celebrated article on Artaud, has termed 'la structure de vol'; where it is the assumed subject which is systematically 'robbed' by the collective upon which a language is founded:

[C]e qu'on appelle le sujet parlant n'est plus celui-là même ou celui-là seul qui parle. Il se découvre dans une irréductible sécondarité, origine toujours déjà dérobée à partir d'un champ organisé de la parole dans lequel il cherche en vain une place toujours manquante. [...] La structure de vol (se) loge déjà (dans) le rapport de la parole à la langue.⁹

Artaud himself reserves the term 'poésie' to describe the lucidity of the would-be subject on this ever-recurring dispossession. In his '*Messages révolutionnaires*' of 1936 this position is developed so far as to make the consciousness assigned to the term 'poésie' into what is conceivably the basis of a refusal of writing :

Comme la vie, comme la nature, la pensée va du dedans au dehors avant d'aller du dehors au dedans. [...] Arrêter la pensée dehors et l'étudier dans ce qu'elle peut faire c'est méconnaître la nature interne et dynamique de la pensée [...] J'appelle poésie aujourd'hui connaissance de ce destin interne et dynamique de la pensée.¹⁰

⁸ Benveniste, Émile. *Problèmes de linguistique générale I*. Paris: Gallimard, 1966: 261.

⁹ Derrida, Jacques. 'La parole soufflée' in *L'écriture et la différence*. Paris: Seuil, 1967: 253-93, 265.

¹⁰ Artaud, Antonin. *Messages révolutionnaires*. Paris: Gallimard, 1971: 31-32.

In the accession to speech, the speaker – for whom the term subject is already an idealised convention – is on this view dispossessed rather than established by the convention, is annihilated in the very act of foundation. Artaud's exemplary value, Derrida insists, is not simply to have illustrated this crux, but to have persistently attempted to explode it : thereby placing mute experience (typified for Artaud in a discourse on the body) in a totalising, mythical mediating position (this could, for example, be taken as the communal thrust of *Le théâtre et son double*.) In according absolute priority to mute experience over the compromise of spoken convention – both formally establishing and intimately abolishing the speaker – Artaud has already decided that the verbally-mediated community is a convention, or a compromise, too far. The capacity of the term 'poésie' to act as a floating marker of authenticity is typified here in Artaud's salvaging of it as knowledge even in the absence of any language which could render this knowledge accessible to another.

This dissociation of the 'poetic' from the written prompts us to ask whether 'addressivity' is not precisely what Foucault depicts as absent from the situation of 'written' utterance. Somehow linguistic community, situated-ness, dialogic pressure on utterance make greatest imaginative sense in a scenario of oral exchange. Whereas ordinary utterances seem better accounted for in terms of full context, the addressivity of written poetic work is more problematic. We are dealing with what seems to be a *sui generis* or at least semi-detached activity, both in terms of address and on the linguistic plane itself. It is as if the poetic accession to speech is addressed to those very instances which normally determine the receive-ability of speech – that what is being addressed is not an interlocutor but a convention or parameter of the activity of speaking *per se*. Oswald Ducrot, in stressing "l'idée que l'énoncé est une représentation de l'énonciation", having already defined the latter term as the momentary "événement constitué par l'apparition d'un énoncé", designates a cleft in the meta-discursive representation of poetic 'speech'.¹¹ For poetic

¹¹ Ducrot, Oswald. *Le dire et le dit*. Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1984: 183 and 179. "La réalisation d'un énoncé est en effet un événement historique: existence est donné à quelque chose qui n'existait pas avant qu'on parle et qui n'existera plus après. C'est cette apparition momentanée que j'appelle «énonciation»." 179.

‘foundation’ to occur in the modern context, ‘speech’ is a fiction which necessarily precedes the real possibility of a [tran]scription. In its written emergence, which may or may not be a ‘passage à l’écrit’, the utterance undergoes foundation in the face of the risk, as Emmanuel Levinas has remarked, of succumbing to the readerly gaze, of becoming a monument to its own failure as the language of a particular subject. The ‘foundation’ of poetry corresponds in this scheme to the absurdity of the ‘autonomous’ text-object, the contradiction of which is material, that of a complete discrepancy between means and ends:

Entre le travail qui aboutit à des œuvres ayant du sens pour les autres hommes et que les autres peuvent acquérir – déjà marchandise reflétée dans l’argent – et le langage où j’assiste à ma manifestation, irremplaçable et vigilant, l’abîme est profond. [...] [L]’absurdité de ces œuvres ne tient pas à un défaut de la pensée qui les a fournies; elle tient à l’anonymat où tombe aussitôt cette pensée, à la méconnaissance de l’ouvrier qui résulte de cet anonymat essentiel.[...] En acquérant l’œuvre, je désacralise le prochain qui l’a produite. L’homme n’est vraiment à part, non-englobable, que dans l’expression où il peut porter secours à sa propre manifestation [...] La justice consiste à rendre à nouveau possible l’expression où, dans la non-réciprocité, la personne se présente unique. La justice est un droit à la parole. C’est peut-être là que s’ouvre la perspective d’une religion. Elle s’éloigne de la vie politique à laquelle la philosophie ne mène pas nécessairement.¹²

‘Poetic’ foundation results in an artwork the mode of circulation of which is radically separate from the conditions and instance of its production. The conception of poetic writing as ‘parole’, the re-placement of the artefact into an accompanying discourse of voiced presence, is indicative of an attempt to overcome this division, which, if we follow Levinas on the question, is not simply a matter of maintaining a privilege of the oral over the written – it is an attempt to conflate a presumption that the subject has

¹² Levinas, Emmanuel. *Totalité et infini. Essai sur l’extériorité* (1971). Paris: Le Livre de Poche, 2000: 331-32.

mastered its own input into the language it has produced with the idea that fidelity to such meaning is the just tribute of human singularity, individual ‘justice’, a vindication of the most profound and personal kind. The materially detached ‘poetic’ text both reinvigorates the possibility of a purified or absolute-tending self-conception, and insulates its commitment to the linguistic by separating the utterance from its authorial instance.

The cleft between speech and writing is the one in which the utopian telos of community for the *parole poétique* takes form, taking this poetic speech outside the community that enabled it and making it the locus of another kind of relation, which it is poetry’s burden or privilege to unveil, or at least to continue to try to imagine, in writing. “Car autant la langue est la faute,” as Bonnefoy puts it in an essay on Pierre Jean Jouve, “autant la parole est la délivrance”:

Certes, tout poète est partagé de cette façon, dualiste de fait, moniste d’espérance; et parfois s’emportant jusqu’à tout briser pour un peu de lumière au terme, d’autres fois consentant à l’écriture labyrinthique, où il lui semble qu’au prix d’il ne sait quelle synthèse la lumière remonte, par le fond.”¹³

It could be asked whether the core of the utopian demand that characterises poetic writing is not already embodied in an idealised continuum between the oral and written texts, in the sense of the ‘justice’ available only to the accompanied statement, and their fusion in the case of poetry in the discourse that crystallises around *parole*. Is it not precisely the immense power and centrality of the ‘institution de la voix’ (Derrida), its durable if instinctual legitimacy, that is at the crux of the model of poetic writing as the horizon of communication that is at once both optimal and spoiled?

This trait, if it can be observed, should not automatically be thought to institute an absolute or even a very clear rupture. Not all writing is involved in the same problematics with speech, but speech seems destined to be a cardinal source of the sense of all writing as problematic – even within a ‘utopian’ perspective. In an essay from *Le degré zéro de*

¹³ Bonnefoy, Yves. ‘Pierre Jean Jouve’ in *La Vérité de parole et autres essais*, op. cit. 488, 490.

l'écriture titled 'L'écriture et la parole' Roland Barthes, seeming to have established a relation of full equivalence between what he refers to as 'La Littérature' and the writing of novelistic prose, sets out a revealing counterpart of the totalising ambition of *parole poétique* as it occurs in other literary texts. He presents the relation of *parole* and *écriture* in modern literature in terms of the irruption into the originally 'bourgeois' novel form of fragments of the spoken language of characters, initially as a kind of light relief or to add a bit of local colour [for locality one can read class or even more generally the set of historically sanctioned forms of social separation] – but latterly, that is, with and after Proust, in a relation of total determination and thus representation of the speaking (or spoken) character. "[U]n personnage proustien, lui, se condense dans l'opacité d'un langage particulier, et, c'est à ce niveau que s'intègre et s'ordonne réellement toute sa situation historique: sa profession, sa classe, sa fortune, son hérité, sa biologie."¹⁴

The restitution of *parole* within *écriture* is the representation of the entire register of the imagined subject as particularity, within a framework of narrating or analysing prose writing at a different level of generality, that is, imagining itself as writing beyond the particular of those characters it represents. This particularity of *parole* within *écriture* leads us right to the cleft between notions of linguistic or national community and that of the subject's accession to speech as an act – a necessarily social act – of self-creation. Because, as Barthes points out, "l'universalité d'une langue – dans l'état actuel de la société – est un fait d'audition, nullement d'élocution", the accession to speech in modern literature has an inevitably tragic dimension – the universality a language arguably bears exists on the level of reception rather than production. Speech, the momentary aspiration to this universal, thus constitutes the subject in an experience of his or her difference and constitutes the spoken as the trace of the failure of that aspiration. Barthes reads this tragic dimension according to an eschatology of social reconciliation – what he calls "l'appréhension' d'un langage réel", describing it as "pour l'écrivain l'acte littéraire le plus humain", is historically the attempt of the writer to represent "la naturalité des langages sociaux". The over-arching *project* of an 'engaged' writer would be the marriage of literary writing with the spectrum of particularised accessions to speech

¹⁴ Barthes, Roland. *Le degré zéro de la littérature*. Paris: Gallimard, 1953: 59.

whose horizon in turn is what Barthes terms ‘le verbe des hommes’. Whereas the overarching *reality* of the condition of the writer is the impossibility of this marriage in the historical conditions that prevail, the *a priori* unattainable realisation of that writer’s none the less necessary *a priori* aspiration. Barthes closes his reasoning forcefully: “C’est parce qu’il n’y a pas de pensée sans langage que la Forme est la première et la dernière instance de la responsabilité littéraire, et c’est parce que la société n’est pas réconciliée que le langage, nécessaire et nécessairement dirigé, institue pour l’écrivain une condition déchirée.”¹⁵

That this sets up a utopian horizon for the writer is explicit in the very first statements of the following essay, ‘L’utopie du langage’: “[L]’écrivain conscient doit désormais se débattre contre les signes ancestraux et tout puissants qui, *du fond d’un passé étranger, lui imposent la littérature comme un rituel, et non comme une réconciliation.*”¹⁶ This prospective effort of writing, which harmonises with the discourse of modernity as progress while breaking with that of originality as the *sine qua non* of such progress¹⁷ makes writing as the site of a reconciliation with speech a space of “l’aliénation de l’Histoire et le rêve de l’Histoire.”¹⁸

If we accept this ‘condition déchirée’ of the writer as characteristic of the modern period – which for poetry at least in French is conventionally inaugurated by Baudelaire – what

¹⁵ Ibid. 61.

¹⁶ Ibid. 62 (emphasis added.)

¹⁷ See Compagnon, Antoine. *Les cinq paradoxes de la modernité*. Paris: Seuil, 1990.

¹⁸ Op. cit. 64. For Godzich (*The Culture of Literacy* op. cit.), linguistic universalism was essential to the maintenance of a ‘fiction of commonality’ in the political sphere (in which different social groups collaborated with different degrees of consciousness / levels of reading). Parallel to this he defines the role of literature within the ‘culture of literacy’ as instituting a notional totality of cultural inclusion: “Literature as we know it, and more generally the aesthetic function of art, have come to occupy the space left gaping by this contradictory pull upon language in this epoch, universalising according to strict humanistic principles the particular instances of mediation necessitated by further extension of the imperative toward expansion and absorption of what had remained heterogeneous and particular.” (7) Whereas for Marxists this fiction can be transformed to something genuinely universal, participative, consciousness-raising, for Godzich the socially-documented move to specialisation means that language is at the present time in the process of relinquishing its power to mediate between ever more autistic sectional projects – including those of the polity makers and the literature constitutors (producers/readers). The related fictions of a shared polity and a notionally universal literature held in common by the citizenry are at present marching their way jointly off screen. This relegates to history the barthesian view of the condition déchirée of the author, who, in the new society, will preach only to the converted, in a reduced version of the ‘humanism’ whose death is reported by Sloterdijk.

possible interest can there be had in the apposition of generic criteria to the grounding activity of writing? How is the question of ‘community’ material to a modelling or theorisation of a specifically ‘poetic writing’? Is there not something tautological in the term poetic writing when we have it *obiter dictum* from Barthes that henceforth “la Forme est la première et la dernière instance de la responsabilité littéraire”? If we make the assumption that the standard set here by Barthes for prose fiction remains to any degree material to the consideration thereof, is the annexation of the ‘poetic’, and even more generally of the vein of thought developing around *poiêsis*, by the general flux of ‘writing’, an irrefutable argument that the figure of the ‘poet’ as different from the novelist or the playwright is one deserving sociological rather than literary critical or textual inquiry? In short, is not any writing practice in which the conflicts of the modern subject appear entitled, by usurpation at the very least, to call itself ‘poetic’?

Albeit in a fairly narrowly political sense, a discursive terrain upon which prose literature generally affords more reliable purchase, Barthes is setting up the literary text here as the utopian site where a definable social conflict / contradiction can be both observed in operation and seen beyond – what we have already seen Marin identify as as utopia’s ‘neutrality’.

Mode figuratif du discours, l’utopie comme produit textuel de la pratique utopique occupe bien la distance écartant le oui du non, et le faux du vrai, mais comme *la double figure, la représentation ambiguë, le tableau équivoque de la synthèse possible et de la différenciation productrice; de la réconciliation à venir et de la contradiction agissante: du concept et de l’histoire*. A ce titre, l’utopie dissimule et révèle dans l’idéologie le conflit fondamental entre forces productives en développement et conditions sociales de production formulées en institutions juridico-politiques, d’une part, et théorie et pratique, pratique de la théorie et théorie de la pratique qui en sont la résolution possible, d’autre part[.]¹⁹

¹⁹ Marin, Louis. *Utopiques: Jeux d’espaces*, op. cit. 22-23. (emphasis in original)

For 'poetry' the 'fundamental social contradiction' which Marin sees as resolved within this 'neutral space' could thus be argued to be the question of its sociability – that is, of the relation between communication and a putative 'langage' or 'parole poétique' in the moment/event of poetic foundation itself. The 'utopian' space of that poetry would be 'neutral' in that it both represents and negates within the one space something like a virtual absolute of poetry, which it both needs and needs to be rid of. It is the space within which the contradiction is played out. The extent to which a poetic project of overcoming the cleft between *parole* and *écriture* depicted as a social cleft is in part related to the refusal to engage in a social speech in the first place is an important question. The only way of escaping the logic of the demise of universal communication as depicted by Godzich, for example, would appear to be to never have subscribed to any of its mainstream versions. In this light poetry becomes the paradoxical space of an imagined meeting, no longer, it would appear, thinkable within the mainstream of 'communication', but in its more 'heroic' moments wishing to achieve a conciliation between its withdrawal and the glittering possibility of a 'passage à l'universel', or the major chords of intersubjective transmission (which is of the order of 'le sens', to use Bonnefoy's terminology, rather than that of 'la signification'.) This ambition is played out in the framework of a social space, that into which the poetic utterance is understood to be emergent, but it is first constructed as a utopian fantasy of that social space and of the possible role of poetic speech therein.

To leave 'community' coextensive with the language itself would not allow us to account for a difference of the poetic vis-à-vis any other linguistic act. It would also, in suggesting an identity of the linguistic and the cultural, be to ignore the idea of affinity – even through an ideal commitment to universalism – that goes to the definition of any 'être-ensemble'. That all such definitions are themselves deeply problematic, that 'community' is to an extent always a colourable device, is apparent. As Jean-Luc Nancy observes in the opening lines of *La communauté désœuvrée*, modernity is the name of the epoch which is characterised by the crisis, the *déchirement*, of the concept and practice of 'community' on all levels, and the consequent forms of closure which it might have appeared to offer theoretically:

Le témoignage le plus important et le plus pénible du monde moderne, celui qui rassemble peut-être tous les autres témoignages que cette époque se trouve chargée d'assumer, en vertu d'on ne sait quel décret ou de quelle nécessité (car nous témoignons aussi de l'épuisement de la pensée de l'Histoire), est le témoignage de la dissolution, de la dislocation ou de la conflagration de la communauté.²⁰

Nancy employs the term *clinamen* to denote that which 'inclines' members of a putative community towards one another. *Clinamen* is the elusive entity that founds the 'rapport' – it thus operates the absolute distinction between community and all figures of the 'absolute', the 'sans-rapport': "Le rapport (la communauté) n'est, s'il est, que ce qui définit dans son principe – et sur sa clôture ou sur sa limite – l'autarcie de l'immanence absolue."²¹ That is, 'the limit of community' is also, negatively, the limit of the absolute. That modernity has witnessed a crisis of the idea of community is an idea normally accompanied with a view of 'modernity' as the historical period of the 'dislocation' of community – setting this up as an object of nostalgia, situating the human in terms of a lost framework. This is the standard association of ideas with which Nancy disagrees – what was lost with the advent of 'society', (and 'history') was no more 'community' than 'society' as we know it: "Si bien que la communauté, loin d'être ce que la société aurait rompu ou perdu, est ce qui nous arrive – question, attente, événement, impératif – à partir de la société."²² Among other effects, this move realigns community with the problem of process, action, the vector of work, i.e. out of the present and into the future, placing it within the temporality of 'foundation'. Nancy, developing this reflection elsewhere, makes of this present-based model of community the basis for a reworking of the question of 'being'. Having argued that "la pluralité de l'étant est le fondement de l'être", he formalises from this principle the programme of "faire de la question sociale la question ontologique."²³

²⁰ Nancy, Jean-Luc. *La communauté désœuvrée*. Paris: Christian Bourgois, 1986: 11.

²¹ Ibid. 19.

²² Ibid. 35.

²³ Nancy, Jean-Luc. *Être singulier-pluriel*. Paris: Galilée, 1996: 37 and 78.

The idea of an absolute or founding term being replaced formally by the question of that term as the key to ongoing ‘community’ is what can be extrapolated from these remarks. Such a philosophy of the (potentially) absent centre being replaced by the undeniably present disquiet it generates is recognisable in other works – even with regard to other discourses of the social: Jean-François Lyotard, for example, constructs his version of relation in an entirely analogous way – that is, like Pascal’s God – making of the interrogation, and hence of any shared interrogation, the basis of community at a time of crisis in more ‘positive’ beliefs and positions :

La question du lien social en tant que question est un jeu de langage, celui de l’interrogation, qui positionne immédiatement celui qui la pose, celui à qui elle s’adresse, et le référent qu’elle interroge: cette question est ainsi déjà le lien social.²⁴

The Italian philosopher, Giorgio Agamben, in what he calls his “théorie de la singularité quelconque”, postulating a community of such ‘singularities’, takes the externalising turn onto the space in common that characterises these other attempts to think community. In so doing, he does not seem to account for cohesion, other than in the term ‘quelconque’ (*quodlibet*) as a rhetorical balancing mechanism, a strategy of the oxymoron – suggesting featureless, unengaged involvement:

Ce que le quelconque ajoute à la singularité n’est qu’un vide, une limite; le quelconque est une singularité plus un espace vide, une singularité finie et toutefois, indéterminable selon un concept. Mais une singularité plus un espace vide ne peut être autre chose qu’une extériorité pure, une pure exposition.²⁵

Poetic agency being at least in some part a matter of social recognition – one is nominally constituted a poet by being recognised as such through the performance of certain acts –

²⁴ Lyotard, Jean-François. *La condition postmoderne*. Paris: Minuit, 1977: 37.

²⁵ Agamben, Giorgio. *La communauté qui vient*. Paris: Seuil, 1990: 69.

and recognition itself being a factor of communal organisation, there is certainly a sociological sense that could be given to poetic language as being, broadly, a group idiom, or the idioms of a number of groups in dispute over the legitimacy of various attributions. Accounts of poetic writing that concentrate on developments in the relations inside and between groups exist alongside those which take an individual (and, mythical convention obliging, often an exaggeratedly isolated individual figure) as their focus. The restricted sense of community that can be invoked in relation to groups instituted around reviews, principles, a guiding figure or figures, can be seen as concentric, analogous in conception, and governing mental dynamic, to a general conception of community in respect of poetry.

Broad 'community', which attempts a gesture towards all those subject-positions, real or potential, for which the poetic text could theoretically act as an object of mediation and encounter, becomes thinkable in the achievement of narrow 'community'. The microcosmic qualities of avant-garde social self-imaginings are generally explicit. The question is that of a modelling of communication in which both speech and community take on new qualities, force. Vincent Kaufmann, in his attempt to articulate a 'poetics' of such groups, moves from the general observation of "[l]'histoire de l'avant-garde, l'histoire de son exigence communautaire, [...] comme une série de variations sur le Livre, dont les différentes figures (la langue universelle, la scène virtuelle, la révolution, l'espace urbain, etc.) représentent autant de versions d'une idéale communauté, appelée à advenir dans l'équivoque limite entre la littérature et l'«action» politique."²⁶ The absent centre of the literary 'group' is located in a version of the absolute onto which the subject is free to project individual energies of adhesion. Community arises in an apparent coincidence of such projections upon a name, a concept, a text, a question:

Leurs [Lacan, Mallarmé] styles procèdent d'une même politique de la non-communication, leurs écrits multiplient délibérément les équivoques – les basses tues, dirait Mallarmé – qui situent le lecteur dans un au-delà du sens, qui le confrontent au *che vuoi* de son désir de lire. *Che vuoi?* Que veux-tu, toi qui

²⁶ Kaufmann, Vincent. *Poétique des groupes littéraires*, op. cit. 13.

t'acharnes sur ce que j'écris, qui n'est pas fait pour être lu. Telle serait leur commune question, qui est aussi, à un autre niveau, tout l'enjeu de la cure analytique.²⁷

This construction of community around a bottomless pit of subjective investment is reminiscent as a model of the understanding of the 'real' exhibited by Lacan, who wrote of "[l]a fonction de la *tuché* [la rencontre du réel – Lacan, after Aristotle], du réel comme rencontre – la rencontre en tant qu'elle peut être manquée, qu'essentiellement elle est la rencontre manquée [...]"²⁸ That the 'real' is indeed a major substitute absolute for poetic thinking, and hence poetic community, will be apparent hence. But it is important to stress that the linguistic experience as it gives rise to a horizon of communication is not solely the construction of 'community' in terms of the absent centre of a non-recognition. The ordinary operation of language, per Maurice Merleau-Ponty, gives rise in a *sui generis* way to an effect of inter-subjectivity: "[Ce qui] justifie la situation particulière que l'on fait d'ordinaire au langage – c'est que seule de toutes les opérations expressives, la parole est capable de se sédimenter et de constituer un acquis intersubjectif."²⁹ Thus speech, far from being experienced in terms of a barrier to the idea of 'community', joins the temporality of Nancy's community of the present and espouses its perspective.

La parole est l'excès de notre existence sur l'être naturel. Mais l'acte d'expression constitue un monde linguistique et un monde culturel, il fait retomber à l'être ce qui tendait au-delà. [...] Cette ouverture toujours recrée dans la plénitude de l'être est ce qui conditionne la première parole de l'enfant comme la parole de l'écrivain, la construction du mot comme celle des concepts. Telle est cette fonction que l'on devine à travers le langage, qui se réitère, s'appuie sur elle-même, ou qui, comme une vague, se rassemble et se reprend pour se projeter au-delà d'elle-même.³⁰

²⁷ Ibid. 63.

²⁸ Lacan, Jacques. *Les quatre concepts fondamentaux de la psychanalyse. (Séminaire Livre XI.)* Paris: Seuil, 1973: 65.

²⁹ Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. *Phénoménologie de la perception.* Paris: Gallimard, 1945: 221.

³⁰ Ibid. 229-30

It is thus with a generalised sense of the fragility of available ordering concepts that a partial attempt to recover a sense of the poetic takes place – and with the idea that the ‘poetic’ is in some sense an attempt to respond to this fragility. A reading of two thinkers whose work has been particularly influential on the discourses accompanying French poetry in the course of the century, and of their very contrasting assignments of the ‘poetic’, will confirm our sense that this is indeed a role it has come to have to fulfil.

2. The utopian qualities of ‘poetic’ foundation.

In contrasting briefly the positions with respect to the ‘poetic’ which have come to be attributed to Georges Bataille and Martin Heidegger it becomes possible both to remark upon the tendency of the ‘poetic’ to become active in the articulation of founding concerns within a logic of difference, and upon the parallel ability of the general attribution ‘poetic’ to absorb contrasting extremes arising within this logic. Neither Bataille nor Heidegger is primarily describing poetic practice, but marking out positions in what have come to be read as bodies of thought displaying systemic tendencies. Their opposing appropriations of the ‘poetic’ are less interesting in themselves than for the way in which each conveys an aspiration or tendency of what is examined here as the work or practice of poetic foundation. The homonym can in the process be seen to be doubly pressurised, with parallel careers as a site of theoretical investment and as an attribute devolved upon individual practices.

It will be argued that poetic foundation is, as practice, caught between the simultaneous imperatives of negation and establishment, and that, in the refusal to dissociate these two imperatives within a poetic text, there is a generative principle of poetic work. Poetic writing, qua writing, is thus not simply a conclusion of impossibility, but a construction around or in respect of it. The ‘founded’ (realised) poetic text attests to a possible line of action within view of an understanding or apprehension of ‘impossibility’, or an ‘absolute’. That this idea of containment is articulable through the metaphor of utopia, which, with the elasticity of the utopian parameter, connotes both a negative moment

(Ricoeur) and a 'neutral' space (Marin) within an empirically 'positive' act (the creation of a text), is a contention to be kept in mind here.

The assignment of the 'poetic' relates in the cases of both Bataille and Heidegger to a kind of rectifying function as between a view of the human condition and the interference set up by what is understood as the social order(s) of the modern age, generally thinkable under the parameters 'modern', 'western', 'historical'. The 'poetic' acts in each case are thought to reveal a more authentic version of the 'human', but in ways which are opposed as to both mood and outcome – that is, in respect to the question of a poetic foundation as realisable in principle as well as in practice.

Bataille, to begin with, assigns the 'poetic' act and the intelligence thereof to a disappearing point within the objective, external order of human relations. Paradoxically, he designates what is conventionally a language-based activity in terms of a refusal of the language pact as a condensation, in text, of a social arrangement. This is the avatar of the homonym as pure negativity – negativity which preserves intact the idea of the 'poetic' as radically distinct, as a state of exception from the economy of compromise (both senses) which characterises organised social relations. The 'poetic' exists as a quality or dimension of experience or personality, rather than subsisting in literary artefacts. It is thus what lies through its very definition outside of the possibility of actual 'foundation':

Le terme de poésie, qui s'applique aux formes les moins dégradées, les moins intellectualisées, de l'expression d'un état de perte, peut être considéré comme synonyme de dépense: il signifie, en effet, de la façon la plus précise, création au moyen de la perte. Son sens est donc voisin de celui de *sacrifice*. Il est vrai que le nom de poésie ne peut être appliqué d'une façon appropriée qu'à un résidu extrêmement rare de ce qu'il sert à désigner vulgairement et que, faute de réduction préalable, les pires confusions peuvent s'introduire [...] [P]our les rares êtres humains qui disposent de cet élément, la dépense poétique cesse d'être

symbolique dans ses conséquences: ainsi, dans une certaine mesure, la fonction de représentation engage la vie même de celui qui l'assume.³¹

Bataille can be read as an extreme demarcation of poetic foundation as social – its ‘other’, as it were, or the stance most revelatory of a contradiction arising therein. The ‘poetic’ is that which abjures foundation, its refusal being constitutive of its identifiability (if not identity), and the criterion in the light of which all claimants to the homonym are thereafter required to appear. Yet this refusal is constitutive of something, it has a social value, or a value in the face of the ‘social’. The notion of ‘dépense improductive’, which, in the potlach, results in “la constitution d’une propriété positive de la perte – de laquelle découlent la noblesse, l’honneur, le rang dans la hiérarchie – qui donne à cette institution sa valeur significative”, makes this clear.³²

The association of the poetic in principle with the non-productive, with the refusal of the rationality of production, can then continue to lead to a ‘création au moyen de la perte’, even though, in general, readings of Bataille, as well as that writer himself, tend to emphasise the ‘perte’ rather than the ‘création’.³³ It would be possible to argue that this derivation of a ‘poetic’ pole/exception in respect of the social order of modernity became thinkable in the aftermath of Baudelaire who, in addition to being the retrospectively-ordained inaugural figure of the literary field of modern French poetry, was the

³¹ Bataille, Georges. ‘La notion de dépense’ (1933) in *La part maudite*. Paris: Minuit, 1967: 23-45, 31 (italics in original, emphasis added.)

³² Ibid. 34. The destiny of the potlach as an explicative tool for deep structures of modern society is noteworthy – since 40 years after its utilisation by Bataille, having served between times as the title of the Situationist publication, it became the cornerstone of the argumentation developed by Baudrillard in *La société de consommation* (Paris: Gallimard, 1970) – which depicted the move of an entire civilisation into the omnipresent logic and practice of potlach, into profound self-alienation in the process. Phenomena against which poetry, as a ‘utopian’ practice, could be thought to have worked in that time (though the potlach of that text which, distilling the symptoms of a society in disarray, brings these to paroxysm, is one form of avant-garde, or post-a-g, production – one which would in the main contest the term ‘poésie’ and the company in which it places.)

The ‘propriété positive de la perte’, as the objectification of a principle of nobility or social distinction, interestingly recalls the analysis by Pierre Bourdieu in *Les règles de l’art* (Paris: Seuil, 1992) of the inverted logic of the autonomous literary field: where, as it were, the recognition of a practice of disinterestedness is material to the achievement of recognition in the field (career is anti-career.) Where the foundation of a poetic identity, and the acceptance of the ‘nobility’ of a ‘poetic’ practice, are dependent upon the ‘purity’ of a certain number of renunciations.

³³ See for example in this respect Cels, Jacques. *L’exigence poétique de Georges Bataille*. Brussels: de Boeck, 1989.

recognised theoretician both of the aesthetic-historical period and of the figure of the poet-pariah (the anti- or extra-social vocation of the poetic) therein. The example of Rimbaud, whose evolution as an emblematic figure is sketched below, is also immediately suggestive – apart from the biographically-supported suspicion that Rimbaud’s ‘silence’, or ‘désœuvrement’, was not a continuation of a poetic logic but a rupture with it, in favour of a return to the ‘utilitarian’ considerations of the world against which Bataille constructs his version of the ‘poetic’ as that which, through being ungroundable, founds our thinking of the order it negates.³⁴

The radicality of the ‘creation’ which ensues in this schema should not, however, be minimised here. Bataille places poetry in a grounding position by making it into the antithesis of the notion of foundation within the ‘objective’, external world – that is, the state in which poetic foundation necessarily occurs, if we attempt to consider the question with respect to given poetic oeuvres. Without accepting his assignment of the poetic, it allows us to locate a contradiction at the core of all such foundation between objective existence as a product of work inserted into a system of economic exchange, and the pre-foundational intuition of what is irreparably beyond this ‘ordre réel’, that is of the community of ‘êtres séparés’ – an intuition which Bataille articulates negatively in the idea of the ‘intimate’. It is necessary here to quote at some length:

Le monde *intime* s’oppose au *réel* comme la démesure à la mesure, la folie à la raison, l’ivresse à la lucidité. Il n’y a mesure que de l’objet, raison que dans l’identité de l’objet avec lui-même, lucidité que dans la connaissance distincte des objets. Le monde du sujet est la nuit: cette nuit mouvante, infiniment suspecte qui, dans le sommeil de la raison, *engendre des monstres*. *Je pose en principe que du «sujet» libre, nullement subordonné à l’ordre «réel» et n’étant occupé que du présent, la folie même donne une idée adoucie. Le sujet quitte son propre domaine et se subordonne aux objets de l’ordre réel, dès qu’il est soucieux du temps à venir. C’est que le sujet est consommation dans la mesure où il n’est pas astreint au travail.* Si je ne

³⁴ In his *Rimbaud*. Paris: Seuil, (new edition) 1994, Bonnefoy prudently chooses not to interpret this element of Rimbaud’s biography in terms of the preceding work.

me soucie plus de «ce qui sera» mais de «ce qui est», quelle raison ai-je de rien garder en réserve? Je puis aussitôt, en désordre, faire de la totalité des biens dont je dispose une consommation instantanée. Cette consommation inutile est *ce qui m'agré*e, aussitôt levé le souci du lendemain. Et si je consume ainsi sans mesure, je révèle à mes semblables ce que je suis *intimement*: la consommation est la voie par où communiquent des êtres *séparés*. (1) Tout transparaît, tout est ouvert et tout est infini, entre ceux qui consomment intensément. Mais rien ne compte dès lors, la violence se libère et elle se déchaîne sans limites, dans la mesure où la chaleur s'accroît.[...]

- (1) J'insiste sur une donnée fondamentale: la séparation des êtres est limitée à l'ordre réel. C'est seulement si j'en reste à l'ordre des *choses* que la séparation *est réelle*. Elle est en effet *réelle*, mais ce qui est réel est *extérieur*. «Tous les hommes, *intimement*, n'en sont qu'un.»³⁵

The logic of the poetic as exception is revealed to its full extent here. It is the concept whose removal sets up a network of others on the side of a certain rationality. The real is assimilated to the external, which becomes the order of things, implying the subordination of the 'subject' to this order via the 'souci de ce qui sera', addressed by the subject through 'work'. 'Work' itself, as that which tends towards foundation, is thus of the order of the real – 'poetic work' could therefore have no meaning for Bataille, being a contradiction in (his) terms. Jean-Luc Nancy, in his reading of Bataille, comes to an understanding of 'community' consonant with the projective quality of the experience of 'parole' itself: Bataille's 'expérience intérieure' is in his view neither interior nor subjective "mais est indissociable de l'expérience de ce rapport au dehors incommensurable." Bataille is thus in his view perhaps the first to have had the modern 'experience' of 'community': "ni œuvre à produire, ni communion perdue, mais l'espace même, et l'espacement de l'expérience du dehors, du hors-de-soi. Le point crucial de cette expérience fut l'exigence, prenant à revers toute la nostalgie, c'est-à-dire toute la

³⁵ Bataille, Georges. *La part maudite*, op. cit. 96 (Main text and footnote. Italics in original, emphasis added.)

métaphysique communautaire, d'une «conscience claire» de la séparation, c'est-à-dire [...] de ce que l'immanence ou l'intimité ne peut pas être *retrouvée*, et de ce que, en définitive, elle *n'est pas* à retrouver.”³⁶ This, even as it sets aside the idea of an oeuvre as the centre of community, appears to establish a logical polarity between ‘community’ and the ‘poetic’ as Bataille has assigned it. Yet rather than put an end to speech, this understanding of community in externality maintains therein the paradox or problem of the oeuvre and *désœuvrement* – which Blanchot, in a reply to Nancy’s interpretation, resumes as “pour pouvoir être silent, il faut parler”.³⁷ In other words, speech itself is the ultimate theatre of the impossibility which, rather than elude, evacuate, ignore or accept, actual poetic work – in Bataille’s sense of the ‘work’ occurring across the separation of the order of the ‘real’ – attempts to maintain positively (albeit with variable degrees of self-hatred) as an ongoing dilemma.

It thus becomes possible, within a logic of foundation, to put forward the idea that in the context of the work of poetic writing, the preoccupation with ‘ce qui est’³⁸ is in fact one of the order of ‘ce qui sera’ – that in the gesture of externalisation, the poet commences ‘work’ and makes the order of things into the framework for the utopian dynamic. The thinkable quality of a ‘poetic project’ (to use another compound term hateful to Bataille) would consist in the attempt to square the circle of foundation – to reconcile the prospective, utility-based character of ‘work’ on the one hand with the present permanent reality in the ‘intimacy’ of the ‘subject’ of an event of a different order, on the other. Utopia is, in a sense, the figure of utility perfected – of reason perfectly adequate to itself, work in agreement with the subject nominated as its source/author. The utopian dynamic is thinkable as the movement, the work occurring across the tension between this imagined state of perfect balance, this optimal economy, and their felt absence in the world as it is. It is thus, in a sense, the work (*travail*) done towards the ‘utopian’ work (*œuvre*).

³⁶ Nancy, Jean-Luc. *La communauté désœuvrée*, op. cit. 50.

³⁷ Blanchot, Maurice. *La communauté inavouable*. Paris: Minuit, 1984: 92-93.

³⁸ Recurrent in the three poets under consideration. The implications of this deferral within a discourse of referential space will be dealt with in Part II.

In contrast with Bataille's assignment in principle of the poetic as a rupture with the adhesion of the creative act, and as at the same time revelatory of social logic to itself, is, in the Heideggerian position as laid out in the essay 'Hölderlin and the essence of poetry',³⁹ which dates from the same general period in which Bataille was developing his theories, one that appears directly opposed to Bataille on the question of foundation.⁴⁰ Here the purifying logic operates in the sense of a foundational positivity – with the exemplary, Romantic, German poet as both origin and edifying genius, as a cornerstone of the language which will be ab/used elsewhere in a degraded mode. On a practical level, the 'poetic' is positively the essence of the ongoing human rapport with the Earth, a reality coextensive with life itself. Human participation in that rapport is definitive of the 'real' in Heidegger's view. With that understanding established, 'poetry' is in a position of foundational rather than oppositional importance. Strikingly, the foundational power of the 'poetic' is sourced by Heidegger in the deep interiority which for Bataille culminates in the idea of the 'intime'. The French translation of the essay is cited here:

Dans la poésie au contraire [du jeu], l'homme est *concentré au fond de son être-là*. Il y accède à la quiétude; non point, il est vrai, à la quiétude illusoire de l'inactivité et du vide de la pensée, mais à cette quiétude infinie dans laquelle toutes les énergies et toutes les relations sont en activité.[...] [C'est] ce que le poète dit et ce qu'il assume d'être, qui est le réel.⁴¹

Heidegger concentrates retrospectively upon a very particular moment in intellectual and literary history, where poetry is placed in the position of attaining the 'Absolute' in respect of which philosophical representations had fallen short. This interaction between

³⁹ 'Hölderlin und das Wesen der Dichtung' (1937).

⁴⁰ Derrida, having depicted Nietzsche as the philosopher who abolished 'logos' as an 'original truth-value of the sign' [Nietzsche being Bataille's great precursor – see Le Rider, Jacques. *Nietzsche en France*. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1999: 153-80, and in particular 164-70], argues that Heidegger was the one who attempted to "[réinstaller] l'instance du logos et de la vérité de l'être comme «primum signatum»: signifié en un certain sens «transcendental» ..." *De la grammatologie*. Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1967: 33

⁴¹ 'Hölderlin et l'essence de la poésie' (tr. Henry Corbin) in Heidegger, Martin. *Approche de Hölderlin* (Erläuterungen zu Hölderlins Dichtungen, 1951, tr. Corbin, Deguy, Fédier, Launay). Paris, Gallimard, 1973: 57 [emphasis added.]

poetry and philosophy, of great consequence for the governing commonplaces of French poetry in the second half of the 20th Century, is commented thus by Andrew Bowie:

The essential tension in Idealist and Romantic thought resides in the uneasy coexistence of the desire to be able to say what it is in thinking that is unlimited, with an accompanying sense of the impossibility of saying it. The Romantic attachment to art will derive from an awareness of this tension.⁴²

Hölderlin attempts to resolve this impossibility, apprehended in Fichte, via ‘poetic representation’. To quote Bowie again, paraphrasing Hölderlin: “[O]nly the I, as free spontaneity, can see nature aesthetically or produce aesthetic objects. The object thus enables the subject to grasp what it would be like to realise its most fundamental self, and prevents the sense that the division in self-consciousness leads merely to alienation. [...] to overcome the division without regressing into an imaginary unity.”⁴³ This is the beginning of the philosophical association between the poetic and the (impossible) absolute, but in a scenario where the ‘real’ of the object world is imagined in possible sympathy and continuity with the ‘intimacy’ of the subject (to use Bataille’s term against his meaning.) The poetic work here too passes via the object, not in subordination of an imagined liberty of the intimate subject but in the quest for an absolute grounding to the lived phenomenon of consciousness. Heidegger: “La poésie est fondation par la parole et dans la parole. Et qu’est-ce qui est fondé? Ce qui demeure.” This is the discursive back-up of written works of poetry, the validation of their ‘foundation’ as published texts:

Poématiser, c’est l’originelle nomination des dieux. Mais la parole poétique ne possède sa force nominative que si ce sont les dieux eux-mêmes qui nous poussent à parler. [...] Le dire du poète consiste pour lui à surprendre ces signes, pour ensuite faire signe à son peuple. [...] Quant au poète, il se tient dans l’entre-deux, entre ceux-là, les dieux, et celui-ci, le peuple. Il est rejeté au-dehors – dehors dans cet entre-deux, entre les dieux et les hommes. Mais c’est en premier

⁴² Bowie, Andrew. *Aesthetics and Subjectivity: from Kant to Nietzsche*. Manchester University Press, 1993: 66.

⁴³ Ibid. 71. See also Nancy, Jean-Luc and Lacoue-Labarthe, Philippe. *L’absolu littéraire*. Seuil: 1978.

lieu et uniquement dans cet entre-deux que se décide qui est l'homme et où est établi son être-là. «C'est poétiquement que l'homme habite sur cette terre.»⁴⁴

This pronouncement (“Voll Verdienst, doch dichterisch wohnet /Der Mensch auf dieser Erde”) – perhaps the most celebrated of Hölderlin’s dicta considered by Heidegger in the essay – introduces the idea of the poetic as working in function of something as yet unrealised, and yet which is in some measure conceivable. Bowie again, commenting Novalis: “If philosophy is a striving for the Absolute, the Absolute cannot already be achieved in philosophy, even though philosophy presupposes the Absolute as its object; without it philosophy would not be philosophy.”⁴⁵ Something similar might be said of the ‘poetic’, the structure to which reflection thereupon gives rise is in all points comparable. What subsists and thrives is the sense of a process in the face of an insurmountable difficulty – and the figure of the poet as constituted in the textual embrace of this contradiction.

This is what allows Heidegger to (appear to) square the circle of anachronism created by a discourse on essence derived from one historical example. The view of ‘essence’ as process, as inhering in an ongoing activity, is valid, says Heidegger, because the epochal consciousness inaugurated by Hölderlin’s work (that of the ‘dürftige Zeit’) is characterised by the absence of the gods, consigned to the past and to the future. The ‘essence’ of poetry in this time is that it continues, thus, to speak even in the absence of the structures which were availed of to validate it as a grounding discourse, the mediator of speech and the activity of foundation:

[E]n fondant de nouveau l’essence de la poésie, Hölderlin commence par déterminer ainsi un temps nouveau. C’est le temps des dieux enfuis et du dieu qui va venir. C’est le temps de la détresse, parce que ce temps est marqué d’un double manque et d’une double négation: le «ne plus» des dieux enfuis et le «pas encore» du dieu qui va venir.

⁴⁴ ‘Hölderlin et l’essence de la poésie’, op. cit. 52 and 58-59.

⁴⁵ Op. cit. 77.

L'essence de la poésie, celle que fonde Hölderlin, est historique au suprême degré, parce qu'elle anticipe un temps historial; mais en tant qu'essence historique, elle est la seule essence essentielle.⁴⁶

Although explicit on the dangers of de-historicisation in the essay itself, Heidegger's pursuit of a discourse of essence within the historical has the effect of annulling this caveat. The legacy in this respect to French poetry at least has been the discourse on the poetic as a 'habiter' with what the poet happens to have to hand, and the legitimisation of this foundation, not so much in terms of the 'people' or the absent gods, but of those other terms of the liminal register which are 'être', 'vérité', 'absolu' etc. Most important however is the tone of the 'habiter', the attribution of an ontologising validity on the artefacts of poetic foundation, the products of the processes of the poetic 'habitus', to allow a play on words to switch our analytical registers.⁴⁷ The 'heidegger-hölderlin' line would tend thus towards a rehabilitation of the accession to speech which grounds the subject inside the order of the *être-ensemble*, against which Bataille had established the poetic as the antithetical principle.

It is interesting to ask, however, whether the differences between these positions are not counterbalanced, in according an exceptional status to the 'poetic', by a structural agreement. Despite it being possible to think of the positions as diametrically opposed, at least in terms of the domestication undergone by each inside the French 'poetic' field, and the sensibilities they are given to servicing in respect of the mood of foundation, in each, the 'poetic' occupies the position of the affectively critical exception, whether that be negation or establishment. In each the poetic reveals the fallen quality of the non-poetic to the theorist, or is the vessel of revelatory intent in the theorist's construction of standard forms of (non-poetic) experience as deficient or alienated. In each, the 'poetic' is the hypothesised medium of a form of intersubjective communion of which the conditions of the contemporary historical period are understood as the negation – thereby allowing for a re-statement of the 'communal' in terms of the exception of the 'poetic'.

⁴⁶ Op. cit. 60.

⁴⁷ See, for example: Pinson, Jean-Claude. *Habiter en poète (Essai sur la poésie contemporaine)*. Seyssel: Champ Vallon, 1995.

Thus one could argue that Heidegger's mythically-pitched depiction of the 'poet' differs essentially from an individual gifted with Bataille's sense of the poetic only on the question of the admissibility of the oeuvre itself, and of a 'poetic' effort:

Persistant en lui-même comme le suprême isolé qu'individualise sa destination propre, le poète œuvre la vérité pour son peuple en le représentant, et par là œuvre en vérité.⁴⁸

In the face of this isolated figure of the poet, isolated in the very madness of the metaphysical ambitions assigned to or devolved upon him, a more practical counterpoint on the contradictions of poetic foundation is in order. The necessary assumption of language in poetic work as the medium / substance of that work, maintains the principle of relation within the order of the external real. It can thus be understood as definitive, performative of a 'human' limit occurring inextricably within this order – the cardinal impossibility for consideration, before that of all individual or projected 'acts', would thus be that of the (self-)removal of the subject from this order. This mitigated reality of practice, adhering to neither the all or the nothing of the metaphysical poles, is transposed in a remark of Agamben's who, in a particularly memorable comparison, complements this version of the position of the subject by trying to attenuate the false dialectic of the foundation of a singularity in opposition to the collective represented by language – with 'quelconque' (*quodlibet*) as the term for a singular articulation of the two :

De même que la juste parole humaine n'est ni l'appropriation de quelque chose de commun (la langue) ni la communication de quelque chose de propre, de même le visage humain n'est ni l'individuation d'un *facies* générique ni l'universalisation de traits singuliers: c'est le visage quelconque, pour lequel ce qui appartient à la nature commune et ce qui est propre sont absolument indifférents.⁴⁹

⁴⁸ Heidegger, op. cit. 61.

⁴⁹ *La communauté qui vient*, op. cit. 25.

Levinas, meanwhile, who takes the separation of the subject as his starting point, the exteriority of 'subjects' for one another as the given preceding the construction of philosophical problems, views this assumption of language from a different angle and hence in a different light from both Bataille and Heidegger. One in which the subject is allowed more mitigated ambitions and designs for speech, in which the imperfection of the relation does not authorise its invalidation, and in which language squarely occupies its own place:

L'extériorité de l'être ne signifie pas, en effet, que la multiplicité soit sans rapport. Seulement le rapport qui relie cette multiplicité *ne comble pas l'abîme de la séparation, il la confirme*. Dans ce rapport nous avons reconnu le langage qui ne se produit que dans le face à face[...] *L'extériorité du discours ne se convertit pas en intériorité. L'interlocuteur ne peut trouver – et en aucune façon – place dans une intimité*. Il est à jamais dehors. Le rapport entre les êtres séparés ne les totalise pas, «Rapport sans rapport» que personne ne peut englober ni thématiser. Ou plus exactement, celui qui le penserait, qui totaliserait, marquerait par cette «réflexion» une nouvelle scission dans l'être, puisqu'il dirait encore ce total à quelqu'un. Le rapport entre les «tronçons» de l'être séparé est une face à face, relation irréductible et dernière.⁵⁰

In this excerpt from his critique of the 'panoramic' through an insistence on the separation of beings Levinas is actually responding to a reading of Heidegger. The 'panoramic' in representation can be understood as one of the many unity-tending antitheses of this idea of the irreducible exteriority of discourse to its addressee, another being Bataille's affirmation above of the intimate 'unity' of outwardly individual subjects. Levinas's position is equally interpretable as an ethically-oriented practical setting in the face of one and other version of the poetic, hence closer to the view of an actual actor in the process. Actual poetic foundation could be thought as constituting an attempt to reconcile or overcome these two versions on an ideological or discursive level,

⁵⁰ *Totalité et infini*, op. cit. 328-29 (emphasis added.)

while confronting the realities described in Levinas's countering reflection on the level of the poet's own practice.

One could however ask whether it possible to affirm that 'poetry', that which is founded as 'poetic' through a process of work akin to this reflux of the uniform and the singular, displays such indifference (Agamben) or restraint (Levinas) in respect of the individual-collective divide. Is it not that accession to speech, to reformulate, which aspires both to the sovereignty of its own intentions and that of the signifying system in the sum of its potentiality as system? The poem thereby reposes upon a hypothesis of collected meaning beyond any enunciating instance – it becomes that text which as a result places meaning in crisis by an intention of speaking "littéralement, et dans tous les sens", to cite an affirmation of paradigmatic importance.

Rimbaud's remark constitutes the poetic text as what exceeds any possible single readerly apprehension of it, as constituted by the presiding ambition to abolish the discontinuity between *langue* and *parole*. It becomes a site of intransigence in its confrontation with models of community as de-centered communicative consensus (a subject-less *sens commun*.) Insofar as the written text retains a mediating function, insofar as it appears to still gesture towards a community in respect of which its singularity came about, it does so in this view almost as much as a unitary symbol as it does as a text – as much a material monument to the will-to-poetry as a primarily linear verbal work with both musical and propositional tendencies. The poetry it describes is an accession to speech which would thus in its turn mark, with the authority of something indestructibly self-contained, the limit of any enabling community's claim upon it, and thereby an outer limit of the possibility of community itself: one past which the elements of mediation and exchange so readily imagined in respect of language are obliterated by the singular and the absolute in concert.

'Poetic speech' in its utopian dynamic congregates around those two same poles of singular and absolute. In the statement of its own possibility – that is, the aspiration whereby it acceded to speech in spite, as it were, of the convention – that which proffers

itself as *parole poétique* forces open the question of the possible convention it could, as language-become-‘speech’, represent. Rimbaud, in other words, could be taken to initiate a line of poetic practice which gives *equal weighting* to the two versions of the poetic attributed above to Bataille and Heidegger, and progresses through the play of the two through ever-modifying instances of ‘poetic’ foundation. Lying outside the ‘founded’ text given to us are the figures of *désœuvrement*, the presiding silences, upon which the meta-discourse of the poetic renders absolute the engagement with the transitivity of *parole*.

Hence, for Bonnefoy, distinguishing him from Hölderlin (whom he characterises as the poet of the origin) and Mallarmé (poet of the text), the work of Rimbaud is, indeed, the exemplary attempt at this transforming leap within writing. Reading the earlier poet, the later distinguishes the poetic as it is embodied in writing by its *a priori* refusal of a textual or even a linguistic immanence:

Toute œuvre qui se veut texte, ou que l’on veut interpréter comme un simple texte [se met] irrémédiablement, au passé, même si ses mots contribuent au devenir de la langue. Mais ce passé n’est pas l’origine, car celle-ci, dans l’intelligence qu’en a la poésie, c’est notre condition même pour autant que n’y a pas disparu un certain possible dont on pressent qu’il lui assurerait, serait-il réalisé, *la qualité d’un lieu et la lumière d’un sens*. Et certes ce possible est d’avant les mots – «ô journées enfantes!», en écrit Rimbaud –, il se peut même que ce soit eux qui l’aient barré de notre horizon, il est donc au fond du passé et comme antérieur à lui, mais ces mêmes mots qui le ruinent, de toute l’inertie conceptuelle, le désignent aussi, dans un certain excès, mystérieux, de leur sens sur leur contenu notionnel, ils le raniment donc dans toute question que l’on pose avec quelque espoir: et le voici *qui reprend comme promesse d’un avenir*, qui se ferait par réforme de la parole, transparence, et s’inscrit dans l’histoire comme une tâche – assurée vaille que vaille par *la seule parole qu’on ait encore, la poésie*. Rimbaud, dès *Soleil et chair*, est tout entier dans ce mouvement *qui transmue le passé antérieur de l’être en futur de la société des hommes*.⁵¹

⁵¹ Bonnefoy, Yves. ‘Rimbaud encore’, op.cit. 446 (emphasis added).

The ‘poetic’ in the wake of Rimbaud is an accession to speech grounded in the intuition of the speaker of unitary (significant) silences, and thus calls to be read (and ‘heard’) with these silences in mind. Thus the figure of the origin, which, we shall see, is an established telos of the meta-poetic imaginary, is a silence known to poetry, the conceptual unity of which carries a promise of the *haut lieu*. And by a principle of reversibility, undoubtedly backed up by a philosophically-oriented sense of symmetry, the intelligence of the origin, the already utopian temporality of language’s apprehension in terms of its beginning, is transformed through an accession to speech into an anticipation of the perfect economy of the linguistic – its future transfiguration within the ideal harmony of a community ‘à-venir’. This is its deep communicative function. Thus founded, the outcome of poetic work, the proffered *parole poétique*, places the unknown addressee, in turn, before the question of the *être-ensemble* – that is, a condensation of the human question into the question of community in the presence of authentic poetic speech.

A large fragment of *Soleil et Chair*, the poem mentioned above by Bonnefoy, initially titled *Credo in Unam*, was given its first publication as late as 1929 in the second issue of *Le Grand Jeu*, the periodical associated with the group of the same name, in both of which the 21 year-old René Daumal was a central figure.⁵² That fragment contains precisely the juxtaposition of aporias noted by Bonnefoy, together with a promise of their resolution embodied in the lyrical speech of the figure par excellence of the future of mankind – the still almost hugolian “Homme”. The exemplary poem iterates a promise of poetry, if such is the name which could be given to the “chant” of the reconciled future :

Et l’Homme, peut-il voir? peut-il dire : Je crois?
 La voix de la pensée est-elle plus qu’un rêve?
 Si l’homme naît si tôt, si la vie est si brève,
 D’où vient-il? [.../
 /...] Nous sommes accablés

⁵² Reprinted in *Le Grand Jeu (1928 – 1932)*. Paris: Jean-Michel Place, 1977. *Le Grand Jeu* II, Printemps 1929: insert between pp. 4 and 5.

D'un manteau d'ignorance et d'étroites chimères!
 Singes d'hommes tombés de la vulve des mères
 Notre pâle raison nous cache l'infini!
 [...]

Le grand ciel est ouvert! les mystères sont morts
 Devant l'Homme, debout, qui croise ses bras forts
 Dans l'immense splendeur de la riche nature!
 Il chante... et le bois chante, et le fleuve murmure
 Un chant plein de bonheur qui monte vers le jour!...
 - C'est la Rédemption! C'est l'amour! C'est l'amour!... ⁵³

It is interesting that Bonnefoy should take Rimbaud as exemplary of the passage, in language, from the question of being to that of being together, and of their indivisibility in the imagination of poetic achievement. So much is explicitly true for *Le Grand Jeu*, whose whole *modus operandi* as a group arises out of this double development. In the opening text of the same issue, Daumal, together with Gilbert-Lecomte, issued a *Mise au point ou Casse-dogme*, purporting to clarify issues of group practice in the face of accusations of theism attendant upon their initial manifesto. It is a text in which the dialectic of foundation is taken to its logical extreme. The opprobrium of the antithesis is first assigned outside the group itself:

Si le *Grand Jeu* a voulu qu'en le regardant les hommes se trouvassent enfin en face d'eux-mêmes

CE FUT POUR FAIRE LEUR DESESPOIR.

Et aussitôt ceux qu'on retrouve toujours en pareille circonstance de fonder des espoirs (d'ordre «littéraire», n'est-ce-pas?) sur le *Grand Jeu*.⁵⁴

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Ibid. 1.

By the end of the declaration the hope of foundation, within a logic of ‘systematic destruction’, has been firmly and solemnly appropriated for the group and its position. Foundation, in the necessity of a totalising demand, occurs via the appropriation of impossibility. Destruction becomes the privileged path to unity:

Si les dogmes sont des formes de la pensée, la pensée universelle, qui est la vérité de tous les dogmes, est une négation de tous les dogmes. Et nécessairement notre pensée, qui veut être la pensée, doit remplir une fonction de casse-dogmes.

Cette fonction présente deux aspects:

- I. Elle est destructrice dans le domaine des formes: aucun dogme ne peut échapper à sa critique. Et cette menace n’est pas vaine, car nous sommes entourés d’hommes qui veulent saisir la vérité dans une forme en ne tenant que la forme. Un tel homme, en nous approchant, risque sa vie. [...]
- II. Le second aspect du Casse-Dogme n’est plus DOGME mais CASSE et ne regarde que

SOI-MEME⁵⁵

Rimbaud in the nascent pantheon of *Le Grand Jeu* is the heroic figure of the necessary opposition of means and ends in this fixation on totality. This is an interpretation which derives particular satisfaction from the rupture of the rimbaldian silence, read as an artistic gesture. Gilbert-Lecomte does not hesitate to go this far, making of the silence, and of the oeuvre it canonises, instruments of the ‘morality’ that his own group, so systematically transgressive in its positions, was so openly anxious to establish in its own name:

[Q]uand Rimbaud jette à la mer avec le «bateau ivre» les fabuleuses richesses de son art, il cède plus consciemment à une obligation morale. Car l’œuvre de celui qui a voulu se faire voyant est soumise, jusqu’à sa condamnation finale, et au delà, à la seule morale que nous acceptions, à la morale terrible de ceux qui ont

⁵⁵ Ibid. 3.

décidé une fois pour toutes de refuser tout ce qui n'est pas *cela* en sachant pertinemment à l'avance que, quoiqu'ils atteignent, ce ne sera jamais *cela*.⁵⁶

Almost a further quarter of a century previous to these remarks, Victor Segalen's *Le Double Rimbaud*⁵⁷ appeared in the *Mercure de France*⁵⁸. *Le Double Rimbaud* was published upon Segalen's return to France after two years spent in Polynesia as a medical doctor in the French Navy. This was the period, prior to the inception of his poetic work, that gave rise to his first literary publications, but in addition, to several acts of reflection ranging across the arts. It was his second full article to be published in the *Mercure* after *Gauguin dans son dernier décor* in 1904. Of Rimbaud and Gauguin, along with Nietzsche, Segalen establishes elsewhere in his notes a category he calls 'les Hors-la-loi', with a view to the theorisation of this position as that of the authentic figure of the artist in modern times. Yet the artistic outlaw of *Le Double Rimbaud* is brought to book by the later writer on what he formulates as an artistic criterion. Having remarked upon "[ces] instants divinatoires [qui] désignent les poètes essentiels" the article levels at the Rimbaud of *Illuminations* what reads like a reproach interesting for its re-integrative properties:

Ni la beauté des vocables, ni la richesse du nombre, ni l'imprévu des voltes d'images, rien ne parvient à nous émouvoir, bien que tout, en ces proses, frissonne de sensibilité. Pourquoi cette impuissance? C'est que parmi les diverses conceptions d'un être sentant, seules nous émeuvent les données *généralisables* auxquelles nos propres souvenirs peuvent s'analogier, s'accrocher. Le reste, évocations personnelles, associations d'idées que les incidents de la vie mentale ont créées dans *un* cerveau et jamais dans les autres, cela est en art lettre morte.⁵⁹

It is hardly novel to point to the seminal influence of the figure of Rimbaud on 20th Century French poetry. What seems most interesting in these passably different

⁵⁶ Ibid. 31 (emphasis in original).

⁵⁷ Segalen. 'Le Double Rimbaud' in *Œuvres complètes I*. Paris: Robert Laffont, 1995: 481-511.

⁵⁸ Dated 15 April 1906.

⁵⁹ Segalen. *Le Double Rimbaud*, op. cit. 488 and 490.

appropriations of the work and figure of a preceding poet is not the fact that they conflict as positive and negative judgements (Rimbaud moral exemplar or Rimbaud impenetrable singularity?), but that they attribute different values to the same work within a shared logic of what one could, with Segalen, call ‘generalisation’ – that is, in view of a singular relation between the quintessentially ‘poetic’ and the question we have been describing as that of ‘community’. Though Segalen is highly aware of the biography of Rimbaud, his poetic judgement, and his conception of poetic communication, is structured around a model of the message in the text, of articulation, which is no longer directly attractive to the following generation. Yet his aspiration towards something of the order of a universality of the scope of poetic address, and the idea of the validity of the aesthetic pretension through this aspiration, is directly comparable to the collective position of the members of that group, and re-emerges fully in the interpretation given by Bonnefoy.

It is thus proposed to turn to a consideration of such aspiration, in its various forms and guises, as manifested in turn in the works of these three inheritors of this problematic relation.

3. Between order and origin. Victor Segalen.

Segalen’s judgement on Rimbaud, which distinguishes the criterion of the ‘generalisable’ as one of poetic excellence, would be taken for a misreading by many later invocations of that poet’s example. It is of interest for the present discussion, I would argue, in that it reveals a tension in Segalen’s own oeuvre between the attractive total individuality of a Rimbaud-figure and the later poet’s fascination with the group (the social whole conceived on a series of related, escalating levels) as the space of communicative action. Poetic foundation necessarily occurs through distinction – yet Segalen’s thinking towards such foundation takes the indistinction of the collective as perhaps its cardinal object. Within Segalen’s writings, the poetic text is recognisable as a particularly forceful attempt to exist within these contending polarities – a *lieu neutre*, or utopian space in the sense of Marin developed above, in that it attempts to integrate strongly-drawn elements

of both. Segalen's poetic work establishes and maintains the space in which a continual play between a series of opposites can be observed – foundation and impossibility, universality and distinction, fusion and order, self and group, the notional and real addressees of the poetic work – making that oeuvre a forceful illustration of the utopian dynamic which places poetic foundation at the limits of the question of community. Three aspects of Segalen's construction of the relations between art and life dating from the time of his essay on Rimbaud warrant particular mention.

Firstly, with the engagement in extensive travel and extended contact with other cultures, there is the establishment of the globe itself as the framework for the derivation of significant experience. This ultimate figure of unity permitted Segalen an intellectual and lived representation of totality within which the utopian dynamic could become amenable to a holistic interpretation. It is a totality within which Tahiti acted as the first and most extreme version of the opposing pole – the perfect antidote to France, the poet's community, as it were, of origin. This totality nullified any idea of abandonment or escape à la Rimbaud. Reflexivity and combination become the avenues of development in a saturated world. The strategy of approaching the same via the other within a very foregrounded unifying structure is one that remains visible as a matter of conscious precept right throughout Segalen's literary life and across generic boundaries.

Secondly there is the unveiling of the related problem of the figure, or the individuality, of the artist as one of vital rejection of the constraints of degraded, modern, Western 'individuality', to speak with the vehemence of Segalen himself. This figure is typified in the first instance by Gauguin, in the liquidation and repatriation of whose estate Segalen was involved. The artist embodies this rejection by the achievement of a literally monstrous individuality (that is, an amplification rather than an attenuation of the modern condition), against a backdrop of human other-ness constructed as pure and undifferentiated. Gauguin's 'dernier décor', the one in which Segalen imagines him attaining fully to this figurality, is one in which his 'excess' is most readily apparent to the average Western sub-individual, in that the surrounding humanity is seen only in terms of the collective, susceptible thus only to generic declination:

Gauguin fut un monstre. C'est-à-dire qu'on ne peut le faire entrer dans aucune des catégories morales, intellectuelles ou sociales, qui suffisent à définir la plupart des individualités [...] il apparut dans ses dernières années comme un être ambigu et douloureux, plein de cœur et ingrat; serviable aux faibles, même à leur rencontre; superbe, pourtant susceptible comme un enfant aux jugements des hommes et à leurs pénalités, primitif et fruste; il fut divers et, dans tout, excessif.⁶⁰

Thirdly, and again relatedly, there is the view Segalen developed of that contrasting social environment – in a curious relation of sympathy with and total contrast to the artist, ‘ces êtres-enfants’ as he characterises the Marquesians, perceived admiringly in principle, pityingly in practice and almost exclusively as a collective entity, fragments of a natural, quasi-religious unanimity: “Gauguin coryphée entonnait une complainte et récriminait, et les choristes dociles achevaient l’antistrophe.”⁶¹ The complementarity here is thus between two forms of escape from the refrain of ‘civilisation’, between the laudable singularity of a Gauguin and the harmonic communality of the islanders, for whom the divisions external and internal which Segalen himself was seeking to overcome did not yet seem to him to have attained a status of reality. This leads to a questionable discourse on the works of the painter (“Il [Gauguin] ne chercha point, derrière la belle enveloppe, d’improbables états d’âme canaque: peignant les indigènes, il sut être animalier.”) It also leads Segalen to equate his own culture, in the colonialist embodiment of its most invidious qualities, with the imminent demise of this capacity for co-existence, and hence for survival, of such community. Just as the modern world suppresses artistic individuality it suppresses the community in and against which this can fully emerge:

L’opium les a émaciés, les terribles jus fermentés les ont corrodés d’ivresses neuves; la phtisie creuse leurs poitrines, la syphilis les tare d’infécondité. Mais qu’est-ce que tout cela sinon les modes diverses de cet autre fléau: le contact des

⁶⁰ Segalen. ‘Gauguin dans son dernier décor’ in *Œuvres complètes I*, op. cit. 286-91, 288.

⁶¹ Ibid. 290.

«civilisés». Dans vingt ans, ils auront cessé d'être «sauvages». Ils auront, en même temps, à jamais, cessé d'être.⁶²

This in practice meant that Segalen's understanding of cultural contact between the West and elsewhere on the newly global unit, is one of a double degradation undergone by those other cultures. Made subordinate by the forms of contact established with the West, they lose both their own continuity and self-intelligibility (traits long-since surrendered by the colonisers, bearers of the puritanism-decadence complex), and thereby their ability to stand in meaningful contrast or opposition to the Western mind that seeks to transcend to some degree its own inheritance. The global totality as an absolute space of meaning-generating difference is thus endangered almost as soon as it is established.

The *Essai sur l'exotisme*⁶³ and the so-called 'esthétique du divers' developed therein reflect upon and rationalise this process of the removal of self from the reading community, the space of address and comparison to some extent. The *esthétique du divers* could be read as Segalen's attempt to mix rimbaldian and mallarméan attitudes of withdrawal from the world of the addressee, just as his poetic texts move between appearances of the effacement of a speaking subject and barely-contained effusion. Literature in its various forms as narrative, novel, poem, arises in the elementary reasoning of this 'aesthetic' from the robustly-maintained tension between self and surround. This is a principle as material to the internal negotiation of the literary field as it is to a macro-theory of difference as a metaphysical category. Segalen's creative intelligence, consonant with his individualist theoretical take on the figure of the artist, was of a kind which repeatedly led him first to set out a standard or dominant position in a question and then to model his own plan of action in accordance with a principle of difference from this. Hence, for example, his great general admiration as individual and poet for Paul Claudel (an openly tutelary figure in his artistic development) is counterbalanced at practically every consideration by reservations in respect of what Claudel is, produces, or is seen to represent. Claudel's poetic principle is 'catholicisme' –

⁶² Ibid. 291.

⁶³ Segalen 'Essai sur l'exotisme. Une esthétique du divers (Notes)' in *Œuvres complètes I*, op. cit. 745-81.

Segalen, with an undeniable taste for the inclusive artistic gesture, is on the contrary “anti-catholique pur”⁶⁴, even as he looks forward to an exchange with the great man. The notes for the *Essai sur l'exotisme* show Segalen well aware of the resonance between his theory of individuality through experience and the practicalities of the foundation of a literary identity:

Donc, ni Loti, ni Saint-Pol Roux, ni Claudel. Autre chose! Autre que ceux-là! Mais une vraie trouvaille *doit* être simple ... Et d'abord, pourquoi tout simplement, en vérité, ne pas prendre le contre-pied de ceux-là dont je me défends? [...]

Ils ont dit ce qu'ils ont vu, ce qu'ils ont senti en présence des choses et des gens [...] *Ont-ils révélé ce que ces choses et ces gens pensaient en eux-mêmes et d'eux?*⁶⁵

Interestingly, then, the poet's self-theorisation leaves off somewhere short of his actual engagement (biographical and literary) with the space and marks of ‘pure’ other-ness. Artistic foundation passes via a depersonalisation of the writing subject. Thus, in marked contrast to Claudel and Saint-John Perse, the two more prominent poetic figures with whom he is most generally compared, Segalen's actual learning on the language, culture and geography of China (the country in which practically all of his poetic work was done) was considerable and impressive. With these attempts to bridge the gap, or at least to satisfy a serious cultural curiosity, he appears as a model of cultural adaptation, if not assimilation.⁶⁶ There is little doubt as to the reactionary tone of Segalen's actual politics, nor in respect of the average person in China is he particularly charitable. What is

⁶⁴ *Lettres de Chine*. Paris: Plon, 1967: 60. Letter dated 13.6.1909. Segalen's self-description arises in a comparison with his travelling companion Augusto Gilbert de Voisins, but the opposition on this point with Claudel is explicit and sustained throughout their acquaintance. Indeed it is tempting to see in Segalen's ‘Exotisme’, his version of a grand unified theory, an attempt to respond to Claudel's ‘Catholicisme’ – a counter-system within the field of poetic reflection.

⁶⁵ *Essai sur l'exotisme* op. cit. 746.

⁶⁶ Charles Forsdick writes of Segalen's conception of the exotic as one “whose potentially reactionary, even xenophobic adherence to an ideal of cultural essentialism has not yet been fully addressed.” (Forsdick, Charles. *Victor Segalen and the Aesthetics of Diversity. Journeys between Cultures*. Oxford University Press, 2000: 20.) The corollary of the point we are attempting to make here is that Segalen may have been less of a reactionary in lived and artistic practice than he undoubtedly was in elements of his political views, and, perhaps, in the possible implications of his aesthetic theories viewed in retrospect.

interesting to observe here however is how his search for aesthetic difference leads him into direct contradiction of any essentialist position – not only is he an example of acculturation himself, but at least part of his aesthetic effort is devoted to an understanding of a cultural viewpoint which his own initial axiom of absolute difference cannot accommodate. The closing notes towards the *Essai sur l'exotisme* disclose as much:

Et je m'aperçois maintenant, dans cette Solitude, qu'elle [la théorie de l'exotisme] est vaste, plus que je ne le croyais d'abord; et qu'elle les englobe, qu'ils le veuillent, ou non, - LES HOMMES, MES FRÈRES, - QUE JE LE VEUILLE OU NON. [...] Car, cherchant d'instinct l'Exotisme, j'avais donc cherché l'Intensité, donc la Puissance, donc la Vie.⁶⁷

Given the evident dynamising power of intellectual curiosity in the genesis of the oeuvre, this transfer could not have been entirely 'undesirable'. It must thus be contrasted with the pessimistic overt reading Segalen has of the processes whereby his own artistic individuality came about. Contact between cultures is the basic agent of what, being a man of his time, he terms entropy. The diminution of difference is the diminution of identity which in turn is itself the end of specific cultures as matrices or sources of the unitary experience, and thus the end of a certain form of community.

Segalen is emblematic of that eminently modern condition of being the late arriver – the one who has not only been preceded by his own sort (Gauguin, Rimbaud, Claudel) but for whom neither simple action nor adhesion to the spectacle is compatible with present lucidity. From his very earliest travels and writings thereon it becomes clear that he has a sense of living at a time in which the conditions of con-sensual co-existence (community attaining extremities of the 'generalised') are no longer available territorially or in terms of any simple form of collective identity. This sense, arising in the shock of difference, is a radically new one for the writing subject, whose attention continues to be drawn to the vestiges of defunct cultures of self-presence, and whose intelligence is, correspondingly,

⁶⁷ *Essai sur l'exotisme* op. cit. 774 (emphasis in original.) Note dated 'Shanghai 21.4.17'.

occupied to a degree with the general problem of reconstructing, if only textually, the figures around which such forms of personal and collective self-hood were either fostered or evacuated. It is a sense of newness thus accompanied at every stage by one of incessant cultural decline. Fated to look on in the case both of his time in the South Seas and of that in China, perhaps precisely because of a sense of their imminent demise as coherent and cohesive lived realities, Segalen is at the same time repeatedly attracted to forms of life and of art which appear to evacuate the problem of the individual subject and allow accession to speech to occur under the sign of the always already generalised. Thus a fascination (on the level of language) with a conventional *parole* which effectuates, as a matter of social perception, a consonance of person, community and the surrounding world, and (on the level of the artistic event) with the achievement of a fusion both of performing subjects *inter se* and of the spectator with the spectacle.

These latter terms actually become impossible to use, in Segalen's view, in respect of the 'exotic' experiences he is attempting to describe, just as is the conventional division between the aesthetic and the social. The fusional virtualities of community are most readily observed, and theorised, in relation to music. It is necessary, in passing, to observe in Segalen's work something of the order of a musical phase, notably through an association with Debussy, the end of which practically coincides with the beginning of the poetic work. The ethnomusicological article *Voix mortes: musiques maori*⁶⁸, written upon the suggestion of Debussy and published in 1907 in the *Mercure musical*, contains in its concluding pages a suggestion, however, that these forms of communal expression go far beyond any Western imagining of a *Gesamtkunstwerk* or a liturgical music to achieve a multifaceted, communal unity that is properly cosmic or religious, and aesthetically all the more admirable for being, in Segalen's judgement, doomed, along with "le paganisme maître des jeux et joies humaines", to imminent extinction:

Le moindre pas dansant, – La connivence mesurée de tous les membres, jusqu'aux doigts. – La participation de chaque danseur au geste total. – La participation du chœur, de l'assemblée, au rythme des choses environnantes et

⁶⁸ *Œuvres complètes I*, op. cit., 531-49.

amies: mugissement coupé de silences du récif qui déferle inlassablement: alternance des nuits où l'on a peur, et les jours où l'on se rit sans alerte: suite des trois saisons, [...] Tous ces éléments se mêlaient, inextricables, dans la vie polynésienne: vie libre, vie nue. [...] [O]n donnerait avec avantage trente «pièces» toutes montées, avec décors, musiciens mécaniques et public applaudisseur, pour la participation, dans son intégralité, aux chœurs des voix franches en quelque terre de Polynésie.⁶⁹

The centering of this principle of generality on speech, and the collapse of community with its disappearance, is the central theme of *Les Immémoriaux*, Segalen's first major literary work. Published in the same year as the above remarks, it could be described as an ethnographical novel⁷⁰, depicting through the eyes of a number of its members, relayed by a sympathetic narrator, scenes from the end of the life of a Polynesian community which has come into contact with the West. In a key scene, Térîi, the *haéré-po* or apprentice priest through whose perspective a large part of the novel is indirectly narrated, breaks down in the recitation of the ancestral names:

Le nom s'obstina dans la gorge. [...] Térîi chercha ses maîtres. Il ne vit en leur place que les deux étrangers hostiles, aux vêtements sombres parmi les peaux nues et les peintures de fête: cette fois, le sortilège était manifeste. L'incanté proféra bien vite les formules qui dissolvent les sorts. Il balbutiait davantage. Enfin, les yeux grands ouverts, les lèvres tremblantes, il se tut.⁷¹

This descent into the silence of forgetting signals the demise of the entire indigenous oral culture with the arrival of traders and missionary groups – 'Les Hommes au Nouveau

⁶⁹ Ibid. 547.

⁷⁰ Doumet and Dollé disagree: "Le langage du roman est trop infusé du monde qu'il évoque pour être celui d'un ethnographe [...] [Il] se crée, à travers le texte français, un véritable idiolecte, consubstantiel au parti pris du narrateur maori." (Doumet, Christian and Dollé, Marie. 'Une active nostalgie', preface to Segalen. *Les Immémoriaux*. Paris: Livre de Poche, 2001: 7-31, 27.) In that the perspective adopted forces the reader to engage in a process of deduction and a suspension of cultural values, and in so doing constitutes a genuine (rather than an escapist or exotic) cultural *dépaysement*, I would maintain the description ethnographical novel – given, also, that novel writing is on disciplinary divisions an improper activity for an 'ethnographer' with pretensions to a scientific distance.

⁷¹ 'Les Immémoriaux' in *Œuvres complètes I*, op. cit., 107-286, 135-36.

Parler' – who, "trop attentifs à considérer sans cesse de petits signes tatoués sur des feuilles blanches, ne se livraient jamais ouvertement à l'amour"⁷² represent a multiple degradation of language, written, decontextualised, instrumentalised, eradicator of experience in favour of abstraction. Prior to that collapse, which results in a strange accommodation between a native substratum of practice and an imported structure of belief and religious discourse whose grotesque qualities he never fails to bring out, the reader is exposed to the first literary manifestations of Segalen's aesthetic of the unitary, micro-cosmic group ordered around speech with the status of an originary, transcendent utterance that was later to become a feature of the poetic writing done in China.

Un silence lourd comme le ciel nuageux tomba soudain sur la foule. Les clameurs des hommes fléchirent, et la triple sonorité sainte – voix du récif, voix du vent, voix des prêtres, – s'épanouit seule dans la vallée. Le cortège se mit en route: les Maîtres-du-Jour, et devant eux Haamanihi, le menaient avec une grande majesté. Derrière marchaient les chefs, les promeneurs-de-nuit, les sonneurs de conque marine, les sacrificateurs et les gardiens-des-images. [...] Tous ensemble, les prêtres et les Plumes, accédèrent à l'enceinte sacrée. Le peuple se rua sur les barrières, et le rite annuel déroula ses gestes immuables.⁷³

The fabric of the indigenous oral culture, its major developments in forms of ritual and recitation which placed the subject in a state of outwardly (that is, to the eye, or imagination, of the *exote*) perfect symbiosis with the governing pattern and practice, are attractive to the artist above all for the appropriateness they bestow on the gestures, acts and words of individual persons⁷⁴. The culture functions as a guarantor of unity between actors depicted as moving in an entirely unproblematic and unquestioning way – in other words, in accordance with a certain conception of naturalness – through an existence experienced by the modern, for his part, in terms of a growing cacophony. Indeed, it is

⁷² Ibid. 114.

⁷³ Ibid. 130.

⁷⁴ This aesthetic reaction is of course not specific to Segalen. More celebrated examples would be Artaud's encounter of the théâtre balinaise (in *Le théâtre et son double*) or, on another level, of the Tarahumaras ('Les Tarahumaras' in *Œuvres complètes IX*. Paris: Gallimard, 1979: 7-98); and, to a lesser degree, Michaux's

this unifying quality of the indigenous practices, more than any distinct element of the cultural inheritance, that vanishes almost instantaneously in the contact of the Tahitians with an aggressive alien culture, and in particular with its writing (Bible) and associated repressive morality.

In the imaginary of communication instanced in *Les Immémoriaux*, Segalen's literally 'primitive' scene is precisely one of 'consumation', of a shared intimate in the meaning of Bataille above – it is in this vision of sacrificial 'communication' that the asymptote of community in art is thought out, developed. Yet the figure of the modern artist, the one who approaches this most closely from a Western background, is premised on the fact of foundation, of work, of creation, of future orientation, of individuation. A remark by Lévi-Strauss allows us to place this more fundamental paradox in context. It refers directly to the kinds of cultural practices which Segalen observed, and to which he reacted admiringly:

Le mythe et l'œuvre musical apparaissent ainsi comme des chefs d'orchestre dont les auditeurs sont les silencieux exécutants. Si l'on demande où se trouve le foyer réel de l'œuvre, il faudra répondre que sa détermination est impossible. La musique et la mythologie confrontent l'homme à des objets virtuels dont l'ombre seule est actuelle ... les mythes n'ont pas d'auteurs ...⁷⁵

The mythical is thus what has escaped from anything as localised as the figure of an author – the problem of the 'author' being that creation *ex nihilo* can never rival the cohesive force of mythical texts or mythically-grounded practices. In witnessing or reconstructing the vitality of a culture firmly within a unified mythological structure, the author approaches forms of communication which the very idea of authorship undermines. Any such artistic distinction violates the principles on which it is built – the consciousness from which artistic work begins is a consciousness of the irreparable. *Les*

encounter of certain kinds of performance in 'Un barbare en Asie' (in *Œuvres complètes I*. Paris: Gallimard (Bibliothèque de la Pléiade), 1998.)

⁷⁵ Cited by Derrida in 'La Structure, le signe et le jeu dans le discours des sciences humaines' in *L'écriture et la différence*, op. cit. 409-28, 421.

Immémoriaux is written firmly in view of this diagnosis. The cultural change Segalen depicts therein exemplifies the paradox central to his own writing activity and which remained unresolved in the *Essai sur l'exotisme*, arising as it does almost entirely out of experiences which de-centre the writer culturally. It is via this de-centering that the writer takes on the distinctiveness whereby his accession to speech is capable of being singled out as aesthetically worthy back at the operative cultural 'centre', that is, where artistic judgements are formulated in respect of his given language and identity. What is good or productive for the artist, in other words, is bad for society, or on the level of human history. The processes which made possible this accession to speech are integral to what the work explicitly and intentionally opposes – which is the diminution of difference and the universalisation of disenchantment.

Segalen has recourse to his willed literary project – that is, to his modern self – in the face of such contradiction. A key moment in the passage out of the 'mythological', as in all accounts of the Fall, is the emergence of the consciousness of separation – of which Segalen encountered and enthusiastically adopted an account developed in respect of the thematisation of nature by the Romantic poet Maurice de Guérin.⁷⁶ Nature becomes an object of writing in the writer's consciousness of his separation from it. Writing the aspiration to fusion or unanimity requires a similar separation. Segalen, with the sense of category and will-to-definition which characterise him, notes:

Maurice de Guérin est un bel exemple, pour l'Exotisme de la Nature, de ce que j'ai dessein de faire pour l'Exotisme des Races et des Mœurs: m'en imbiber d'abord, puis m'en extraire, afin de les laisser dans toute leur saveur *objective* (comme les mêmes mots se retrouvent obstinément avec leur même force! Je dois aboutir à l'exotisme essentiel: celui de *l'objet* pour le sujet!)⁷⁷

Even then as the artistic effort is nourished on a scenario of integration, oral culture, originary speech, fusional participation and unalienated community, the modern subject-

⁷⁶ In 'Maurice de Guérin et le sentiment de la nature', an article by Henri Clouard in the *Mercure de France* of 1 January 1909.

⁷⁷ *Essai sur l'exotisme*, op. cit. 756.

artist carries out a project of self-creation – a literary project – through a double strategy of adhesion to and abstention from such visions. The passage from pure adhesion to the practice of the double strategy is that from the community in which the communal foundation of speech is unproblematic to that of a literary practice which must invent its own foundation at each new effort. Agamben has argued, in an article dealing *inter alia* with *Les Immémoriaux*, that Segalen recurrently exemplifies the passage from a *parole mythique* of which the subject is the performer to a *parole littéraire* of which the subject has become the author – that is, a *parole* definitively cut off from and thus haunted by the origin, but forced to experience itself as a result in terms of pure futurity. Citing a remark from Segalen’s pseudo-commentary to the first of his *Odes* (“cette ode au passé ne peut donc être ancienne: il faut bien qu’elle date d’aujourd’hui”) Agamben makes a case for the author’s paradigmatic value in this respect:

Ce renversement inattendu exprime parfaitement le paradoxe qui constitue le problème formel de Segalen: comment inscrire dans l’œuvre à la fois sa contemporanéité, son irrévocable appartenance au présent et à la parole, et sa provenance d’une origine lointaine, qui fait de toute œuvre une «parole soufflée» par le passé de la langue. [...] [L’exotisme de Segalen] cache le drame essentiel de la parole littéraire même. Toute parole littéraire est nécessairement exotique, car, soufflée par le passé, elle provient d’une origine lointaine, mais, pour cela même, comme les beaux parlers originels qui manquent aux lèvres de Térii, la parole littéraire est fatalement *abolie*, dans le sens étymologique du mot: c’est-à-dire: venue de loin (*ab-oleo*).⁷⁸

The theme of the origin as that of which the ‘poetic’ is revelatory in language is, of course, a commonplace of a certain metaphysically-oriented line of discourse on modern poetry. Laurent Jenny, for example, argues in a 1990 essay for the specific nature of the relation between poetic writing and what he calls the “expérience «originnaire», indéfiniment ouverte précisément parce que l’origine nous fait absolument défaut.”⁷⁹ It is

⁷⁸ Agamben, Giorgio. ‘L’origine et l’oubli. Parole du Mythe et Parole de la Littérature’ in *Regard, Espaces, Signes (Victor Segalen)*, l’Asiathèque, 1979: 169-80, 175-76 (italics in original, emphasis added.)

⁷⁹ Jenny, Laurent. *La parole singulière*. Paris: Belin, 1990: 89.

important to note what, in the terms adopted in the present study, might be called the ‘utopian’ structure of this assignment of objectives. This ‘indefinite’ openness has as its price the lack of any resolution which could offer itself in poetry as ‘connaissance de sa naissance’, to echo Denis Roche. It instead gives rise to a process of interpretation hypothesised as leading back to an experience of the communal – that is, requiring a supplementary discourse in order to be ‘experienced’ in this way by the modern reader:

Du côté de l’œuvre poétique, [...] parce qu’étant elle-même engagée dans un frayage de formes, l’œuvre ne peut ignorer l’expérience commune de parole dont elle se fait le prolongement. Mieux, elle est susceptible, par un retournement sur cette expérience, d’en faire apercevoir l’événementialité et d’établir cette représentation comme son projet essentiel, fût-ce en se désintéressant d’enjeux historiques plus pressants. [...] Il faut admettre cependant que le savoir de «l’œuvre» sur «l’origine» ne se donnera jamais dans la clarté de la théorie, mais à travers une figuration qui sera elle-même à interpréter.⁸⁰

These examples demonstrate the role of accompanying discourses in constructing the poetic via what escapes it. In their treatment of the aporia of the origin, Jenny’s reasoning domesticates the ‘figuration’ of the poetic event with the discursive ease – if not necessarily the ‘clarity’ – of theory, while Agamben’s commentary takes from the author commented upon a subtlety in the maintenance of ambiguity around its ordering terms. In Segalen, the solemn quality of the discourse of the origin as of a human absolute is counterbalanced in the opportunities for play, or for irony, which the exotic repertory affords. The ‘exotic’ quality of the authored text inaugurates a tension which, despite the transformations in decor with which the oeuvre abounds, maintains a constant explicit presence in Segalen’s attempts in literature – the mask of the chosen form or cultural framework continually being lifted to reflect upon the incident text as an authored event, an event seeking to incorporate an ‘author’ (je, moi) in the position of the origin. He does not simply clothe in exotic costume his evident desire as an author to ‘stand out’, but rather places a principle of relativity, of continual slippage between ‘self’ and

⁸⁰ Ibid. 90-91.

‘community’, right at the heart of an otherwise intact sense of poetry as a kind of maximal unified articulation, whose major outcome is a foundation of self in the eye of the other.

To dramatise poetic writing, as we have done, in terms of the accession of a subject to speech is thus to point back to a preceding silence and to make of this silence the absent foundation of the activity, ordering thinking on the subject around what remains by definition unthinkable. But it is also to require that poetic writing enact this accession, that its trace be the reconciliation of these demands – or the direct evidence of an impossibility of such reconciliation. The qualitative difference which Agamben appears to elide in his analysis is what he calls Segalen’s ‘problème formel’, which can indeed be approached or rationalised through the multiplicity of his writings and in respect of a variety of literary and non-literary authorial voices. It is arguable, however, that it is only directly enacted in the internally diverse group of those writings commonly classed as poetic, which extend from *Stèles* (1912) through *Peintures* (1916) to *Odes* and *Thibet*, both unfinished at his death in 1919.

A considerable amount of work is devoted by Segalen to the creation of forms for the activity of poetic communication, generally presented to the reader as the adoption of what appear to be original forms of convention. In these poetic works the enactment of the ‘problème formel’ gives rise to forms or aspirations to form⁸¹ but which appear in each case to depict the event of the poet’s accession to speech so as to in the first instance remove the contingency inhering to that act. This can be through the assumption of pseudo-legal forms, the pastiche of traditional forms, the collusive recourse to the performative, the written aspiration to pure *chant*, or the fallacy of an explicit equation between a specially-developed metre and the physical features of an imaginary landscape. But these formal devices serve equally to establish these accessions to speech in their own right, as forms within which an initially declarative voice is in a strong enough position to actually foreground the autopoetic nature of its act. This play within the heavily-worked form of the *stèle*, the written tableau, the ode or the mountain-poem, is

⁸¹ To be dealt with in Part III.

also that which definitively de-exoticises them as writing. They become readable as enacting the formal difficulty of a particular subject's position, ultimately addressed to that community in respect of which the attempt at something like a sovereign – distinguishing – gesture becomes operative.

In Segalen's case that is the imagined group of those he calls, in a document accompanying the second edition (1914) of *Stèles*, 'Les Lettrés d'Extrême-Occident'.⁸² Two years previously, the first edition had been an entirely personal approach of the literary field, a self-consciously symbolic condensation of the wider community addressed – none of its 81 copies was sold, but instead dispatched with personal dedications to selected luminaries of the French literary world.⁸³ The formality of that inaugural address of Segalen's poetic career, the evident will to control the communicative act of foundation at all stages of the process, is mirrored dramatically in the distinctiveness of the poetic structures contained in that book. Of the specific properties of the stele form, the first is the exaggeratedly affirmative quality of its presentation – its quasi-performative force:

Marquant un fait, une volonté, une présence, elles forcent à l'arrêt debout, face à leurs faces. Dans le vacillement délabré de l'Empire, elles seules impliquent la stabilité.⁸⁴

The relationship of the steles with materiality, in addition to the question of formal novelty, is relevant to their status as imaginary mediators of community. The stele declares its own permanence, univocality, validity. It appears to disallow interpretation, its utterance closer to the legal in its pretensions than to the poetic. The stele is thus in the first instance a linguistic image of the law. The text of the law, which surrounds itself with all possible paraphernalia assisting the repression of its textual status, is one which equates force of speech with a collective origin (where it is not the voice of the collective

⁸² See 'Aux Lettrés d'Extrême-Occident', annex to *Stèles* in *Œuvres complètes II*, op. cit. 21-144, 137-43.

⁸³ The second edition includes sixteen additional texts, first published in the *Mercure de France* of 16 December 1913.

⁸⁴ Ibid. 35.

it is the voice which silences the collective.) The remarks of Antoine Garapon on physical juridical space, what he calls 'l'espace judiciaire', are astonishingly consonant with the prefatory discourse of *Stèles*:

L'espace judiciaire est [...] un espace découpé et obligatoire pour tous ses occupants; un espace organisé et hiérarchisé, entièrement constitué par le vide et l'interdit, c'est un espace à l'image de la Loi! Il suspend, pour un moment, toutes les différences de rang habituelles entre les hommes, pour en substituer d'autres. Il incarne l'ordre, il crée l'ordre, il est l'ordre.⁸⁵

Garapon goes on to assimilate this thinking to that of sacred space per Eliade.⁸⁶ Such laws as form the object of legal philosophy are collectively elaborated, formally institutional facts. In literature, where all is the affair of a single isolated subject the mimetic recuperation of vestiges of legality and legal declaration could be taken to represent a fantasy of cohesive collective existence. The central activity of law-making, establishing conventionalised sense within a paradigm of change and movement, makes of the work of Saint-John Perse from around the same time, and in particular the long poem *Anabase*, also written in China, an obvious valid comparator for Segalen on the level of aesthetic concern and of influence: "Sur trois grandes saisons m'établissant avec honneur, j'augure bien du sol où j'ai fondé ma loi."⁸⁷ What does not seem contestable is a common interest in the poetic itself as the grand allegorical gesture of human (cap)ability, the isolation of which is directly proportional to its totalising ambitions: "*Anabase* a pour objet le poème de la solitude dans l'action. Aussi bien l'action parmi les hommes que l'action de l'esprit; envers autrui comme envers soi-même. J'ai voulu rassembler la synthèse, non point passive mais active, de la ressource humaine."⁸⁸

⁸⁵ Garapon, Antoine. *L'âne portant des reliques: essai sur le rituel judiciaire*. Paris: Le Ceinturon, 1985: 45. See also Goodrich, Peter. *Languages of Law*. London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1990. Discussing the legal philosophy of Pierre Legendre, centering on "the foundational symbolism of unity and universality in the Western tradition", Goodrich remarks that "the discourse of truth has always appeared in the guise of law". Op. cit. 270 and 265 respectively.

⁸⁶ "Il [l'espace sacré] réalise dans l'imperfection du monde et la corruption de la vie, une perfection temporaire et limitée." Eliade. *Le sacré et le profane*. Paris: Gallimard, 1965: 22, cited in Garapon, op. cit. 45.

⁸⁷ Saint-John Perse. *Œuvres complètes*. Paris: Gallimard (Bibliothèque de la Pléiade), 1972: 93.

⁸⁸ Ibid. 576.

The legal imaginary of the *Stèles* publication is reinforced in the concluding remarks to Segalen's 'Justification' of the second edition. Having discussed the format and binding of the publication, and explained three different kinds of character used at different levels in the composition of the book (main title, inter-titles, epigraphs) he finishes with a discussion of the fourth kind of character:

[L]es trois sceaux, apposés à la main et faits de la cinabre royal broyé dans des huiles qui pénétreront lentement le papier, enveloppant chaque signe d'une auréole brune. Leur écriture, d'un corps très antique, dit «Ta-tchouan», obéit de plus aux modes sigillaires. [...] Le dernier doit se déchiffrer ainsi: «Wou-tch'ao Sin-siuan mien tsiuan», et promulgue, à la fin de tout, ce que la première des Stèles, «Sans marque de Règne» annonçait. On peut traduire:

«Composé durant la période Promulgation de l'Empire du Cœur de la dynastie sans avènement dynastique.»⁸⁹

Marc Gontard takes the interpretation of this legal imaginary further, in that he appears to ascribe it to a full-blown act of identification on the part of the poet with the symbolism encountered at the exotic site. Thus, having incisively remarked that "[l]'une des particularités les plus frappantes du langage de Stèles apparaît en effet dans sa ritualisation, en relation avec le hiératisme commémoratif du monument", he assimilates this 'ritualisation' to what he calls the 'intertexte énonciatif du Moi l'Empereur' – the assumption of the persona of the imperial sovereign by the poetic subject:

D'une manière beaucoup plus stricte que dans *Les Immémoriaux* [...] Segalen inverse donc ici la relation intersubjective traditionnelle de la littérature exotique pour faire de l'empereur le sujet énonciateur de la plupart des stèles [...] La voix qui énonce dans le poème devient ainsi une construction locutoire représentant un Je-Empereur mythique qui focalise l'imaginaire de Segalen, d'où cette ritualisation du discours, dans une intertextualité déterminée par le statut bien

⁸⁹ 'Justification de l'édition' in Segalen. *Stèles*. Paris: Mercure de France, 1982:298-99, 299.

spécifique de l'instance énonciative. Car l'empereur ne saurait s'exprimer qu'en conformité avec les rites.⁹⁰

What it becomes important to emphasise in respect of these remarks is the explicitly ironic relationship of Segalen with his own imaginary repertory. All assumptions of situated persona, of voices however sovereign, are shadowed by the textual consciousness that the 'promulgation' of the speaking subject is, like the 'Dynasty' whose seal he appends to the book, "sans avènement" – is simply the textual foundation of a certain kind of enunciating disposition.

The apparent aesthetic of the *Stèles* is consonant with that discoverable elsewhere in Segalen's stylised imaginings of groups, where the spectacle of univocal order is paramount. They recall explicitly the values of a classical imperial culture – the demise of elements of which their author bemoaned for Europe. By extension, the book proffers itself as in the first instance an act of social sovereignty in respect of its European addressees – the exotic embodiment of the intransitive enables 'poetic' foundation. On this point, it is important to emphasise that the 'poetic' is the scene of writing into which, as an aesthetic idea, 'sovereignty' is most readily transposed and acted out by Segalen. It is not something immanent to poetic form, but a direction taken by the utopian dynamic of the writer's attempt at 'poetry'. *Briques et tuiles*⁹¹, Segalen's literary notebook from the first Chinese period, is observably the raw material for much of his subsequent 'poetic' work – which is frequently a refined version of observations and attitudes already set down therein, as if immediately received by the neophyte explorer *en l'état*. Thus, for example, the aesthetic of the imperial gesture, which Segalen has understood and appropriated with a kind of admiring irony in his notes only shortly after disembarkation. The scale and order of the sacrifice, as in the very different circumstances described in *Les Immémoriaux*, are what are of obvious and enduring fascination here:

⁹⁰ Gontard, Marc. *La Chine de Victor Segalen. Stèles, Équipée*. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2000: 103-04.

⁹¹ *Œuvres complètes I*, op. cit. 839-959.

TEMPLE DE L'AGRICULTURE

Le geste est plus beau que l'objet. L'irréel et l'imaginaire triomphent.

Je sais que l'Empereur accomplit ici des fonctions millénaires et purement chinoises.[...] Tout un peuple – quatre cents millions de bouches – attend d'une seule faim l'immense récolte qui doit lever sous le soc impérial. Le Geste est grand comme l'Empire, grand comme la terre nourricière et bénie, et ceci, qu'on répète aujourd'hui, est l'écho figuré des milliards des gestes semblables accomplis depuis des époques plus nombreuses que les gerbes dressées... [...]

Il faut réinventer le geste immense et Impérial; il faut s'y suspendre, ainsi qu'au fort symbole de l'immense chose incluse en la pauvreté formelle que voici.⁹²

The aesthetic of the imperial pantomime and its associated poetics link exemplarity and sovereignty in a radical imbalance between the act and what it represents, what it purports to effectuate. The significant gesture is the subject of all attention (thereby consolidated into a thinkable – and desirable – whole.) The passage from tendentious observation to the enunciation of what amounts to an aesthetic programme in conclusion is entirely characteristic of the segalenian will-to-form as the individualising turn of an aesthetic fodder which is already consummately aesthetic.

It becomes possible in this light to read *Peintures*, the other of Segalen's anthumous 'poetic' publications, in terms of a continuity with the approach of poetic foundation instanced in *Stèles*. Motifs emphasising order, symbolic closure and hierarchy (Cortèges et Trophée des Tributs des Royaumes; *Peintures Dynastiques*), gleaned from a frequentation of art, artefact and history follow on from the fantastical scenes of the opening *Peintures Magiques*. The values of such scenes are relayed on the level of address. At all times the 'spectacle' proffered is commented upon as the declarative effort of the exponent-performer coupled with the collaborative adhesion of the reader – the poetic text's value as an originating instance posited alongside an ironically-maintained submission of the addressee. The declared convergence of wills upon the text of the *lieu*,

⁹² Ibid. 851-52

the mechanics of which Segalen characteristically places in the foreground, enables it to stand in for both object and subject positions, as a generalised and extra-ordinary affirmation of the first order, a kind of utopian speech act:

Derrière les mots que je vais dire, il y eut parfois des objets; parfois des symboles; souvent des fantômes historiques ... N'est-ce pas assez pour vous plaire? [...] Et je ne puis dissimuler: je vous réclame comme des aides indispensables à la substitution. Ceci n'est pas écrit pour être lu, mais entendu. Ceci ne peut se suffire d'être entendu, mais veut être vu. Ceci est une sorte d'œuvre réciproque [...] Donc, une *certaine* attention, une *certaine* acceptation de vous, et, de moi, un *certain* débit, une abondance, une emphase, une éloquence sont également nécessaires. Convenez de cette double mise en jeu. [...] Je vous convie donc à *voir* seulement. Je vous prie de tout oublier à l'entour; de ne rien espérer d'autre; de ne regretter rien de plus.⁹³

Peintures is a text which insists on being experienced as an event, a gesture that identifies the communicating subject with the globality in its purview, and the sovereignty of its viewing – traits between which it, as text, is the unifying node, the founding embodiment. The images of radically ordered, hierarchical society, of tribute and ritual which much of the work either thematises or incorporates formally, contrast largely with Segalen's lived experience of the world around him – both that of his Western origins and the degraded elsewhere, in which he pursues this project. 'Entropy', we have said, is the conceptual diagnosis of the contrast weaker in reality than in anticipation, but these imaginary monuments to difference evidently carry in them a negative judgement of the world as viewed at present – making of the 'founded' poetry as much a gesture of socially-directed rejection as of socially-imagined apotheosis.

Towards whom is this ambiguous gesture operative? Whereas thematically it encompasses all those elements encountered as 'other' or 'outside', and that to the extent of inhabiting or ventriloquising some of those elements to varying degrees, it is formally

⁹³ 'Peintures' in *Œuvres complètes II*, op. cit., 145-259, 156 (emphasis in original.)

organised, and must be read, in terms of its own origin and destination – the field of French poetic or literary writing at the time. Segalen’s work, in explicit location and dislocation between cultures and symbolic systems, is a particularly striking example of a writing practice which ostensibly flouts the cultural bearings it attempts to integrate. The residual object of this integration, the ‘founded’ object, like that object fought over by “[d]eux bêtes opposées, museau à museau, mais se disputant une pièce de monnaie d’un règne illisible” in the concluding passage of *Équipée*, remains unknown at the centre of the visible opposition. Its very visibility, and its conscious accentuation of this quality, is in the nature of a *trompe-l’œil*, conveying what remains resolutely formless, the subject whose accession to speech it embodies:

C’est un cercle ... qu’encastre un carré. Quadrature? Un anneau, un serpent symbolique, un symbole géométrique, le Retour éternel? L’équivalence de tout, l’Impossible, l’Absolu? Tout est permis ... Je crois plutôt à la figuration d’une simple monnaie, la sapèque chinoise, ronde, percé d’un trou carré ... Mais ceci est l’interprétation historique grossière ... L’objet que ces deux bêtes se disputent, - l’être en un mot – reste fièrement inconnu.⁹⁴

It is tempting to read this image as an allegory of Segalen’s understanding of poetic foundation. While the origin of a fully-delineated sense of ‘self’ might in theory be maintained in the process of exotic encounter, this self is what is founded, in the eyes of Segalen’s fantasised literary peer group, ‘Les Lettrés d’Extrême-Occident’. Even as it is held back from direct exposition to those ‘Lettrés’ through the layering necessitated in the construction of the ‘literary’, and *a fortiori* the ‘poetic’ text.

4. Silent foundation and avant-garde speech. René Daumal.

Poetic foundation for Segalen, then, involves the simultaneous establishment and withdrawal of a ‘je’ in the face of a distant ‘nous’. The accession to speech both founds

⁹⁴ ‘Équipée’ in *Œuvres complètes II*, op. cit. 261-320, 319-20.

and obscures. In the case of René Daumal's governing experience of community within *Le Grand Jeu*, the foundation of the 'je' and the 'nous' as indissociable elements within an economy of pre-linguistic experience governs the entire sense of the 'poetic' act. The authenticity of which experience, the *Grand Jeu* position being in this comparable to that of Artaud⁹⁵, it has typically been language's role to obscure and which it thus becomes poetry's role to reveal. For the members of *Le Grand Jeu* that revealing function went to the utopian extreme of an apocalyptic-messianic relation to speech. The initial and initiate community, that within which valid poetic work can come about, became the gauge for the authenticity of all communicative acts, the template of all imagined community. It was characterised by a double foundation – one inside, the other apparently outside language.

The first foundation is that of a shared rhetoric on a platform of themes, ideas and aspirations, a form of legislation not untypical of the 'avant-garde' position in the literary field. The logic of this position embodies much of what we have attempted to define as the utopian dynamic, the imperative towards the constant rejection of standard or 'legitimate' positions in the field of debate. *Le Grand Jeu*, in purporting to engage in the incessant re-examination of discourses of established truth or *idées reçues*⁹⁶ nevertheless maintains a number of structuring principles for its own project. The first of these is a degree of personal intellectual agency (the *Avant-propos au Grand Jeu*, written by Gilbert-Lecomte, is the first and last document to which all founding members append their name.) The second recognisable principle is a governing notion of the whole, or of Unity, which is derived in equal measure from the Eastern and Western sources of the group's conceptual repertory.

This common platform of practice and discourse reposes on a second, extra-linguistic order of foundation – which is accompanied and shored up by a functioning 'mythology' of shared initiatory pre-linguistic experiences. These experiences become understandings

⁹⁵ Some detail of the relations between Artaud and the group is provided in Virmaux, Alain and Odette. 'Une revue «ésotérico-métaphysique» ?' *Europe*, 782-783 (June-July 1994): 19-29.

⁹⁶ The imperative known to its members as the 'Casse-Dogme', the inaugural text of which was cited in section 2 above.

and hence, in a degraded form, texts, include shared use of drugs, dream experiences, speculation on the possibilities of telepathy, on the de-verbalised limits of occult conscious experience, on the philosophical and discursive functions of laughter. The essential importance of this order of foundation is attested by one of the last pieces of writing completed by Daumal, *Le souvenir déterminant*⁹⁷, an essay written at the suggestion of Jean Paulhan⁹⁸ in 1943, which recounts the experience as an adolescent of what he calls ‘la certitude’. While insisting that the recounting of the ordeal undergone suffices in itself to deform it, he writes of the sudden irresistible ‘certitude’ of being in another world, “un autre monde, intensément plus réel, un monde instantané, éternel”, one immediately more ‘real’ than that left behind. “A ce moment, c’est la *certitude*, et c’est ici que la parole doit se contenter de tourner autour du fait”:

[L]a certitude dont je parle est à la fois mathématique, expérimentale et émotionnelle; [...] identité de l’existence et de la non-existence du fini dans l’infini [...] elle était éprouvée à chaque instant par ma lutte pour «suivre le mouvement» qui m’annulait [...] je voyais mon néant face à face, ou plutôt mon anéantissement perpétuel dans chaque instant, anéantissement total mais non absolu: les mathématiciens me comprendront si je dis «asymptotique».⁹⁹

⁹⁷ *Les pouvoirs de la parole, essais et notes II*. Paris: Gallimard, 1972: 112-20.

⁹⁸ Paulhan who, shortly before this, had anatomised the cyclical group pretensions to a new attainment in language thus: “Qu’il s’agisse du symbolisme ou de l’unanimité, des paroxystes ou des surréalistes, il n’en est pas une [école littéraire] qui ne nous frappe aujourd’hui par ses manies verbales. Il n’en est pas une non plus qui n’ait cru *se fonder contre tout verbalisme et tout procédé* – mais chacune d’elles commence par découvrir avec beaucoup d’énergie un objet: l’esprit, l’homme, la société, l’inconscient, que les écoles précédentes lui semblent avoir pris la tâche de dissimuler sous les mots. (Paulhan, *Les Fleurs de Tarbes, (ou La terreur dans les lettres)*, 1941: 86 (emphasis added). Language is the agent of this assimilability of the irreconcilable – language as the opposite of experience. The reflex involves a reversal of the role assigned to language – from barrier it becomes revelation of what it had previously served to hide.

⁹⁹ ‘Le souvenir déterminant’, op. cit. 113, 114, 117 (emphasis in original.) The importance of this text, and of the experience it describes, for the interpretation of Daumal’s own work and for the founding mythology of *Le Grand Jeu* has been noted by a number of commentators, including Powrie, Phil. *René Daumal, étude d’une obsession*. Geneva: Droz, 1990; Solmi, Serge. ‘Une expérience fondamentale.’ *Europe*, 782-783 (June-July 1994): 48-63 and Masui, Jacques. ‘Poésie et négation chez René Daumal.’ in *Hermès* ‘Le Vide (L’Expérience spirituelle en Occident et en Orient)’ 2 (nlle. série), 1981: 247-53. The intention here is to emphasise the unity the experience is thought to establish between the individual and the collective when both are taken to a certain extreme – their ‘common’ limit. See also on this point Briosi, Sandro. ‘Le «paradoxe» de la littérature et sa «solution» dans l’avant-garde’ in Briosi and Hillenaar (eds.) *Vitalité et contradiction de l’avant-garde (Italie-France 1909-1924)*. Paris: Corti, 1988: 51-58.

Rather than a predictable development towards a narcissistic ineffable, this ‘certitude’ opens the prospect of an alternative, silent history: “Ma certitude n’avait certes pas besoin de confirmations extérieures, mais bien plutôt c’est elle qui m’éclaira soudain le sens de toutes sortes de récits que d’autres hommes ont tenté de faire de la même révélation.” The account culminates by laying claim to this history with the exposition of the ‘certitude’ become a shared understanding. It is the commonality of this understanding which is recognised as the basis of ulterior developments within language, and of the promise they are thought to bear. The ‘certitude’, firstly of the order of ‘connaissance’, leads to a wordless ‘reconnaissance’:

[U]n troisième connut exactement la même réalité que moi, et il ne nous fallut qu’un regard échangé pour savoir que nous avions vu la même chose. C’était Roger Gilbert-Lecomte, avec qui je devais diriger la revue *Le Grand Jeu*, dont le ton de conviction profonde n’était que le reflet de notre certitude commune; et je suis persuadé que cette expérience déterminait sa vie comme elle déterminait la mienne, bien que dans un sens différent.¹⁰⁰

In according cardinal, foundational validity to experience independent of the language the subject brings to it, in making of it, as it were, the sole basis for possible convention, this position recalls the state that Agamben has termed *en-fance*, that is, a state of human existence or potential anterior and exterior to the subject-hood arising with the accession to speech and thus prior to the possibility of ‘history’ – the other term in that philosopher’s equation – which occurs irreparably beyond the experience of the ‘origin’ that, as we have seen, recurrently provides a rhetorical/intellectual orientation for poetic writing. The emergence from *en-fance* is, in other words, the initiation of the category of the subject as a vector of transcendence. Developing this philosophical argument with reference to Benveniste’s account of the personal pronouns (touched on in section 1 above), Agamben strongly emphasises the idea that this liminal position of *en-fance* is itself one which can only be approached from within the common space established by the linguistic convention:

¹⁰⁰ Ibid. 119.

[Si, suivant Benveniste, le 'sujet'] n'est rien d'autre que l'ombre projetée sur le système des indicateurs de l'élocution (comprenant non seulement les pronoms personnels, mais tous les autres termes qui organisent les relations spatiales et temporelles du sujet: ceci, ça, ici, maintenant, hier, demain, etc.), on comprend alors comment la représentation de la sphère transcendantale comme subjectivité, comme «je pense», se fonde en réalité sur une permutation entre le transcendantal et le linguistique. Le sujet transcendantal n'est autre que le «locuteur» [...] [S]i le sujet n'est que le locuteur, contrairement à ce que croyait Husserl nous n'atteindrons jamais dans le sujet le statut originel de l'expérience, «l'expérience pure et, pour ainsi dire, encore muette». La constitution du sujet dans et par le langage est bien plutôt l'expulsion même de cette expérience «muette»: autrement dit, elle est toujours déjà «parole». Loin d'être quelque chose de subjectif, une expérience originaire ne pourrait être alors que ce qui, chez l'homme, se trouve avant le sujet, c'est-à-dire avant le langage: une expérience «muette» au sens littéral du terme, une *en-fance* de l'homme, dont le langage devrait précisément marquer la limite.¹⁰¹

The communion of the *Phrères Simplistes*, the embryonic fellowship of the *Grand Jeu* mythology and the template of the idea of experience and true self that remains stable through Daumal's writings, make of the silent 'certitude commune' the central articulating fact of community and hence a generative principle of the poetics of impossibility developed in those writings. As such, it figures the passage from *en-fance* to *histoire* (Agamben) in a manner which is comparable to Segalen's distance from the South-Sea rituals which so fascinated him aesthetically, and which founds historical, linguistic action on that which, in the human consciousness, is inaccessible to it. Authentic *parole* is again dependent upon that to which it marks a limit. 'Certainty' derived in an equation of this nature, comparable to that of the religious mystic, yet established in its quality of being shared, enters language indirectly through its corollary in practice – that is, through the refusal of the status of reality to what is normally

¹⁰¹ Agamben, Giorgio. *Enfance et histoire* (tr. Yves Hersant). Paris: Payot, 1989: 60-61.

accredited as such. It becomes the certainty of the ubiquity of sleep, illusion. It distinguishes itself in language through a show of intensity, urgency, disquiet.

To approach an authentic personal subjectivity through language is magnified to the state of central 'political' gesture, because the thinkable quality of the unified subject (one hesitates to use the term 'individual') is the necessary model of the political-philosophical idea of the whole. Linking these two forms of aspiration to an absolute form of textual validity, in the interim where all textual work occurs, are the relations between the members of the group – not so much a question of literary sociability as the pseudo-anthropology of a group with its own founding myths, practices, leadership, and the ongoing conflict it experiences between the role of members as analysing (intellectual) and acting (integrated) entities. The subject is the microcosm to the 'whole's' macrocosm – the artistic community is what enables the sustaining of some belief in this equation, the founding extra-linguistic experience being the model of all imaginable relations, and is thus the matrix of the pure, revolutionary text.

The decision to go to the limit on each level, that of the subject and that of the collective, allows Daumal, chief polemicist of the group along with Gilbert-Lecomte, to found an exhilarating rhetorical persona upon a figure of austere and eclectic renunciation. The energy exuded by the writing in *Le Grand Jeu* is young and devastating. The two levels of group experience, inner and outer, silent and rhetorical, are revealed therein to be indissociable. Its programme is presented as a programme for living, with individual creativity as its most axiomatic component. The opening sentences of the *Avant-propos* convey this attitude and its mood well:

Le Grand Jeu est irrémédiable; il ne se joue qu'une fois. Nous voulons le jouer à tous les instants de notre vie. C'est encore à « qui perd gagne ». Car il s'agit de se perdre. Nous voulons gagner. Or, le Grand Jeu est un jeu de hasard, c'est-à-dire d'adresse, ou mieux de « grâce »: la grâce de Dieu, et la grâce des gestes.[...]

Attitude: il faut se mettre dans un état de réceptivité entière, pour cela être pur, avoir fait le vide en soi. *De là notre tendance à remettre tout en question à tous les instants.*¹⁰²

Whereas Segalen's accession to speech occurs in a play of formal elements gleaned in a world teetering on the brink of saturation, the mythical *en-fance* of the members of *Le Grand Jeu* – the mute experience which was to guide their common and several artistic outlooks – is entirely consonant with the historical sense of the *tabula rasa* at the time. Indeed, an understanding of *Le Grand Jeu* as an avant-garde group is facilitated by a realisation that the generation in which they emerge is characterised (already) by the absence of foundations to individual will and action. Having emerged from one great historical catastrophe we can situate it retrospectively on the cusp of another. In so doing we are in a position to notice many substantive motifs of the apocalyptic scene in the undergrowth. A recent memory of mass butchery, the collapse of institutional pieties and collective self-confidence, the disappointment of the faith in measured rational progress through science and industry had all left the generation of 1925 in the position of having to assume a new set of criteria and objectives for the invention of the post-war world and its values, faced with the overwhelming evidence of the vicious nature of its own cultural past. Benjamin Crémieux in an article from the beginning of that year compares the basic difficulties with those of their counterparts at other major times of rebuilding in French history such as the post-revolutionary and Napoleonic era of a century previously. Both generations encountered this task of rebuilding on all levels:

Ils ont grandi au son du canon; ils n'ont trouvé en arrivant à l'âge d'homme que les ruines du régime ancien et l'ébauche indécise et menacée d'un régime nouveau. Il leur appartient d'instaurer l'ordre nécessaire.

But in the turbulent century between 1825 and 1925 a metaphysical Rubicon had been crossed. Whereas the earlier reflection could rely upon the figure of the individual

¹⁰² 'Avant-propos au Grand Jeu', *Le Grand Jeu* I, Été 1928 (emphasis in original.)

subject, albeit in a hostile environment, the later generation were in general required to begin within the question, or option, of existence itself.

Le désarroi de 1925 est bien autrement plus grave et profond, il s'agit avant tout pour les jeunes gens d'aujourd'hui de trouver des raisons profondes de vivre, de retrouver le sens de l'être [...]

Puisque aucune réalité ne s'impose plus par la force de la tradition ou par celle de la novation, puisque toutes les réalités sont aujourd'hui possibles, le problème du choix est le premier qui se pose [...].¹⁰³

The register on which that problem of choice is played out, and the privileged position of the homonym in the equation, are gleaned from other, contemporaneous remarks by Crémieux, reviewing the literary year immediately preceding: “Le fait essentiel de l’année 1924 semble être la prédilection de la jeunesse littéraire 1) pour la poésie pure 2) pour la spéculation philosophique 3) pour le mysticisme 4) pour les problèmes moraux.”¹⁰⁴ In a post-war essay on Lautréamont¹⁰⁵ (another figure, like Rimbaud and Nerval, whose time came in the inter-war years) Julien Gracq develops this theme of the rejection of the dominant social values in the name of totality as a cardinal literary value. But he does so in a manner which renders intelligible the conflation in the rhetoric of *Le Grand Jeu* of negativity, totality and the fullest imaginable realisation of self. Gracq, whose own beginnings date from around this time, writes of the discovery of that author as the capital event, or anti-event, in the history of French literature. Running counter to the “voie royale” of that literature, bathed in the celebrated clarity of the national genius – one engendered *per* Gracq in the reason or the “rationnel” of an ascendant “bourgeoisie marchande” – is an insistence, generally barely discernible, on, as he puts it, “la nécessité d’une conquête de l’irrationnel, dépouillé de ses tabous et oripeaux sacrés; conquête faite

¹⁰³ Crémieux ‘Examens de conscience’ (1925), cited from Daumal. *Tu t’es toujours trompé*. Paris: Mercure de France, 1970, where it is reproduced in an annex under the heading ‘Le Désarroi de la jeunesse intellectuelle française en 1925’: 247-58, 248-49.

¹⁰⁴ Crémieux. ‘L’année littéraire 1924’ (Les Nouvelles littéraires, 3 January 1925), cited in Bandier, Norbert. *Sociologie du surréalisme*. Paris: Éditions La Dispute, 1999: 198.

¹⁰⁵ Paris: Editions de la Parque, 1947. Reproduced in Lautréamont/Ducasse. *Œuvres complètes*. Paris: José Corti, 1953: 67-86.

en commun et parallèle à l'affranchissement social collectif.”¹⁰⁶ Whereas for the entire length of the long age of reason, which begins, in France, in the 16th Century, there is a refusal on all sides to admit fully “l’avantage qu’il y avait à mettre de son côté les *forces obscures*. Le *grand jeu* par une espèce d’accord tacite, n’a peut-être jamais été joué.” And as an instance of what this generic ‘grand jeu’ might represent Gracq appropriates an example from outside literature, one emblematic of the ‘revolutionary’ ethic *per se*:

Ce qui donne à la figure de Robespierre ce rayonnement sans égal, c’est qu’il a été le seul à en comprendre la nécessité, à vouloir par un coup de barre d’une hardiesse inégalée « récrire au bien » ce que des siècles de luttes terribles avaient écrit au mal, sans pouvoir le frapper de caducité pour autant. Robespierre a voulu que dans la Révolution qu’il rêvait, pût entrer l’homme *complet*, avec armes et bagages, qu’il pût s’y accroître et s’y développer *dans tous les sens*, dût-on même lui laisser pour hochet provisoire un dieu à qui par ailleurs les hommes de 1793 s’entendaient de la bonne manière à arracher les crocs les plus venimeux.¹⁰⁷

The territory of the literary is therefore occupied through a stance which makes little of literature as an autonomous, unconnected practice. Purity of intent becomes synonymous with totality of ambition. In this construction of totality an intriguing balance between Enlightenment ambition and the ‘obscure’ pessimism of a later time comes to the fore. The ambition of Daumal, Gilbert-Lecomte and their companions remained openly social in that it was of a kind which did not hesitate to point the finger, to engage in strategies of excommunication and denunciation. The logic of radicalisation intelligible in this practice embodies much of what we have attempted to define as the utopian dynamic, as an imperative towards the constant rejection of standard or ‘legitimate’ positions in the field of debate. This logic could be interpreted, if one accepts the principle of such a reading, in terms of a dominated entry – to adopt a consecrated terminology¹⁰⁸ – into the relevant sociological field (literary, or more broadly intellectual) : ‘Qui perd gagne. Car il s’agit de se perdre. Nous voulons gagner.’ To lose oneself totally thus becomes a way, in

¹⁰⁶ Ibid. 70-71 (emphasis in original.)

¹⁰⁷ Ibid. 72 (emphasis in original.)

¹⁰⁸ See Bourdieu, Pierre. *Les règles de l’art*, op. cit. and Bandier, op.cit.

the inexorable logic of the discourse, of ‘winning’, rejoining oneself in the absolute (and here the shadow of the ‘homme complet’ looms large) but it is a strategy that is nothing less than arduous in a field where Surrealism and its epiphenomena have been assembled about the purifying virtues of the ‘geste balayeur’ – verbal or otherwise¹⁰⁹.

Such an impeccably antagonistic stance as that developed by *Le Grand Jeu* in its search for foundation did not take long to get noticed. The sociologically key event of Daumal’s exchange of fire with André Breton serves as an exposition of the very idea of the group as a means to poetic foundation. In the *Second Manifeste du Surréalisme* of 1930, having settled outstanding scores, repaid the treacheries of assorted former companions (including Artaud and Desnos) and exhorted others back to the straight and narrow of authentic surrealist action, Breton names Daumal (whom he implicitly takes to be the group’s leader) as the only figure on the intellectual horizon with whom it might be possible to exchange “un signe d’intelligence.”¹¹⁰ Daumal should give up the distinguishing label, obey the sense of his own writings in *Le Grand Jeu* and integrate the Surrealist church. The addressee’s response, in the *Lettre Ouverte à André Breton sur les rapports du surréalisme et du Grand Jeu*¹¹¹, provides a model of socio-literary self-assertion. Separation is not deemed necessary out of political difference – Daumal reiterates “notre accord avec vous sur les principes d’une action révolutionnaire”, which he institutionalises with references to Marxism and the principles of the Third International. The Surrealists however are characterised as disorganised and disunited and this is contrasted with “l’unité du *Grand Jeu*.” The *Grand Jeu* is, moreover, better equipped in its choice of practices and interests towards that declared shared end of revolution :

Nous avons, pour répondre à votre *science amusante*, l’étude de tous les procédés de dépersonnalisation, de transposition de conscience, de voyance, de médiumnité; nous avons le champ illimité (dans toutes les directions mentales possibles) des

¹⁰⁹ See on this point Kaufmann, Vincent. *Poétique des groupes littéraires*, op. cit. and Bandier, op.cit.

¹¹⁰ Breton, André. ‘Second Manifeste du Surréalisme’ in *Manifestes du Surréalisme*. Paris: Gallimard (Folio essais), 1985: 61-137, 122.

¹¹¹ *Le Grand Jeu* III, Automne 1930: 76-83

yogas hindous, la confrontation systématique du fait lyrique et du fait onirique avec les enseignements de la tradition occulte (mais au *diable* le *pittoresque* de la magie) et ceux de la mentalité dite primitive ... et ce n'est pas fini.¹¹²

Beyond the bravado of the *enfant terrible* returning fire on the cardinal figure of the anti-establishment and appropriating his credibility in the process, this response to Breton is the first instance to hand of Daumal positioning himself, albeit as part of a group, in terms of both his means and his objectives in the literary and broader intellectual fields as constituted at that moment. What these means and objectives state plainly in a public language is the intolerable nature of the *hic* (*Occident*) and the *nunc* (by implication a pre-revolutionary period of sorts.) The revolutionary transformation towards which group activity is oriented has a number of distinct practices and techniques at its disposal ('procédés de dépersonnalisation', 'les yogas hindous'¹¹³ etc.) and it is these which enable Daumal to remodel the basic poetic glossary of 'revolution' in a manner which greatly enhances its potential for uniting political and social provocation with a literary practice. Thus, taking possession of the aporetic term, the *Grand Jeu* is involved in a "course au *réel* (que vous nommez pauvrement, pour ce que vous en présentez, le *surréal*.)" The consequences of this reversal (*réel* and *surréal*, although ostensibly varieties of shorthand for the same political and artistic ideals, are given opposite weightings through their rhetorical juxtaposition) "sont bien autrement terribles et *concrètes* que vos exercices dialectiques et pseudo-pythiques."¹¹⁴

Daumal's response to Breton at the same time embodies a number of points recurring throughout his 'career' as a writer and does so in a format which arguably makes discussion of his work in terms of a poetic project thinkable. Firstly there is the social, political or at least public backdrop to the text which situates the younger writer as one

¹¹² Ibid. 79 (emphasis in original.)

¹¹³ Institutionality is the great double-edged question at the heart of these appropriations. A letter to André Rolland de Rénéville from February 1932 (*Correspondance II*. Paris: Gallimard, 1993: 261-68), with the group entering the phase of its dissolution, discusses the Roman Catholic Eucharist – exhibiting both a total rejection of the Church as an institution and the aspiration to goals profoundly comparable to those of what it constructs as the original state of that particular sacrament.

¹¹⁴ Ibid. 81 (emphasis in original.)

struggling towards a supreme political-historical goal, 'revolution', with a vocabulary which is otherwise one of disengagement with the social, political and historical contexts.

Secondly, the intellectual or literary activity which would have itself political condemns the here and now for its unreality, its maintenance of the alienation of the subject from the real. This activity paradoxically aims to attain the 'real' via a set of practices which are esoteric or exotic – that is, whose principal feature is their difficulty of acquisition or access. The real is not discoverable with the tools available to or chosen by the other participants in the debate let alone the inhabitants of the bourgeois or unrelievedly proletarian worlds. Hegel's dialectical materialism, via which Daumal makes a conciliatory gesture, is brought to its pure ends by those who have acquired an understanding of the self outside the Western tradition. There is thus, as with Segalen, something of an archaic turn to be discerned in the strategies of the *Grand Jeu*, its own discursive authenticity being postulated on its choice of and access to real cultural precedent for its pursuit of 'revolutionary' action (that is, its arguments for the extended effects of its restricted action.) The unmistakably messianic trait of the reversibility of *origine* and *à-venir* is observable in the move from the 'historical' of established traditions to the non-historical time of the esoteric.¹¹⁵

Thirdly, the paradigm for the attainment of reality and of the concrete is the written word. Daumal's abiding focus will continue to be on the relation between the *réel* (his 'réel') and language – not in terms of a problem of reference and a putative referential relation, but in those of the relation between knowledge and communication (and the transformational effect of the successful communicative act on the intimate status of

¹¹⁵ As Agamben contrasts both the 'historical' of the individual assumption of speech with the 'en-fance' that silently precedes it, and the 'literary' with the 'mythological' utterance, Walter Benjamin (in remarks upon a reading of Bloch's *Geist der Utopie*) establishes a dichotomy between 'historic' and 'messianic' time: "Erst der Messias selbst vollendet alles historische Geschehen, und zwar in dem Sinne, daß er dessen Beziehung auf das Messianische selbst erst erlöst, vollendet, schafft. Darum kann nichts Historisches von sich aus sich auf Messianisches beziehen wollen. Darum ist das Reich Gottes nicht das Telos der historischen Dynamis; es kann nicht zum Ziel gesetzt werden. Historisch gesehen ist er nicht Ziel, sondern Ende." Benjamin goes on to identify the 'messianic' with 'nature' "Denn messianisch ist die Natur aus ihrer ewigen und totalen Vergängnis." 'Theologisch-politisches Fragment' in Benjamin, Walter. *Illuminationen. Ausgewählte Schriften I*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1977: 262-63, 262.

knowledge). Linking the fascination of the *réel* with the problem of effective communication leads naturally to the question of a textual re-presencing and ultimately to a poetics of transmission. This is so despite the existence, as has been mentioned, in the cultural conditions from which the group emerged, of an aggravated sense in those coming of age of being in a position where all previous stances are in a state both of radical discredit and *de facto* occupation of the public space. The basic hostility of the *Grand Jeu* to language is as it is seen to collaborate with the ambient ‘modern’ consciousness, or lack of it. The standard accession to language is understood to initiate the fall into self-alienation, a falsely reassuring discursivity (‘bavardage’ is the dismissive term favoured by Daumal) which establishes a parody of the subject in a series of positive representations. To this ubiquitous practice of delusion Daumal and his associates logically oppose a posture of total negation, at once metaphysical and political, subjective and collective. Thus having named ‘LE CASSE-DOGME’ as their principle of separation/purity, and announced that “...Le *Grand Jeu* est entièrement et systématiquement destructeur...”, Daumal and Gilbert-Lecomte continue:

Ce qui jaillira de ce beau massacre pourrait bien être plus réel et tangible qu’on ne croit, une statue du vide qui se met en marche, bloc de lumière pleine. Une lumière inconnue trouera les fronts, ouvrant un nouvel œil mortel, une lumière unique, celle qui signifie: «non!»; s’il est vrai que nier absolument le particulier, c’est affirmer l’universel, ces deux points de vue sur le même acte étant aussi vrais l’un que l’autre, puisqu’ils sont pris sur la même réalité.¹¹⁶

This passably questionable thinking finds itself at the heart of Daumal’s attempt to rethink the poetic act. The principle of negation, as exposed in the important poetic-theoretical tract *Clavicules d’un Grand Jeu poétique* (1929), is depicted as operating the passage between personal and communal levels, in which the value of the ‘poetic’ is reserved for that imaginary point of resolution where the process of negation culminates in the realisation of something of the order of a general fusion. The deeply messianic quality of this writing is counterbalanced by the writer’s appended commentary (a textual

¹¹⁶ *Le Grand Jeu* II, op. cit. 2.

strategy Daumal shares with Segalen), which already points to that obverse of the poetics of the absolute which is the poetics of failure, alternating exalted and dispassionate styles:

Plaçant ton œil suprême au zénith, regarde,

Prononçant du zénith ton JE suprême:

jaillie de la pure vision, la lumière brille.

[...]

Parole condensant toute lumière, Parole encore non parlée, contenant toute vérité,

Parole encore souffrant d'être muette – comme le hurlement silencieux entre les mâchoires paralysées du tétanique.

Toujours sur le point d'être prononcée, cette Évidence est la Parole unique et suprême, qui n'est jamais dite, mais qui se cache derrière les mots des poètes et les soutient. Si le Poète prononçait ce mot, le monde entier serait son Poème; il aurait anéanti le monde en le recréant en soi.¹¹⁷

The *Clavicules* appear at the beginning of Daumal's one published book of poetry, *Le Contre-Ciel*¹¹⁸, a work for which this depiction of a stand-off between the absolute and language already provides the limit scenario. The theoretical intelligence precedes and arguably usurps the work of poetic writing. As Philip Powrie remarks: "Chaque poème est [...] une répétition de l'expérience fondamentale, mais chaque poème sera aussi une tentative de revivre cette expérience non sur le mode de fatalité, mais de libération. Évidemment, chaque poème sera aussi un échec, car l'«absolue Parole-non-parlée qui est le sens véritable du poème» ne peut jamais être exprimée. [...] *Il n'y a aucun exemple de fusion dans la poésie de Daumal*. Sa poésie est avant tout une poésie de l'anticipation et de l'échec."¹¹⁹

¹¹⁷ 'Clavicules d'un Grand Jeu poétique' in *Le Contre-Ciel suivi de Les dernières paroles du poète*, Paris, Gallimard, 1970: 23-53, 40-41 (indented passage is 'commentary'.)

¹¹⁸ Though written in the main between 1928 and 1930 the original edition of *Le Contre-Ciel* was not published, pruned of half of its original contents, until 1936 – by which time the work was being presented by Daumal, in his introductory remarks, as "des coups de soupape en attendant mieux" (op. cit. 22.) It is proposed to consider the texts of the poems in greater detail in Part III.

¹¹⁹ Powrie, Phil. *René Daumal, étude d'une obsession*, op. cit. 38 (emphasis in original.) The quotation of Daumal given by Powrie is from the commentary component to section 24 of the *Clavicules*, op. cit. 44.

The topos of a revolutionary accession to speech of this fusional order persists, however, in Daumal's writing long after the positions and manner of *Le Grand Jeu* have become untenable in his eyes. While the group mythology disintegrates, the spectre of the origin remains – and its unifying properties become generalised beyond any intermediate group-based dynamic. The later Daumal is characterised by a coupling of greater theoretical scepticism with more specific philological and literary practice in respect of the question of a fully-realised poetics of 'integrity'. The imagining of communication as only partially verbal, as the achievement of a fully reciprocal adhesion in the receiver through an engagement of the unified human faculty, which Daumal terms 'l'être réel', dominates major essays such as *Les limites du langage philosophique* (1935). But this 'être', if it is in some way the essence of the individual speaker is, for Daumal, more importantly that which remains, as if by definition, uncreated in conventional accessions to speech – thus an essence, as it were, to come:

[L']être réel, qui à la fois pense, sent et agit; l'être qui fait, ou plutôt qui devrait faire l'unité de ces trois fonctions de la vie humaine [savoir, sentir, agir] [...] Ce centre de l'être, aucune discipline verbale ne peut le réveiller. Mais s'il vient à briller, ou si seulement il commence à faire sentir au fond d'un individu la tenace démangeaison du vouloir être, il éclaire d'une nouvelle flamme tous les langages.¹²⁰

What is imaginable, even in the imposed silence of the drug-induced revelation, is what, in Daumal's intellectual temperament, must be achieved in the paucity of the written page. Universal possibility is extrapolated, via the poetic text, out of the telos of one man's intimate conviction. Rather than theorise communication in terms of an incompleteness of the subject, as does for example Bataille¹²¹, the lack of self-presence in

¹²⁰ 'Les limites du langage philosophique et les savoirs traditionnels' in *Les pouvoirs de la parole*, op. cit. 9-32, 10-11.

¹²¹ "Dans la mesure où les êtres semblent parfaits, ils demeurent isolés, refermés sur eux-mêmes. Mais la blessure de l'inachèvement les ouvre. Par ce qu'on peut nommer inachèvement, animale nudité, blessure, les divers êtres séparés *communiquent*, prennent vie en se perdant dans la *communication* de l'un à l'autre." Bataille. *Le Coupable*. Paris: Gallimard, 1961: 46 (emphasis in original.)

communicating subjects is for Daumal what confounds communication of the order he continues to demand it attain in poetry – making the truly ‘poetic’ work both unattainable and necessary. In other words, despite all his emphasis on practice, Daumal’s tendency is idealist to no small degree.

We might therefore be justified in attributing to the Daumal of *Le Grand Jeu* a genuinely extreme sense of poetry as the locus of an impossible realisation of self and community, which in its actual practice is rather a reflection on and justification of the necessity of the unrealisable. This is a logical structure which remains with the poet long after the demise of the initial group experience. Why an adequate poetic achievement is unrealisable is a question the post-*Grand Jeu* Daumal constructs around two orders of practical experience: firstly that of physical movement and reflection on the body engaged in under the guidance of de Salzmann; secondly that of the study of Hindu poetics and the Sanskrit language, also seriously begun at around the time of the dissolution of the collective artistic venture. The modern language in which speech must occur is in this context presented as doubly incapacitated, firstly by the attempt to pit it against the greatly enhanced sense of self-awareness and physical mastery induced in the practice of meditation and movement exercises, and in the second case by comparison with the abundance, complexity and precision of the grammatical and poetic distinctions developed in the radically distant other language.

The vast conventional repertory of Sanskrit poetics provide a horizon of achievement to Daumal, one of which through the practice of translation, he takes cognisance, but which is unattainable as *parole*. The essays collected in *Bharata*¹²² demonstrate a scholarship which betrays a fascination with the unattainable, good, quasi-magical convention of the distant grammatical and poetic traditions (their inseparable qualities reinforcing the idea that an exemplary poetry grows out of natural speech.) They thus indirectly act as a further negative reflection on the state of the contemporary community in language – that is, isolation from others and alienation from self through those pitfalls already enumerated: the inessential, the bad convention, the readiness of the mind to fall into

¹²² Daumal. *Bharata. L'Origine du théâtre, la poésie et la musique en Inde*. Paris: Gallimard, 1970.

automatism – the generalised forces of intellectual and spiritual ‘sommeil’: themes which occasionally give Daumal the air of a twentieth-century descendant of Pascal, bringing a Jansenist feel for the tragic of language to relatively esoteric domains.

It is indeed as if what is envisaged is a sea-change in the relation of language to the speaker – one which could be crystallised in the contrast between the good convention of the Sanskrit tradition, and the constant awareness in Daumal of the modern tendency of language to trap its source in the tissue of convention laid down in speech. The two-sidedness of language – its role in the construction of self and its eventuality as a transformational instrument in relation to others, is already of central importance in an essay written at the age of 18 under the title *La révolte et l'ironie*. A defining feature of Daumal's apprehension of language, this two-sidedness is recognised as tragic, even if risibly so, in its manifestations. One of these is the practice of the *serment*, the oath or solemn assertion in the presence of others the object of which is to affirm the subject by describing ‘it’ (him or her). This linguistic activity gradually brings about the imprisonment of the one who asserts inside the physical web of its constructive assertion, the now irretrievably caricatural corpus of its own flesh and blood:

Le serment gèle, et non seulement les pensées, mais le visage même et tout le corps. Les caricaturistes aiment ces faces et ces démarches de militaires énergiques, d'instituteurs austères, ou de puritains rigides; mais ceux-ci gravent eux-mêmes, et de plus en plus profondément à même qu'ils vieillissent, dans leurs corps leurs propres caricatures.¹²³

Daumal's understanding of language as being of direct physical effect, as a practice whereby the body-mind complex is shaped and potentially set in a stilted representation of its ill- or un-formulated intuitions, is one factor inclining him towards a description of himself as striving towards the real or the concrete, and to signify by these terms the rough opposite of what common sense (that ultimate departure from the *réel*) would have

¹²³ Daumal. ‘La révolte et l'ironie’ in *L'Évidence absurde, essais et notes I*, Paris: Gallimard, 1972. 99-142, 140.

them mean. This argument, developed in the discursive and overtly social forms of the essay and the *lettre ouverte*, paradoxically exemplifies his deep suspicion of institution. Conventional codes represent a brake on language and thereby the further distancing of the subject from that other world towards which it is the mission of revolutionary language to tend. But language itself is experienced as the institution par excellence, and ineluctably so even when functioning as meta-institutional, even as the value of the accession to speech as the ultimate gauge of the realised self is maintained – thus splitting Daumal's attempts to achieve a consolidated view of the poetic act between a philosophy of the logos as marginal to the experience or practice it is attempted to relate on the one hand and a set of values or programmatic imperatives bordering on the logolatrous, on the other. By this maintenance the experience of the subject in the modern world continues to be painfully degraded, most of all by a surfeit of sectional languages all presenting totalising claims to explicative truth. The 'intellectual', the one who joins the discussion, is especially prone in the long run to a fate of caricature, an inconsequent settling and thickening in the sleep of vitality, through adherence to a language which has generated its own rationality.

In this respect *La Grande Beuverie* (1937) which presents the modern world as a competitive cacophony of such mutually-ignorant and ultimately ridiculous discourses, marks a break in Daumal's thinking between the goal of communication and the practice of intermediate forms of totalising community. In the foreword to *La Grande Beuverie*, Daumal contrasts the possible expression of any 'pensée claire' ("Je nie qu'une pensée claire puisse être indicible"), and the apparent inability of existing languages as they are used (that is, as discourses which he calls alternatively 'langages' or 'langues') to achieve that goal. Expression here is described clearly in terms of a goal of transmission (between 'locuteur' and 'auditeur'). But the vital conditions of a 'langage clair' are extra-linguistic: "Il faut [...] entre les interlocuteurs une expérience commune de la chose dont il est parlé." This might serve as a communicative model, but the overriding condition for a *langage clair* is "qu'il ait un but et une nécessité":

Autrement de langage on tombe en parlage, de parlage en bavardage, de bavardage en confusion. Dans cette confusion des langues, les hommes, même s'ils ont des expériences communes, n'ont pas de langue pour en échanger les fruits.¹²⁴

Thus to speak one's thought (*dire sa pensée*) is not solely a matter of the transmission of information which the receiver might in turn think he has 'understood'. The experiential dimension of the communication as well as its purpose are central to the reception of information as knowledge. For language to fulfil what we normally encounter as its pretence to convey knowledge, it must be used in full harmony with the material and psychological environment of the communicative situation. But the *beuverie* is cacophony. The tale itself recounts the growing stupor of one bombarded with discourses which mistakenly presuppose their own transparency. Having passed among the exponents of each theory, doctrine or -ism, and conscious of the sought-after form of speech being only further distanced by adhesion to one or other language game, Daumal concludes a work which has incessantly lampooned and belittled the languages of groups rivalling for temporal supremacy and the blinkered perspectives on the world into which their adherents slide, with a foreshortened conversation. Relief from the world of talk, following assurances that everybody has got it wrong, comes in the dispersion of the interlocutors about their business: "Nous nous levâmes tous, car il y avait pour chacun de nous plusieurs choses urgentes à faire. Il y avait beaucoup de choses à faire pour vivre."¹²⁵

It would be tempting to read this silent end to a quest through contending ways of talking as Daumal's version of Voltaire's injunction on occupying oneself with the garden – an 'il faut se taire et vivre' in a garden of authentic visceral self-immediacy, the *concret* and the *réel* being extralinguistic in any liveable sense – were it not for the programmatic admonitions of the foreword. What the narrative actually does is to aggravate the sense of authentic speech as absent from the discursive realm, as conquerable only in and as

¹²⁴ *La Grande Beuverie*. Paris: Gallimard, 1966: 8.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.* 170.

against silence. But as such, it is a critique without counter-examples, the construction of which, as we have seen Powrie remark, is the abiding impossibility of Daumal's literary work. An impossibility gradually adopted as an ethic in itself. In a letter referring to comments of a reader on *La Grande Beuverie* five years after its publication he can thus counter:

Voulez-vous dire que j'ai alors placé l'art, la science, l'amour, etc., trop haut, à une hauteur inaccessible? Je soutiens qu'on ne saurait les mettre trop haut, et ce n'est pas trop demander à l'homme que l'impossible.¹²⁶

This embrace of impossibility, resulting on the one hand in renewed versions of the poetic act to come, results on the other in the depiction of the failed communal gesture of the poet, most notably in *Les dernières paroles du poète* (1936)¹²⁷. The social imaginary represented by this text, the power it assigns to what a poetic speech should be, remain consonant with the most extreme projections of self of the *Grand Jeu* type. ("J'ai l'absolue certitude qu'une expression adéquate jusqu'à la limite de ma pensée entraînerait infailliblement l'adhésion immédiate et universelle."¹²⁸) But messianic performance is seen to have been supplanted by the understanding of poetic activity as practice or approach. Failure ritualised in an almost parabolic language seems to be accepted as the closest valid attempt at a poetic practice. It would be possible to read the text as a satire of poetic ambition, a denigration of its excessive calls upon a certain will to believe. But one could equally speak, in a way that is in no sense derogatory, of an assumed poetics of failure, or of a *poésie ratée* – which is so precisely because of the severe demands of truth telling which ground its failure to perform.

The night before his execution is spent by Daumal's *poète raté* in a kind of mock-Claudelien isolation, occupied in repetition of the question "Que dirai-je ?" In the midst of this doubt he affirms: "Je n'ai qu'un mot à dire, un mot aussi réel que la corde qui me

¹²⁶ Letter to Christine Lorient de la Salle (dated 6 December 1942), *Correspondance III*. Paris: Gallimard, 1994: 327.

¹²⁷ In *Le Contre-Ciel suivi de Les dernières paroles du poète*, op. cit. 191-97.

¹²⁸ Gilbert-Lecomte. *Testament*. Paris: Gallimard, 137.

pendra.” This is the word which will purify the world, rectify injustice, banish instantly “les fantômes et les vampires et tous les voleurs de paroles, les tricheurs au jeu de la vie, les spéculateurs de la mort.”¹²⁹ The poet knows that the word exists but does not know how to progress beyond talking about it. This is the word that can save him, that will literally allow him to live, by unlocking the potential he senses in all things. At the same time, its salutary properties are projected onto the indistinct mass of the people, recalling the political dimension of the metaphysics of Daumal’s earlier writings.¹³⁰ The indecision lasts until the moment when the poet can actually feel “le chatouillement du chanvre” around his neck:

Et alors, au dernier moment, la parole éclata par sa bouche, vociférant :

Aux armes ! A vos fourches, à vos couteaux,

A vos cailloux, à vos manteaux,

vous êtes mille, vous êtes forts,

délivrez-vous! délivrez-moi !

je veux vivre, vivez avec moi !

tuez à coups de faux, tuez à coups de pierres !

Faites que je vive et moi, je vous ferai retrouver la parole !

[...]

Mais ce fut son premier et son dernier poème.¹³¹

Just as they emerge from an experience of presence and exaltation, then, the poetics of impossibility are never far from the experience of despair. This first and last of all poems is a commentary on what the powers of poetry could be. It is also the performative which would make of the one who speaks it a poet. Here it is death that represents the failure which continuing to live had signified elsewhere. But the poet is killed by those to whom he promises to restore speech. The failure of the poet is consummated by those with no

¹²⁹ Op. cit. 195

¹³⁰ See the links developed by Daumal between class theory and his ‘théorie de l’éveil’ in the early part of the section titled ‘L’intuition métaphysique dans l’histoire’ in *Tu t’es toujours trompé*, op. cit. 75-c.85. See also Pasquier, Pierre. ‘L’Armoire aux masques ou La Poétique de René Daumal’ in *René Daumal ou le retour à soi*. Paris: L’Originel, 1981: 205-84.

¹³¹ Op. cit. 197.

awareness of this potential for speech dormant within themselves. For Daumal the social and the autonomous (if never asocial) aspects of the poet's work were at all stages in his intellectual development inseparable, the poem as *parole* coming into being at the moment of its adequate reception: "Celui qui parle est le père, celui qui écoute est la mère, le poème est leur enfant." ¹³²

Les dernières paroles du poète, in spite of or perhaps even in consonance with its title, marks a transition to the 'poetic' texts of the last period of Daumal's life which pit clearly the universal demands of a sustained belief in this 'poésie' with a new willingness to acknowledge the condition of the speaker as unknowing. *Poésie noire et poésie blanche*¹³³ captures the scope and tone of Daumal's theoretical ambition at this time in a manner reminiscent of earlier statements. The consideration of what at once makes such theorisations possible and yet renders them asymptotic – if it is possible to domesticate to present considerations the term that Daumal found in that same period to describe his 'souvenir déterminant' – focuses ever more centrally on an idea of humanness as ultimate subject of, and the quality lived out in this conflict. That humanness comes across as a solar version of Gracq's 'homme complet' – the view of the poetic aspiration takes on the character of an integrated engagement of the subject. This eternal discipline involves, to interfere with the terms of the new daumalian illustration, the judicious and stringent intervention of a poetic super-ego, 'poetry' becoming in the text of 1941 (as *poésie blanche*) the vector of a personal asceticism within a renewed perspective of revelation:

Tout poème naît d'un germe, d'abord obscur, qu'il faut rendre lumineux pour qu'il produise des fruits de lumière. [...] Pour le faire briller, il faut faire silence, car ce germe, c'est la Chose-à-dire elle-même, l'émotion centrale qui à travers toute ma machine veut s'exprimer. [...] Silence donc, la machine! Fonctionne et tais-toi! Silence aux jeux de mots, aux vers mémorisés, aux souvenirs fortuitement assemblés, silence à l'ambition, au désir de briller – car la lumière seule brille par elle-même – , silence à la flatterie de soi, à la pitié de soi, silence

¹³² Ibid. 193.

¹³³ In *Le Contre-Ciel suivi de Les dernières paroles du poète*, op. cit. 183-90.

au coq qui croit faire lever le soleil! [...] La Chose-à-dire apparaît alors, au plus intime de soi, comme une certitude éternelle – connue, reconnue et espérée en même temps – , un point lumineux contenant l’immensité du désir d’être.¹³⁴

Daumal’s insistence upon the apocalyptic clarity of the *Chose-à-dire*, the attainment of being through the accession of the ‘désir d’être’ to speech, as it were, via the subject, accentuates the contrast between the relative obscurity of the poetic production of his *Grand Jeu* phase – his “productions lyricoïdes d’adolescence”¹³⁵ as he calls it in his later correspondence – and the utter simplicity, directness, justness of the thing theorised as “poetically” spoken – an effect of limpidity one can more readily associate with his best prose work than with his poetic writing. That the self-evidence of this poetic speech would be apparent to subjects other than the speaker is entirely consonant with the fantasy of the magical subjugation of the addressee of poetic speech visible in *Les dernières paroles du poète*. The specifically ‘poetic’ force of the written *Chose-à-dire* is thus the imagined release of all that which, *a priori* without form, is obscurely felt to tend towards formal release by the subject. The fact of its attainment to written form, its foundation as poetic speech, is, in the final analysis, inseparable from the adhesion of all in the presence of such speech to what it is thought to represent, “l’immensité du désir d’être”, even as the activity and medium of writing are experienced as alienation from this reconciled state of ‘being’.

5. Poetic foundation as the assumption of language. Yves Bonnefoy.

In his move from a lyrical distress to a ‘poetic’ silence, it might be possible to think of Daumal as one who, through an unbounded ‘vouloir-dire’, brought the logic of poetic foundation as that of the optimally-communicative act in language to an impasse of sorts. The poet’s mature position hovers around the impossible convention as necessarily arising within the accession to speech, no matter how theoretical this horizon actually remains. Despite his abiding sympathies with Artaud – notably, his inability to reconcile

¹³⁴ Ibid. 188.

himself with the ‘structure de vol’ of the accession to speech, corollary to his engagement with ‘experience’ as pre-linguistic – this mature position runs up against silence precisely because of a refusal to dispense with the linguistic moment in spite of all, within the experience of the subject, which seems unattainable to the utterance. Viewed from within that silence, language, if one is to have recourse to it, must aspire not only to saying ‘something’, but to an exhaustive adequacy to its intended object, its originating subject. In this complete rejection of the idea of a poetry of play, with as its limit a ‘vouloir-ne-rien-dire’, Daumal prefigures something of the programmatic line, if very little of the actual style or tone, of a subsequent poetry emerging in the years after World War Two. Within a given of disenchantment, where it was attempted to confront and rethink the problem of accession to poetic speech in a generalised turn away both from all millennial collective horizons, as well as from all fantasies of an absolute power of the speaking subject, Yves Bonnefoy has over time acquired the status of a major figure.

Segalen and Daumal, we have seen, attempt each in their own way to displace the ‘historical’ accession to speech of poetic foundation into the domain of mythical, or even messianic, time. It is possible, in contrast, to think of Bonnefoy’s originating problem as the inadmissibility of a ‘messianic’ position. Language dramatises the question of its own overcoming in the direction of ‘what is’: the figure of this overcoming is recognised as a central, unavoidable, and unavoidably linguistic, solicitation of the subject in experience. Insofar as poetic writing remains the approach of a liminal or original silence, a mute experience, this experience, as in the reasoning of Agamben cited above, can no longer be objectified in an unsupplemented state. Encounter and community no longer relate to a pre-‘historical’ scenario, the rousseauism of an impossible regression/restoration, but are wrought in the present from the potentially deadening mass of words. What is latent or unaccented in the founding concerns of Segalen and Daumal, that is, the quasi-existential commitment to the medium of the linguistic in its imperfection, is brought to the forefront of the reflection on poetry in this approach to the problem of foundation. The poetic accession to speech condenses the ever-present challenge of the avoidance of alienation within language in the overcoming of solitude. Rather than the basis of

¹³⁵ Letter (dated 2 April 1942) to Georges Ribemont-Dessaignes. *Correspondance III*, op. cit. 266.

community, the hypothetical originating silence of subjective communion is that virtuality against which – as a matter of human will – ‘community’ as an affair of the present, even in its minimal form of an imaginable inter-subjective relation, must be attained through language.

Indissociable from the fallen sense of language as a *passage obligé* is, clearly, an aggravated sense of language’s amenability to a logic of its own – that is, as a vehicle for group or individual narcissism rather than a modality of other-oriented action. The nexus of a critique of the understood secondarity of discourse to the real lies in the ongoing interface of the subject and the world. Experience is what reveals the pitfalls of the accession to speech. The re-authentication of poetic utterance thus passes, once again, via an excursion from language. This places the poetic subject in an especially precarious position – forced, in attempting to imagine the possibilities of relation in language, into an extreme sense of the irreducible quality of his own presence in the world. What is, in other words, intuitively grasped as in essence transitory, finite, in mutation, ephemeral, is made to bear existential significance so as to found the poet’s ‘authority’, the key to a social persona, in his ever-renewed mental and discursive solitude.

This imperative of textual openness to ‘experience’ is inseparable from the question of the possibility of relation within language, and hence of ‘poetic’ community. If, as Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe has remarked¹³⁶, there is a kind of modern complacency of the poetic gesture in a ‘vouloir-ne-rien-dire’, an avoidance of the problem of sense as the product of interaction rather than unilateral will, the problem of discernment with respect to radically singular or non-discursive texts – those that exhibit the signs of a utopian dynamic in their composition through the avoidance of anything readable as convention – can become inextricable. In his discussion of Paul Celan, a poet made to bear more than a fair share of exemplarity, Lacoue-Labarthe sets out a line of logic which, to a lesser or perhaps less painful degree, captures a general problematic of the poetic accession to speech and places it within the sobriety of the post-war perspective:

¹³⁶ Lacoue-Labarthe, Philippe. *La Poésie comme expérience*. Paris: Christian Bourgois, 1986, an essay on the work of Paul Celan and its translation.

[P]eut-il y avoir une expérience singulière? Une expérience muette, absolument non traversée de langage, induite par nul discours, aussi peu articulé soit-il? Et si par impossible oui [...], est-il possible que du langage, comme tel, prenne en charge une telle singularité? Et un idiome pourrait-il y suffire, qui soit évidemment autre chose qu'un simple «cryptage» ou le refus de dire de quoi il s'agit – cette immense facilité du «moderne»? Ce n'est là ni le problème du solipsisme ni celui de l'autisme. Mais *très probablement celui de la solitude*, dont Celan a fait ce qu'il faut bien nommer la dernière épreuve.¹³⁷

Mutatis mutandis, the demand in the work of Yves Bonnefoy that the poetic accession to speech be not simply thought to establish the 'subject' as sufficient unto itself, luxuriating in the textual image of its own singularity, is this problem of solitude remodelled. It is the question as to whether, despite what Bonnefoy has described in an essay as 'l'effondrement de la communication'¹³⁸, the singularity of what Lacoue-Labarthe places beneath the term of mute experience can come to be known, can somehow attain itself as singularity through the poetic text and simultaneously overcome that singularity in an act of 'poetic' communication. Because, as should be apparent, the figure of a unified, sovereign individual subject as the outcome of a poetic process is, in isolation, no more conscionable to this conception or solicitation of the poetic than is that of a purely collective subject, or a purely conventional language – which, one and the other, represent a (historically fresh) defeat of experience through the ruses of language:

¹³⁷ Ibid. 27 (emphasis added.)

¹³⁸ "Le poème qui ne communique pas désigne de ce fait même l'effondrement de la communication, demande que soit perçu ce malheur, appelle à combattre les forces qui montent de la langue pour disloquer la parole. Et s'accepter ainsi séparé de l'emploi du langage qui prédomine, c'est la façon certes douloureuse mais véridique qu'a la poésie d'être encore aujourd'hui ce qu'elle a été de toujours, fille de la mémoire." Poetry, even in ceasing to communicate, occupies the position of the true 'lien social', of the authentic link between the parties to a language. It thus becomes for Bonnefoy the space of a conceivably foundational 'recognition' – which goes straight to the general problem of the *être-ensemble*: "... reconnaître en nous le droit d'un désir de monde [serait ...] commencer la recherche de ce qui pourrait décider des principes du contrat social qui nous manque" 'Difficulté de la communication poétique' in *Entretiens sur la poésie*. Paris: Mercure de France, 1990: 276-90, 290 and 287.

La question que je me pose est donc bien celle du sujet: cancer du sujet, *ego* ou masses. Parce que c'est d'abord la question de ce qui pourrait, aujourd'hui, parler une autre langue que celle du sujet et témoigner de – ou répondre à – l'ignominie sans précédent dont fut – et reste – coupable l'«époque du sujet».¹³⁹

The poetic subject is thus pictured as endangered with pure separation inside the condition of subject-hood, whether it be the *je* or the *nous*, a condition that would seem to be reinforced by standard forms of writing and which thus obliges the 'poet' as a matter of ethical imperative, and limited methods, to write a way out of that condition. This makes for an experience that mixes an other-directed hope with something approaching total uncertainty in the present of the subject. In the 1960 text *Der Meridian*, perhaps Celan's own central excursus on his poetic effort, this ethical imperative results in the placement of the entire problematic of singularity within the prospect of an encounter to come. If poetic writing begins in respect of the former, it becomes open to theorisation only in the anticipation of the latter. As an act of writing, the poem takes both its justification and its parameters from an anticipation of that 'other', waiting somewhere along its path. It becomes a prospective verbal exchange that could both constitute and transcend the subject in whose solitary name it has yet to take shape:

Le poème est solitaire. Il est solitaire et sur le pas. Qui le trace se révèle à lui dédié.

Mais le poème alors n'est-il pas manifeste ici, dans la rencontre déjà – *dans le secret de la Rencontre ?*

Le poème est tendu vers un autre, éprouve la nécessité d'un autre, une nécessité de vis-à-vis. Il le débusque sans trêve, s'articule allant à lui. Toute chose, tout être, comme il chemine vers l'autre, sera figure, pour le poème, de cet autre.

[...]

Le poème tend – dans quelles conditions ! – au poème de tel qui – à nouveau, et sans trêve – prend garde, fait face à ce qui apparaît, interroge et appelle ce qui apparaît ; il devient dialogue – il est souvent dialogue éperdu.

¹³⁹ *La Poésie comme expérience*, op. cit. 24.

C'est dans l'espace d'un tel dialogue que la chose interpellée se constitue, qu'autour du moi qui l'interpelle et lui donne nom, elle peut se rassembler.¹⁴⁰

The event of the poem understood as the event of a coming encounter (*Begegnung*) with all that that encounter is understood to leave unformulated, imponderable, is the basis for the recognition of the locus of a subject in the space of the written text. A dialogue is postulated as imaginable – one which is often characterised by despair (rather than the plenitude normally, and tautologically, derived from figures of completion), and which gives rise to what is written (or spoken), it itself centered around the 'ansprechende und nennende Ich'. This *Ich* is assumed and prolonged as an ethical construct (the product of a necessary effort) – thereby identifying the practice of poetic writing with the attainment of subjecthood in coexistence, even if such an attainment remains hypothetical, rather than the imposition of its existence unilaterally without implication in the event of encounter.¹⁴¹

The extent to which such a view of poetry makes of poetic work the wholly disenchanted assumption of the linguistic – with all that this would deny the speaker whose first preoccupation is an attaining of an ulterior 'real' – is important when one compares Celan's pronouncements above with the positions of the preceding generations which it has been attempted to outline. Bonnefoy, in an essay on Celan, assumes a view which is sympathetic to this stance, and onto which he works his own characteristic reasoning – making of the question of poetic communication – in addition to the assumption of disenchantment – an *ontological* question:

¹⁴⁰ "Das Gedicht ist einsam. Es ist einsam und unterwegs. Wer es schreibt, bleibt ihm mitgegeben./ Aber steht das Gedicht nicht gerade dadurch, also schon hier, in der Begegnung – *im Geheimnis der Begegnung?*/ Das Gedicht will zu einem Anderen, es braucht dieses Andere, es braucht ein Gegenüber. Es sucht es auf, es spricht sich ihm zu./ Jedes Ding, jeder Mensch ist dem Gedicht, das auf das Andere zuhält, eine Gestalt dieses Anderen.[...]/Das Gedicht wird – unter welchen Bedingungen! – zum Gedicht eines – immer noch – Wahrnehmenden, dem Erscheinenden Zugewandten, dieses Erscheinende Befragenden und Ansprechenden; es wird Gespräch – oft ist es verzweifelteres Gespräch./ Erst im Raum dieses Gesprächs konstituiert sich das Angesprochene, versammelt es sich um das es ansprechende und nennende Ich." Celan, Paul. 'Der Meridian' in *Gesammelte Werke*, Dritter Band. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1986. 187-202, 198. (Trans. André du Bouchet.)

¹⁴¹ The change of perspective can be seen to entail a move in poetic speech from a will to power to an acceptance of fragility: "La poésie ne s'impose plus, elle s'expose", wrote Celan, in French, in 1969 (ibid. 169.)

[L]es structures que nous jetons sur ce qu'on dit l'univers ne sont rien, c'est vrai, qu'une nuée, notre langue. La plénitude la mieux vécue n'est au vide qu'une enveloppe, que le malheur sent sous ses doigts déchirée. Mais de ce fait même la pratique de ce qui *est*, si elle s'accomplit d'une certaine façon ouverte, attentive au bruit continu, régulier, des eaux d'en dessous et de toutes parts, n'est pas l'impasse de l'illusion mais la question la plus englobante et par la suite la plus lucide que la poésie puisse poser, encore aujourd'hui, au silence.¹⁴²

Arguing from a canonical singularity of the order of Celan is at best hazardous, and the specific ethical challenge of the choice and assumption of a language that pertains to his oeuvre is different from those questionings of language facing the generation of French poets with whom, most notably as part of the editorial committee of *L'Éphémère* in the late 1960s – which, in addition to Bonnefoy, included Jacques Dupin and André du Bouchet – Celan was in contact. Nevertheless, it can be argued that the reversal of the project of poetic communication is one which could meet with the assent of those sometime associates¹⁴³. In particular insofar as it is an attempt to move beyond the poem as the sovereign imposition of the poetic subject either as the hidden essence of the forms it inhabits or in its hypostasis as an aspiration to the mystical communion of the Whole; as it is one which foregrounds openness towards an other not as a preliminary to the closure of self or a complete social fusion but simply as that towards which, as a (self-styled) disillusioned practice in language, poetic writing attempts to continually direct

¹⁴² 'Paul Celan' (1972), in *La Vérité de parole et autres essais*, op. cit. 546-52, 548 (emphasis in original.)

¹⁴³ *Le Méridien* was in fact the opening text of the first issue of *L'Éphémère*. See Getz, Yasmine. 'L'Éphémère : une poétique de la rencontre.' *La Revue des revues*, 22, 1997: pp. 65-83. But it would be wrong to look on it as such as anything of the order of a manifesto, and hard to agree entirely with Gabrielle Bruckschlegel, who writes: "So wie nach dem 1. Weltkrieg die Dadaisten mit ihren Unsinnsgestalten und ihren sprachzerstörerischen Aktionen einerseits Ausdruck einer geschichtlich-gesellschaftlichen Krise sind und andererseits gerade mit ihrem Tun eine kulturelle "Generalreinigung" vornehmen wollen, zielen die Dichter an L'Éphémère nach dem 2. Weltkrieg auf Spracherneuerung, die letztenendes zu einer Veränderung, und zwar zu einer Verbesserung der menschlichen Existenz aufgrund eines neuen Bezugs zu Menschen und Dingen führen soll." (Bruckschlegel, Gabriele. *L'Éphémère. Eine französische Literaturzeitschrift und ihr poetisches Credo*. Wilhelmsfeld: Egert, 1990: 352.) It is not so much that this 'salvational' take on the poetic is not discernible in Bonnefoy's work in particular, but *L'Éphémère* is not thinkable as a group or community in the same way as either the Dadaists with whom it is sought to establish a parallel, or, *a fortiori*, *Le Grand Jeu*. That said, it is undoubtedly the forum for a

itself; and as, in spite of this new ‘fragility’ of poetic speech, it continues to affirm the validity of such speech as a locus of possible meaning rather than its definitive rout.

In viewing Bonnefoy in this way, one is admittedly developing a line which, encouraged in his own parallel writings on the subject, has already been amply attested and expanded upon by his many commentators. Faced with such a body of criticism, exemplarity seems the only manageable course to take. Thus, for example, Michel Jarrety speaks of an ethical subject emergent and active in the poetic work of Bonnefoy – this is the subject as it exists in respect of and in interaction with others:

[L]a langue menace, dans la parole. Non qu’il s’agisse seulement d’un mauvais instrument, car la poésie a la charge d’en redresser le défaut et d’en combler le manque, mais parce que c’est encore au *Je* qu’il revient de fonder sur son propre engagement la possibilité d’inverser en présence l’absence qu’ordinairement notre langue manifeste. Le risque éthique de ce sujet lyrique est alors double: s’établir dans l’illusion que le Moi de l’auteur puisse être l’origine des mots qui du coup se referment sur lui comme une manière d’idiolecte qui ne dira jamais à autrui que l’exil du Moi; continuer d’autre part de parler dans la dispersion, celle des mots, simples signes de fragmentation. Et ce sont deux modalités de la séparation, deux entraves au rassemblement que la poésie doit rétablir.¹⁴⁴

What passages such as this, along with many in the critical/analytical register of Bonnefoy himself, can lead one to ask is whether, in the development of an ‘ethical’ discourse around the ‘poetic’, the idealising discursive social imaginary of the essayist is not in the end far more seductive and accessible than the performed relation of the poetic writing – whether in reflecting on the ‘poetic’ via the order of a discourse on the social perfectibility of the work itself, the poetic does not in fact become a victim of its own, or what is its supposed, integrity. In short, whether ‘ethics’ is not rather the affair of moral

certain set of affinities and interrogations, with objectives that are of the order of the renewal suggested by Bruckschlegel.

¹⁴⁴ Michel Jarrety, ‘Sujet éthique, sujet lyrique’ in Dominique Rabaté (ed.) *Figures du sujet lyrique*. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1996:127-146, 141.

philosophers and moralisers of all shades of discursive persuasion, on whose territory poetry is placed to the detriment of its very specific difference. The fragility of poetic speech is accompanied by a mass of descriptive-prescriptive programming and commentary. This paradoxical danger is, in the view of the present writer, at the heart of poetic sociability. It is something which the institution does not appear capable of doing without. Yet, in the act of naming it, it marginalises the state of mind in which actual poetic work could come about (should one be bold enough to imagine that such work is not composed according to pre-ordained moral or ethical prescriptions.)

Would it be defensible, in spite of this, to speak of an 'ethic' of a shared or common space, of a 'lieu commun', within the utopian effort of poetic work? The ritualistic, desubjectivised, initiatory aspects of avant-garde experience in Daumal – similar in that respect to the group representations in Segalen – construct an idea of the 'un-fallen' state of community as differing radically from the amorphous superficiality of everyday human interaction in the modern western world. It is in relation to this latter fallen state that the idea(l) of community is necessarily understood – these imagined forms of association, and their associated views of language, embodying the 'utopian dynamic' of a writing seeking to transcend conventionalised communication. The weight placed on the activity termed 'poetic' is a measure of the alienation felt from such forms. Involved in a rejection which calls for experiment, that writing is inevitably engaged in a process of becoming, in a state of distance from its own ideal self. To the utter seriousness of the poetic enterprise seen in these terms one is thus obliged to add its inevitable irony. Realisation is a perpetual ground for suspicion. Hence, in Segalen the mask of foundation is porous to the signs of an absent goal and the continual suspicion of pastiche. For Daumal the whole, the association, is governed – in the context both of the group and of the individual in the face of the real – by a negative principle. The promise of the positive is built upon the primacy of the negative. Positive manifestation within this logic automatically instigates an irony¹⁴⁵ of the practice, distances the author from his own

¹⁴⁵ This irony is caught between what are sometimes branded as modern and post-modern versions. To a degree it involves the indirect recognition that no formulation in language is fully adequate to the real, and that as such poetic work can only ever be about the game of inventing new languages to cover the general inadequacy. But this is a point which, it is submitted, the presence and continuity of poetic work aims

output, permits actual poetic foundation precisely in terms of this distance. The hidden value of process over poetic result is one which, at this point, is assumed more openly than elsewhere.

The oeuvre of Yves Bonnefoy can be read as exemplary of this development. It is a 'development' which begins with the rejection of Surrealism¹⁴⁶, in relation with which Bonnefoy's first literary attempts were undertaken.¹⁴⁷ This is an initial engagement which first resembles then opposes Daumal's attitude and experience in respect of the subject-group relation, and the kind of communicative *entente* to which it can give rise. The curbing of affinities and ultimate breaking of links with Surrealism inaugurate Bonnefoy's work on both thematic and 'programmatic' levels, and in respect of the position / assumption of the poetic voice / subject. This poetic subject is born into the crisis of its own general separation, and thus revolves around the ghosts of those categories it is no longer in a position to maintain frontally. Moving from an opposition between the individual subject and a collective, an opposition fully modulated between Segalen (triumphant individual) and early Daumal (pure collective), with Bonnefoy the seeming inadmissibility of a maximal approach to the question is consummated. One of the correlates of this is that the unified other is gone – poetry succeeds or fails entirely on unguaranteed terms, and perhaps only, ultimately, by the sense of openness it manages to maintain and convey to a reader. Yet the writing proceeds from out of the prior

frontally to deny. It relativises ironically its current stance but does so while preserving a way of thinking the non-ironic setting, the absolute of an achieved 'poem'. Thus while approaching a 'post-modern' apprehension of the problem, the 'utopian dynamic' of poetic work is what will always, in the end, place 'post-modern' fatalism in the position of ideology, as something that must, as a matter of intimate urgency, and without compromising the sense of impossibility, be overcome in the direction of an act of authentic communication.

¹⁴⁶ The recently-published *Le Cœur-espace 1945, 1961*. Tours: Farrago / Léon Scheer, 2001, the original text of a work from before this parting of the ways, is distanced by Bonnefoy who describes it as "un document, sur un début décriture." (39) In the accompanying interview, the poet also describes an earlier, first poetic effort, a collection titled 'Ruptures d'univers', "un titre qui ne tenait pas ses promesses mais avait au moins cette vérité d'indiquer que j'attendais de la poésie qu'elle rompe avec tout un niveau de l'être-au-monde dont je n'ai plus cessé par la suite de chercher à définir la nature."

¹⁴⁷ See 'La nouvelle objectivité' (1946), a contribution by Bonnefoy to the first issue of the short-lived publication *La Révolution la Nuit*, reproduced in Jackson, John E. *À la souche obscure des rêves, La dialectique de l'écriture chez Yves Bonnefoy*. Paris: Mercure de France, 1993 (27-29), the 'programmatic, militant aspect' (Jackson) of which recalls the tone of *Le Grand Jeu*. See also the (allusive) account of his brief relations with the Surrealist movement in *Yves Bonnefoy, Livres et Documents* (Catalogue d'exposition). Paris: Bibliothèque Nationale/Mercure de France, 1992.

impossibility: as if meditation on the fact of impossibility, meditating the traces of a lost, imaginary or elusive way of being, were the one sustainable communal vector of the poetic.

Bonnefoy's negative awareness is observable in a new sense of self-restraint compatible with the idea that poetic achievement can no longer be conceived of in terms of an absolute, but rather by the lucidity with which the utterance avoids all avenues of deformation, excess, emphasis in the continued move towards valid speech. There is a new formulation of the onus placed upon the use of language in poetry – that it is the language itself that generate the criteria of validity, or speech (the production of language in context) that somehow achieve a general quality of adequacy through the avoidance of strategies normally associated with that goal. In his continual reference to 'parole' (rather than 'écriture') – Bonnefoy reaffirms a commitment to the idea of a speaking subject in poetry, and hence a continuity between that flux and the structures of a spoken language. Grounded in this engagement with the language as an interpersonal phenomenon, Bonnefoy's oeuvre is theorised from the very beginning by himself as maintaining something of the order of a common space, at the heart of the 'spoken' / written 'poem'.

Emblems of community move from the universal canvas of Segalen's global experience, via a shared intellectual baggage of the *communauté restreinte*, with Daumal, to the point where the poetic subject in Bonnefoy works in the first instance to maintain itself among the debris of spent symbolic material. A possible influence of Jouve in this respect is imaginable – Jouve takes the symbolic elements of a past cohesion (in his case Christian religious belief) and turns them into the props of a theatre of the poetic subject (in his case the Freudian subject.) Poetic work occurs across the fragmentation, the glimpses of the origin which arise in the scattering of ordering symbols. Community emerges in Jouve as a negative afterglow of the experience of adhesion, within a poetic form which makes such adhesion no longer thinkable, but disturbingly present. The idea of the poet as orchestrating the elements of a composite 'truth', engaging with a potential in signs, but in the context of their ruin, is one which, purged of the 'abject' quality of much of the

Jouvian imaginary, re-emerges in Bonnefoy: the 'common space' is imagined as that in which such activity can accede to 'meaning' (*sens*).

The essential figure of this difficult equilibrium is the maintenance of what Bonnefoy terms 'ouverture' – which is an achievement of utterance that both preserves the referential appearance and inaugurates a general capacity of the word – and in particular of the (proper) name (it being understood that all terms are seen as tending to the density, the apparent richness of meaning, of the proper name – and poetry itself to a protracted act of naming.) Bonnefoy's first major book of poetic writing, *Du mouvement et de l'immobilité de Douve* (1953) is thus interpreted by the poet himself as the engineering of a space of ambiguity within the proper name; a 'theatre'¹⁴⁸ within which words emerge but lose none of their evocative virtualities. The name, breaking with the construction of sense, establishes a rapport of openness with the effort to interpret – it refuses to render an ordered message while constantly reworking a diction of sense, proximity, sensation, intensity of attention:

Tandis qu'à se reposer comme à neuf sur les ruines d'un premier texte, «Douve», ce substantif mais aussi bien ce nom propre, ce mot le plus général, me suggérerait d'élargir la conscience à l'œuvre dans ce récit, m'en donnait le moyen peut-être, et me permettait en tout cas de garder présent à l'esprit mon obscur besoin de franchir, de décristalliser tout état de texte, tout rapport figé de la conscience à soi-même? En bref, je reconnus dans le mot «Douve», assez consciemment je crois, l'emblème autant que l'agent de la transgression qu'il faut toujours accomplir.[...] Reconnaisant et mémorisant dans un mot la défaillance d'une structure de sens, échec combien fécond s'il permet que l'on s'éveille d'un rêve, je pourrais au moins préserver en moi l'entrevision de cette lumière qui est là-bas, en avant de nous, mais que barre tout texte qui se referme, toute idéologie qui s'affirme.¹⁴⁹

¹⁴⁸ The framing idea of the 'theatre' is renewed with by Bonnefoy in his most recent collection of short prose works *Le théâtre des enfants*. Bordeaux: William Blake & Cie, 2001.

¹⁴⁹ 'Lettre à John E. Jackson' (1980) in *Entretiens sur la poésie* op. cit. 88-116, 96-97.

This poetic is understood not only in terms of a fruitful destabilisation of linguistic habits, but as the poet's factor of difference as one exemplifying a new apprehension of the problem of a public assumption of language. Thus Bonnefoy, discussing his separation from Surrealism in the same text in which the above remarks were made, does not hesitate to present the return to the 'given' as an evolution, an advance in the demands made by the poetic: the adaptation of this demand to the intellectual exigencies of an interdisciplinary mind (his own educational background being originally mathematical and scientific) – culminating in the idea that the move from the surreal to the 'real' involves a broadening rather than a narrowing of the purview of the poetic subject and a corresponding extension of the possible ambit of community:

De même qu'il nous fallait dissiper le rêve dit «surréal», remontant au-delà de lui vers le grand et simple réel, de même et simplement nous faut-il, au-delà du surréalisme mais en somme sur sa lancée, redéfinir comme communauté humaine au sens de ce mot le plus vaste, le plus ouvert, ce que Breton restreignait à un petit groupe – d'ailleurs bien embarrassé de lui-même – de prédestinés ou d'élus.¹⁵⁰

Douve is the multiple name, forged in the work of writing, that establishes Bonnefoy in the indeterminate, and which reveals this as a medium of determination (that is, of contact with what 'is'.) Eschewing any notion of correspondence – that is, the intuitive manner of linguistic foundation – the latecomer maintains in his sights the ideal of a founded language, an 'ontophanic' utterance and its possible reception as such. This sequence of utterance and reception would be the poetic relation. 'Openness' is linked to the idea of process, of becoming: of *écriture* as distinct from the *écrit*. Thus the approach of the 'finished' object, the published text, is in itself deceptive for our attempts to read. But the achievement of openness in Bonnefoy also suggests, retrospectively, ways of reading Segalen and Daumal against their own self-presentations – in which form and rhetoric cannot succeed in hiding the essentially process-based, dynamic nature of poetic work. Bonnefoy's openness, even in what is moderate about it, thereby enriches our

¹⁵⁰ Ibid. 108.

understanding of the utopian dynamic and its ‘logic’ – even unto identifying the poetic objective with the maintenance of this movement.

The founding aporia instates a utopian dynamic in writing. Bonnefoy, beginning with a proper name, has maintained throughout his work a practice of such aporetics as allowing intimations of community – and which continually link the poetic to the consideration of the primary energies at work in the engagement with language. On a meta-poetic level, the primary name of the founding aporia for Bonnefoy is ‘la présence’. Thus, for example, in a prose included in *Récits en rêve* titled *L’origine de la parole* the poet intuits “... qu’on avait inventé les mots, et par eux l’absence; qu’on avait rêvé la parole.” Language is understood to be consubstantial with the dream of its overcoming in utterance, even as it emerges within the silent experience of self-identity provided fugitively by the meridional sunlight:

[...] rien donc en ce qui existait là, périssait là, n’indiquait là qu’il y avait de la matière sous l’apparence, n’en accusait plus le hasard, on eût dit le présent sans fin, l’espace sans ici ni ailleurs, les essences seules à être dans leur ample bruissement clair d’air qui monte en vibrant au-dessus d’un feu.¹⁵¹

The ‘rêve de la parole’ makes ‘sense’ in terms of this Eden of immediacy, and the poet, who repeatedly banishes the fixity of what he calls the ‘image’ (the ‘image’ in his definition *is* this fixity) from the poetic, nevertheless engages in the process of poetic speech with the assurance of the experience of such self-identity and with the objective of honouring the validity of this experience. It is an engagement undertaken in the name of ‘presence’, for which language acts as a kind of horizon by initiation – the ‘rêve de la parole’. This is the aspect of the apprehension of language which institutes poetry’s distinction in Bonnefoy’s eyes:

J’avance, vous le voyez, cette idée que l’invention poétique n’est pas de déplacer une signification au profit d’une autre plus générale ou même plus intérieure,

¹⁵¹ ‘L’origine de la parole’ in *Récits en rêve*. Paris: Mercure de France, 1995: 199.

comme ferait le philosophe qui fait apparaître une loi ou le psychanalyste qui met au jour un désir; et qu'elle n'est pas davantage de relativiser toute signification au sein des polysémies d'un texte; mais *de remonter d'une absence – car toute signification, toute écriture, c'est de l'absence – à une présence, celle de telle chose ou de tel être, peu importe, soudain dressé devant nous, en nous, dans l'ici et le maintenant de notre existence.*¹⁵²

In this statement one recognises precisely the levinasian structure of time as that dimension to which the other gives access as the horizon between presence and absence. Levinas: “La relation avec autrui, c'est l'absence de l'autre; non pas absence pure et simple, non pas absence de pur néant, mais absence dans un horizon d'avenir, une absence qui est le temps.” In this perspective is it not tempting to institute the poem as a kind of linguistic version of the ‘caress’, at once apprehending and continuing to seek what can only be named meta-discursively?: “Cette *recherche* de la caresse en constitue l'essence par le fait que la caresse ne sait pas ce qu'elle cherche. Ce «ne pas savoir», ce désordonné fondamental en est l'essentiel.”¹⁵³ But while it is common for the poet to order his reasoning in terms of an aspiration or eventual achievement of the poetic utterance which remains indeterminable, a feature of Bonnefoy's reflection is the tendency to place the achievement within the gift of the speaker – presence, and hence the poetic, become predicates of a belief of the speaker: one founded lucidly on nothing other than the decision to believe and the view that this decision belongs to the speaking subject individually, and – potentially – collectively. As such, the poetic arrogates an ‘ethical’ dimension:

[L]a présence est par nature ou plutôt par droit – *un droit que nous nous sommes donné* – ce qui transcende les signes, ce qui s'absente de tout emploi qu'on puisse faire des signes.¹⁵⁴

¹⁵² ‘Lettre à John E. Jackson’ (1980) in *Entretiens sur la poésie*, op. cit. 88-116, 99 (emphasis added.)

¹⁵³ Levinas, Emmanuel. *Le temps et l'autre*. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1983: 84 and 82 respectively.

The maintenance of openness in a ‘parole poétique’ is constructed in critical and occasional writings by Bonnefoy through an opposition with what the poet terms ‘la pensée conceptuelle’¹⁵⁵ – within which the resources of the symbolic, through the achievement of symbolic cohesion, give rise to a symbolising practice autonomous from any referential dimension. In this respect, his suspicion of the tendency of discourse to take over from the speaking subject shows strong affinities with Daumal’s position (an affinity in which Bonnefoy’s ‘concept’ could be equated with Daumal’s ‘serment’.) This could in the first instance be thought also to preclude any form of thought on possible convention, as being invidious to a project of authenticity. But what makes a reading of Bonnefoy both compelling and baffling in this regard is the extent to which the rejection of the reifying properties of language is coupled with the insistence upon a view of poetic speech as revelatory of an imaginable common ground between speaker and addressee, of a givenness of human co-existence whose foundational quality it falls to poetic speech, in the last resort, to uncover. The imperative of ‘ouverture’ needs to be harmonised with that of ‘parole’ – in their reconciliation can be discerned a figure of the founded poetic subject, one liberated in the accession to speech from what Bonnefoy discerns in the poetic generation subsequent to his own, “ce sentiment d’impuissance, et de désespoir, qui m’a paru affecter toute une génération de poètes, celle qui a commencé à écrire quand déjà triomphait ce qu’on a nommé le structuralisme. Œuvres qui privilégient le fragment, qui consentent que le poème ne soit plus que quelques vocables cramponnés à la cime du papier blanc, la page qui dit l’absence.”¹⁵⁶ Language requires, in other words, to be reminded that its domain of primary validity is within a ‘human scale’, the specific fact of humanity as offering a parameter to the question of meaning. Vigilance on this point is at the basis of the ‘social’ claim that Bonnefoy makes for an authentic ‘parole poétique’. What is not available in the absolute is open to construction – humanity being that entity that constructs a reality from out of the given of nature:

¹⁵⁴ ‘Devant la Saint-Victoire’ in *La Vie errante suivi de Remarques sur le dessin*. Paris: Poésie/Gallimard, 1995: 178 (emphasis added.)

¹⁵⁵ A dichotomy which is criticised by Blanchot: see ‘Le grand refus’, in *L’Entretien infini*. Paris: Gallimard, 1969: 46-69.

¹⁵⁶ ‘La poésie et l’université’ (1984) in *Entretiens sur la poésie*, op. cit. 203-19, 213. Bonnefoy’s stance as running counter to ‘post-structuralist’ positions is discussed in Jackson, John E. ‘Yves Bonnefoy et «la souche obscure des rêves»’, afterword to Yves Bonnefoy. *Rue Traversière et autres récits en rêve*. Paris: Poésie / Gallimard, 1992: 205-230.

Les formations de la poésie sont *semblables à l'aménagement que l'humanité a fait autrefois de la nature*, y reconnaissant l'arbre et la source, y ajoutant le foyer : tout autant des propositions que des constats, et nullement des démonstrations mais des suggestions, qui sollicitent l'assentiment. Oui, voici l'essentiel, qu'il importe de souligner. *Sous le signe de l'unité, ai-je dit, le rapport à autrui renaît, que la pensée conceptuelle brouille et permet trop aisément de détruire*. Et c'est dans cette dimension de l'altérité, aussi bien, que la pensée proprement poétique se développe.¹⁵⁷

Whether that 'pensée proprement poétique' is involved primarily in construction or in recognition is a question that remains open in respect of Bonnefoy. It is possible to argue that, in the specific quality of his commitment to poetic speech over the past half-century, he is at once radically opposed to and inextricably bound up in what Richard Rorty calls "[t]he idea, coeval with utopian politics and Romantic poetry, that truth is made rather than found."¹⁵⁸ What is undoubtedly temperamentally closer is the philosophical project of Jean-Luc Nancy alluded to above, that is "faire de la question sociale la question ontologique"¹⁵⁹ – placing (at least rhetorically) the activity of mediation on the 'ontological' level that Bonnefoy has frequently aspired to for poetry. Of what he terms 'le symbolique' Nancy writes:

[Ce] n'est donc pas un aspect de l'être-social: c'est cet être lui-même, d'une part, et d'autre part le symbolique n'a pas lieu sans (re)présentation: il est la (re)présentation des uns aux autres selon laquelle ils sont les-uns-avec-les-autres. [...] L'être social est l'être qui est en paraissant face à lui-même, avec lui-même: il est com-parution.¹⁶⁰

¹⁵⁷ 'Poésie et vérité' (1986) in *Entretiens sur la poésie*, op. cit. 253-75, 267 (emphasis added.)

¹⁵⁸ Rorty, Richard. *Contingency, irony, and solidarity*. Cambridge University Press, 1989.

¹⁵⁹ *Être singulier-pluriel*, op. cit. 78.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid. 80.

‘Being’ (the indefinable essence or foundation) can thus be thought as the absent unifying point in this ongoing articulation, this co-presence of subjects. ‘It’ is what arises, is recognised in the relation with other(s) – that is, it can only be thought satisfactorily at this time within this relation. To approach the term in this fashion throws light on the occurrence of ‘being’, of the ‘ontological’, as a central concept-aporia, or ‘case vide’ of modern French poetry in its attempts at self-analysis: the apprehension of the poetic as the site of a (textual) contact with the question is what is cultivated in the reading-writing relation, as well as in the other-tending effort of poetic work. It is at least one vector of canonicity, in the sense of Descombes. Community around poetic writing can thus be hypothesised as an instance of the *être-ensemble* where there is a latent recognition of the volitional and performative qualities of this unbounded relation. It could be argued that, in his constant re-iteration of the aspiration to the poetic, Bonnefoy is acting in an awareness of the validity of a collectively-entertained orientation as generative of relation even in the absence of an object to that orientation. In a domain of communicative practice, this becomes a ‘radical hermeneutic’¹⁶¹ version of the rituals and forms of community recounted or experimented with earlier in the century – a migration towards a possible evacuation of the conflict between individuation and subsuming of the subject before a figure of the collective through the deferral of the moment at which an end-point to the process of meaning is reached (even as the possibility of such achieved meaning is maintained.)

The attractiveness of the idea of a construct coming about in the *face-à-face* of the communicative relation which would fully honour the putative parties to that relation is, on any reading, profound for Bonnefoy. That the truth of that relation is a dimension of the aspiration brought to it by those engaging therein – that in seeking ‘being’ in the linguistic relation, ‘being’ might be exactly, through an act of consciousness, what one finds, is a position which recognises the central importance of the dimension of subjective longing within the creative act which is observable throughout Bonnefoy’s

¹⁶¹ See Kearney, Richard. *Poetics of Imagining*. London: Routledge, 1993 which, especially in the section devoted to the thought of Ricoeur (‘The hermeneutical imagination’, 134-69), attains a similar state to that of Bonnefoy in his essays in respect of a possibility of achieved communication – a possibility maintained

writings. The recognition of the human in the very desire for the impossible, which Bonnefoy locates in the work of Léon Chestov (whom he contrasts with Bataille, for whom it serves as a pull towards abjection), is a principle to which his poetry has remained attached to the present time. Hence his recent partial homage to the work of Breton which, again placed in contrast with the position of Bataille, pitches its will-to-foundation at precisely this level:

[Breton] comprenait que la réalité qui importe [est] celle que le désir élabore: un désir qui n'est d'ailleurs pas la simple sexualité mais le besoin aussi de bâtir un lieu, d'instituer du sens, de participer d'un ordre, et se donne pour cela des objets à hauteur, disons, humaine, aussi loin des larves dans leur marais, une des fascinations de Bataille, que des galaxies dans le ciel.¹⁶²

The idea of the symbolic as a parameter to the scale of human concern and existence, as initiating the 'world' of human actions, is one which sits well with Bonnefoy's gestures in the direction of community. Recognition of the symbolic in its very distinction from the thing itself is the gauge of this elusive 'human' level to the operation of the mind and the elaborations of the pen. The poem '*Le mot ronce, dis-tu*', from *Ce qui fut sans lumière*, captures this fragile equilibrium of a commitment to language as both the condition of a humanity experienced to the full and as the repository of the real and of a life lived in its pursuit. The event of poetic speech, which is portrayed as occurring through and towards dialogue, ritualises the poem as the paradoxical, continually renewed achievement of a disenchanted foundation in this commitment.

Le mot *ronce*, dis-tu? Je me souviens
De ces barques échouées dans le varech
Que traînent les enfants les matins d'été
Avec des cris de joie dans les flaques noires [...]

primarily in its direct evocation, a kind of rhetorical insistence, navigating between the pitfalls of several sceptical vocabularies.

¹⁶² 'Tant va Breton à l'avenir ...', in *Breton à l'avant de soi*. Tours: Farrago/ Léo Scheer, 2001: 89-99, 95.

Du feu qui va en mer la flamme est brève,
Mais quand elle s'éteint contre la vague,
Il y a des irisations dans la fumée.
Le mot *ronce* est semblable à ce bois qui sombre.

Et poésie, si ce mot est dicible,
N'est-ce pas de savoir, là où l'étoile
Parut conduire mais pour rien sinon la mort,

Aimer cette lumière encore? Aimer ouvrir
L'amande de l'absence dans la parole?¹⁶³

In the meditation on the word one recognises yet again the apprehension of what each and any can offer to the poetic attention, the promise therein which – in this poem explicitly – is a shareable promise. Openness extends potentially to an indefinite number of words, and hence to the practice of language in the apprehension of the poetic. One vector of community within speech, for Bonnefoy, would thus be the accumulation of linguistic resonance through a generalised attention to words. This might, narrowly, result in the view of a cherished language as the medium, over time, of a poetic tradition. More importantly, it renders imaginable the accretion within a shared language of a lexicon of the real, a restricted vocabulary so inserted into the fabric of experience as, to employ Bonnefoy's term, to be 'ontophanic' at the moment of utterance – performative of the poetic, yet also fully realised in this context of a 'poetic' text. This is a view of a language which has become 'poetic' that bears comparison with the position expressed by J.H. Prynne¹⁶⁴ on certain words bearing an 'accumulated potential signification' – their deployment in the context of poetic work representing the promotion of vertical (diachronic, historical) over horizontal connection. Thus even though the activity of poetic utterance is horizontal, and overwhelmingly a solicitation of the present, the mark of an achieved 'poetic' language would be reflected in its capacity to awaken the sense

¹⁶³ *Ce qui fut sans lumière*. Paris: Mercure de France, 1987: 42.

¹⁶⁴ Developed in Prynne, J.H. 'Stars, Tigers and the Shape of Words', *The William Matthews Lectures*. London: Birkbeck College, 1992.

that all levels and signifying resources of the language, even unto the experience of language as a shared reality, in time, are involved and relevant. Bonnefoy's holding to an idea of an essential register thus bears a certain relation also to those examples of the *parole poétique* theorised as holding the totality of meanings (*langue*) rather than as a model of discursive discreteness (*discours*), the singularity of an adapted utterance. That this is at least in part an imagination of community is continually acknowledged by Bonnefoy himself. Hence the reflection, of one who has frequently made plain his unbelief, organising the utopian dynamic of poetic practice around the name 'Dieu' – this name representing historically something like the ultimate openness of the act of naming, a historical counterpart to *Douve* in Bonnefoy's private mythology, but also an extant example of what it is attempted to appropriate as 'poetic' principle.

La poésie veut briser de son écriture non-conceptuelle, plurielle, les significations qui se coordonnent, afin de ranimer, dans chacun de ses grands vocables, ce surcroît de la perception qui serait, pourrait-on s'y maintenir, sa parole.

Et comme les mots se prêtent si aisément à la coordination, à la volonté de puissance, elle tend à garder parmi ces pièces de puzzle une qui ne soit que carton informe, déchiré, peint de couleurs indistinctes: découpe inadaptable à tout autre qui va brouiller de son insistance indéfiniment déplacée la figure vaine qui naît dans les alliances de signes. «Dieu», ce mot, aurait pu jouer ce rôle, si les dogmes ne le rapatriaient dans la langue. Il se peut qu'il le joue dans de grands poèmes, dont l'effet ne s'est pas éteint. Mais tout mot simple est en puissance ce vocable totalement ouvert dont le mot Dieu, en somme, n'aura été que l'annonce.¹⁶⁵

The practice of an 'essential' vocabulary is seen as opening onto a dimension of language as foundational – a kind of minimum degree, or universal elementary particle of human existence. An essential register thus serves to articulate the commitment to the poetic as an art of the *échelle humaine*, it allows Bonnefoy's poetics to maintain this in view as a problem of naming. Through the name these elementary particles enter into the infinitely flexible, infinitely singular-yet-shareable syntagma of 'parole': the openness of the

¹⁶⁵ 'Sur de grands cercles de pierre' in *Récits en rêve*, op. cit. 221-27, 225.

foundational event is what saves it from the immediate past-ness of monumentality. By re-placing the *écrit* in a perspective of process, and drawing this process back into a hypothesis of address, of the interpersonal, Bonnefoy carries off what is at least in part a rhetorical feat of maintaining a founding ambition when ‘foundation’ is no longer directly thinkable, or thinkable as an independent event. As he writes to Jean Starobinski, in another act of speculative mediation framed as a communicative act, and ascribing again to ‘la poésie’ the volition so central to his own construction of poetic difference:

[La poésie] *veut rendre à la vérité générale* – à un mot réformé, guéri, à la fois concept et symbole – la part du mot d’à présent qui est blessée, étouffée, mais dont elle garde mémoire. Et la critique n’atteint à l’intellection de ses opérations difficiles dans la matière verbale que si elle comprend d’instinct, elle aussi, que le but n’en est pas l’escarpé, l’inexploré – cela n’existe pas – mais le simple.¹⁶⁶

¹⁶⁶ ‘Quelque chose comme une lettre’ in *La vérité de parole et autres essais*, op. cit. 351.

II. Haut lieu: (Dis)placing the scene of poetic experience.

... moi pressé de trouver le lieu et la formule.¹

1. Experience and the scene of experience.

The 'social' space of which a language marks the (variable) absolute limit, and which is defined more restrictively by a community of readers or writers, is that in which much of what effectively constitutes 'experience' for the writer occurs. The formation of a literary consciousness is unarguably to some extent a process of literary socialisation. Insofar as the 'poetic' can be in any way distinguished within this complex, through for example the workings of a utopian dynamic in the accession to speech, there seems no reason to claim that the principle of a 'social' space should be dispensed with as a way of thinking the poetic subject other than in the isolation it so willingly arrogates itself.

Poetic foundation, we have attempted to argue, while taking cognisance of the limits of a given language as a social reality, involves an insistence on the creative moment, on the viability of one more accession to speech and its subsistence as such within the linguistic community. This is a principle – that of the possible validity, ever renewed, of what is being created – that each 'poet' has at some point had to accept. The experience of the poetic may then be profoundly social – yet, when it comes to a consideration of those experiences which are adopted as valid 'topics' of poetic work, in respect of which that work becomes viable, the repertory and the problematic are typically elsewhere.

Is it valid to speak of a 'scene' of poetic experience? As one might speak of a primitive scene – one with an abiding power for the generation of significance for the subject, one which, eliding articulation, generates speech? But also as one could talk of a theatrical scene – with the idea of a contained, transformed space within which meaning is produced and all relations are amenable to a unifying interpretation framed by the

¹ Rimbaud. 'Vagabonds' (Illuminations) in *Poésies, Une saison en enfer, Illuminations*. Paris: Gallimard (Poésie), 1973: 174.

artificial whole? If it is possible to speak of such a scene, and while certain traits may dominate such a scene through the work of a given poet, it is only thinkable generically in terms of an insatiable principle.

The scene of poetic experience is one of experience understood under the pressure of a utopian dynamic. 'Poetic' experience thus is analogous in its imperatives, where 'experience' is construed according to the utopian dynamic, with a 'poetic' consciousness of the problem of accession to speech as examined in the previous section. The conception of the difficulty of entry into the 'poetic' is equally radical, acute – with respect to the 'scene' of experience. We again turn to remarks made by Bataille, with his unerring tropism for the limit, for a treatment of 'experience' in terms of a utopian dynamic:

J'appelle expérience un voyage au bout du possible de l'homme. [...] Du fait qu'elle est négation d'autres valeurs, d'autres autorités, l'expérience ayant l'existence positive devient elle-même positivement la valeur et l'autorité. [...] Quand aller au bout signifie tout au moins ceci: que la limite qu'est la connaissance comme fin soit franchie.²

Is there anything to be gained by qualifying this version of 'experience', the imperative of bringing it to a limit, as 'poetic' in its turn? Earlier we saw Bataille identify the 'poetic' with the 'impossible', with a move beyond all consideration of 'foundation'. There is a postulate here that, beyond the question of formulable 'knowledge', the virtue of 'experience' is the grounding of the subject in an intimate apprehension of a limit to the 'possible'. If poetic foundation occurs horizontally within a problematic of language as a social reality, the pursuit of 'experience' as defined in the extreme by Bataille, for example, allows us to ask *whereupon* it is that poetic foundation occurs. What are its referential, as opposed to its differential, prerequisites and necessities. In the face of poetic work it is reductive to separate these two strands. To the poetic *sine qua non* of a foundation in speech is bound the *nec plus ultra* of poetic 'experience'. Or again, if

² Bataille. *L'expérience intérieure*. Paris: Gallimard, 1954:19-20.

foundation were to be regarded first of all in terms of the social orientation inherent in language, the question of poetic experience repositions the problem of poetic foundation in a properly cosmic context – that is, the problem of context itself as that which necessarily exceeds language, and the speaker, in order (being ‘poetic’) to return to them.

The point of poetic experience’s necessary preoccupation with the ‘outside world’, before being one of any ‘dynamic’ significance, is simply a reflection of the existence of the senses as fundamental to the construction of ‘human’ experience, primeval or matricial fantasies notwithstanding. It is in the interface with the exterior non-self that being, to follow Merleau-Ponty, is synthesised:

La vision est la rencontre, comme à un carrefour, de tous les aspects de l’Être. [...] Cette précession de ce qui est sur ce qu’on voit et fait voir, de ce qu’on voit et fait voir sur ce qui est, c’est la vision même.³

In other words, the way to any real apprehension of interiority passes via the world. The ‘world’, in the first instance a phenomenological world, opposes itself to a conception of experience which is ‘purely’ interior. Situated on a historical plane this is again, like utopia’s emergence as a literary genre, a development which can be linked to the age of European ‘discovery’. Thus Paul Zumthor, treating of developments from the 14th Century onwards, with Portuguese voyages in the Atlantic:

A une vieille et savoureuse pensée de l’intériorité (celle de l’occident chrétien jusqu’alors) se superpose [...] une pensée de l’extériorité, le rêve d’un hors-limite, d’une suite indéfinie de transfigurations, au point que l’homme désormais ne vivra sa propre existence qu’en différé, ne concevra de poésie que nourrie de fantasmes et d’utopies.⁴

³ Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. *L’Œil et l’Esprit*. Paris: Gallimard, 1964: 87.

⁴ Paul Zumthor. *La mesure du monde*. Paris: Seuil, 1993: 205, cited by Anne Mortal (*Le Chemin de personne* (Bonneyoy, Gracq). Paris: L’Harmattan, 1999: 15.) Mortal, in her study on the ‘chemin’ in Bonneyoy and Gracq, argues from this citation for a distinction between the ‘journey’ (voyage) and the ‘path’ (chemin) as organising literary principles. It could be argued however that its essential point is in the originary association of a modern consciousness with the question of what lies outside, the validation of

Hence also a great ambiguity in this turning towards the world. On the one hand, the accession to speech which founds the poetic speaker in respect of a community is thereby at the same time literally an *entrée en matière*, the beginnings of a discourse and an inception of the world for which poetic work seeks a mythically adequate expression. The extremity of the poetic ambition founds and is founded in the quality of its corresponding terrain, a kind of ‘phenomenological desire’ to say what *is* to the limit of language’s resource. There is an absolute precedence of this ‘objective’ correlative in respect of that poetic speech which would correspond to its most demanding features, which would leave out nothing of its topographical particularities and irregularities, which would reveal its most inaccessible features – an absolute precedence which is a conceit of the writing itself. On the other hand, the outside world functions as a provider of “fantasmes et utopies”, as an agent of a flight from the ‘real’, as an alibi for all manner of surrender to the autopoietic potential of language delivered to the imaginary faculties of the writing subject. In the multiplicity of writing, the subject, in this scenario, finds a language and even a structuring principle within which writing can go on, which can set up spaces of the as yet unspoken; which can initiate geographies from which a poetic speech could be imagined as having yet to report, or constructed as that which, in terms of the work of writing, lies beyond, behind, above, inside, or outside – as many spatial adverbs as can indicate *en matière*, via the detour of the physical world, that which has yet, as a matter of linguistic or compositional performance, to be entered or attained.

A key moment in modernity was the recognition that human reality involved the coexistence of these strands, rather than the suppression of one by the other. The typically modern *entrée en matière*, which is at the inception of the poetic, places the poetic speaker within a force field of the possible – this being inseparable from the mind as in excess of the present moment. Lines of progression move out to all sides from the position this subject suddenly happens to occupy. Speaking from within the confluence of

experience with reference to this. This ‘external turn’ links even ‘spiritual’ quest with the boundlessness of an [unfathomed] outside world. Historically this can be argued to lie at the origin of the utopian dynamic. Recycled here it suggests that the dynamic is thinkable, is necessarily thought, in terms of the external world.

various compulsions and impulses, the questions of self, non-self and of their modulation over time make their way to the linguistic surface. That surface, together with all the other aspects of the available 'real', are subordinated to the logic of distance, proximity, identity. No sooner are we in the 'real' than language has us talking out of it again:

Tu t'es toujours trompé. Comme moi, comme tout homme, tu t'es laissé glisser sur des pentes faciles et vaines. Ton esprit n'a voyagé qu'en rêve vers la vérité. Compare aujourd'hui ta pensée avec les choses qui te résistent; tes plus belles théories s'évanouissent devant le mur des apparences. [...] C'est d'ici que tu es parti; mais tu as pris une fausse porte. Ou plutôt tu as cru partir; tu t'es endormi sur le seuil et tu as rêvé tes croyances sur le monde et sur l'esprit. [...] Quiconque entreprend un voyage doit partir du lieu où il se trouve; il ne doit pas croire le voyage accompli parce qu'il a entre les mains un itinéraire précis et détaillé; la ligne qu'il a tracée sur une carte n'a de sens que s'il peut fixer le point où il est actuellement. Toi, de même, cherche-toi. C'est-à-dire: éveille-toi, trouve-toi: l'endroit où tu te trouves, c'est l'état actuel de ta conscience, prise avec la totalité de son contenu; c'est d'ici que tu dois partir. Et toute notre spéculation ne sera jamais que l'itinéraire d'un voyage possible.⁵

Couching the poetic as that writing which aims at a maintenance of consciousness, of a will-to-lucidity, serves to establish the 'ici' of the subject and the 'dimension of the present moment' (Holub) as the ever-disappearing parameters of a specifically poetic 'experience'. It is within these parameters that the poet, affronting the wayward-ness of language, attains to an awareness of the ongoing, linguistically-supported distraction of the mind. Through an act of retreat into the present, the poetic effort reveals the activity of the mind in constant tension and divergence with the provisionally absolute character of the here and now. Consonant with the attempt of the subject to construct a situated-ness, this activity is most readily characterised in terms of a physical movement – a spatialisation together with the principle of its transcendence, its constant undoing. As the mind produces the experience of its being constantly surpassed, the attempt to think and

⁵ Daumal. *Tu t'es toujours trompé*. Paris: Mercure de France, 1970: 21-22.

to experience the given-ness of place leads to a chronic instability of the identity of the initial term. The *ici* is not a simple metaphor of a certain state of consciousness – it is the postulated sum of the material horizons of the subject in its position of speech. The *ailleurs* has metaphorical properties of a different, looser order – signifying less through a positive content than as a principle of the contingency of situation. In constructing a reflection on poetic writing which compliments this view, Michel Collot, following Merleau-Ponty, has articulated their constitutive relation for the ‘perceptive intelligence’ in terms of what he calls a ‘horizon structure’:

La structure d’horizon témoigne de la faculté qu’a l’intelligence perceptive de dépasser le simple donné: mais elle marque aussi les limites de son pouvoir, car elle est toujours dépassée par l’excès de ce qui se propose à elle.⁶

Phenomenologically-speaking, the ‘limit’ is the pseudo limit.⁷ The horizon is the open-ended figure – or name – of impossibility. Yet, given the position of experience with respect to writing as that with which writing has yet to coincide, it is frequent for the poetic, with its hyperbolic take on the fundamental problems, to present itself or to be presented as that practice of speech which is in privileged contact with the ‘real’. It would represent the work(ing) of language beyond the devices of affabulation which characterise the production of other literary texts⁸, but also, in an unacknowledged fashion, those texts which emerge in the multi-faceted dominant practice of ‘communication’. Beyond any specific definition, any particular attempt to delimit that of which, for beings unthinkable in separation from a linguistic function, the ‘real’ might actually ‘consist’, there is the affective insistence in the use of the term upon the primacy of the subject’s experience of and engagement with the unsurpassable fact of being in the world, a mind indissociable from a body. Affabulation, in contrast (in the rhetorics of this difference), is the time-honoured strategy of the mind in denial of its situated-ness.

⁶ Collot, Michel. *La poésie moderne et la structure d’horizon*, op. cit. 18.

⁷ Collot recalls Husserl’s remark that “[t]out horizon fait surgir de nouveaux horizons.”

⁸ In this respect the analogical distance or deficit between poetic writing and the utopian genre is at its fullest.

The first point, then, that should be investigated in the construction of the poetic through the interplay of the ‘real’ and the ‘unrealisable’ in language is the extent to which that construction occurs independently of ‘poetry’ as it designates itself or is designated (as an appellation, genre, set of forms or stylistic practices in language.) ‘La poésie appelle la prose’, is a standard exculpatory gesture of those who take it upon themselves to write about ‘poetry’. Not only, as the Introduction to the present study attempted to suggest, is this the case but, for the 20th Century at least, it is arguably equally the case that ‘la prose appuie la poésie’. What this formulation is not is an attempt to downgrade poetic practice among the various forms of writing. Rather, it is the observation that practices of writing can develop so as to keep *apart* what in the space of the subject may occur simultaneously or without differentiation.

The three stages of classical rhetoric are recalled by Jacqueline Chénieux-Gendron as follows: *inventio* “la recherche et le dénombrement des idées”; *dispositio*, “l’organisation des idées”; *elocutio*, “la mise en mots.”⁹ Chénieux-Gendron, discussing Breton, suggests that *écriture automatique* involves a reversal of this traditional order, with the word preceding the organisation and identification of ‘ideas’, these stages nevertheless occurring in the subsequent phases of reception, discussion, recuperation etc. A lesson that may be taken from this is that the poetic ‘moment’ or event is only one from a rhetorical process which, taken as a whole, is what constructs the object as it is received. In proposing in what follows to discuss examples from each oeuvre of what could be called ‘utopian narratives of poetry’, the intention is to suggest both an indivisibility of and a difference within the literary corpus of writers who are elsewhere ‘poets’. The idea is thus that the utopian narrative could be read as a para- if not a meta-poetic *dispositio* – that is, at base, a plan, a parallel attempt at structuring, within some intelligible scheme, of the elements at play or at stake in the notionally central (poetic) activity.

To posit an exact congruence would at base be over-rational, would fall into the caricature of a ‘project’ carried out at all levels with military precision. It would also

⁹ Chénieux-Gendron, Jacqueline. ‘La langue d’André Breton: rives et remous’ in Bonnefoy, Yves and Bombarde, Odile (eds.) *Poésie et Rhétorique*. Louvain: Lachenal & Ritter, 1997: 183-201, 191.

become the over-simplified argument that there is only really one idea – the general, theoretical schema of the utopian effort – involved in each new accession to speech. Almost as if, too broad for articulation as a lived idea or experience, it becomes the entirety of poetic ‘work’ as such. That the narratives to be discussed occur alongside ‘poetic’ efforts must be material to a consideration of their status, without, for all that, going so far as to say that they simply exemplify that which will be ‘carried out’ in the poetic writing proper. It would seem more plausible to argue for some genetic continuity between texts of a different order in a writer’s output, than adhere to a view of poetry as rupture. That, paradoxically, makes the examination of these narratives as *mises en scène*, imaginings from the outside, of ruptures which in the event are not, or only partially, realised, more interesting. In them, it will be argued, the structural logic of a ‘poetic’ effort in language is made the subject of an extended *mise en scène* or topological allegory in which the division of space itself becomes the key to a meta-poetic reflection. The ‘scenic architecture’¹⁰ which determines the progression of the narrative, providing a referential mechanism whereby the work can progress, is in each case ordered around an aporia – a failure of the narrating language¹¹. The significant ‘figure’ created by the practice of the writing subject, a practice at all times distinct from the achievement of ‘poetry’, can be identified from the ‘outside’ with that achievement. It would thus be possible to interpret these narratives as exercises in the psychology of expectation – or as attempts to give this expectation a notionally topological form in the absence of a recognisably ‘poetic’ form to sustain the nominal distinction.

The poetic recourse to ‘experience’ in the attempt to found speech in the ‘real’ can predictably end in the nightmare of the real receding, like the *Nautilus*, at precisely the speed at which perception advances. This dialectical point of contact between the *ici* and the *ailleurs* places the search for a sense of stability inside a logic of perpetual motion, wherein the role of language (poison or cure?) as an agent of anticipation is difficult to

¹⁰ This is a term borrowed from Henriette Levillain (*Le rituel poétique de Saint-John Perse*. Paris: Gallimard, 1977), who theorises Perse’s work primarily in terms of its notional spatial arrangements, as “une œuvre dont le développement structurel ne se fonde ni sur l’image, ni sur le rythme, ni sur la syntaxe du récit, ni sur la référence aux éléments, mais sur l’architecture scénique.” (14)

circumscribe. Prose within the ‘utopian narrative’ relays the ‘poetic’ as an inference, a derived possibility indirectly sensed. The figurations of the idea of poetry to be discussed can be seen to lie consistently in a negative definition, an engineered virtuality of the narrated space(s), an aporia circumscribed and designated but unattainable as it were by definition (in practice, through renunciation, incompleteness, or deferral into conditional and future tenses, and hypothesis) by the non-‘poetic’ texts in question. In each case, as it turns out, this virtuality in the narrative is conceived of and deferred as a *lieu*.

The poetic, thus, even as it is put forward as a maximal linguistic presencing of the real, is indissociable from the imaginative, speculative, differential tendencies of the mind in possession of language in the face of the world. It is useful in this respect to compare the ‘glissement’ of the mind as we have seen Daumal depict it (above) within a generally reproving discourse – as a weakness of the mind characterised as an essentially speculative, distracted intelligence – with Bonnefoy’s most celebrated *mise en scène* of the question, one which also dramatises a kind of primordial temptation suffered by the mind and entertained in words:

J’ai souvent éprouvé un sentiment d’inquiétude, à des carrefours. Il me semble dans ces moments qu’en ce lieu ou presque: là, à deux pas sur la voie que je n’ai pas prise et dont déjà je m’éloigne, oui, c’est là que s’ouvrait un pays d’essence plus haute, où j’aurais pu aller vivre et que désormais j’ai perdu.¹²

An interesting feature of Bataille’s pronouncement on experience quoted above is its success in maintaining the use of the singular (“un voyage au bout du possible de l’homme [...] elle-même la valeur et l’autorité”). Whereas for the writing subject, for whom this singularity begins and quite possibly ends with an authorial signature, experience is first of all the trial of plurality, of the diverse, within which the work of writing is carried on. Writing towards experience is thus that paradoxical conjunction of

¹¹ Daniel Bournoux’s description of *René Leys* as a ‘roman aporétique’ (Bournoux, Daniel. *Poétique de Segalen*. Éditions Chatelain-Julien, 1999: 62) is applicable to all three cases in the strong sense that the aporia is the explicit governing feature of the work, both its pretext and its limit.

¹² ‘L’Arrière-pays’ in *Récits en rêve*. Paris: Mercure de France, 1995: 9-76, 9.

the constant activity of choosing and the refusal to exclude elements of a possible whole. Segalen exemplifies this in the opening chapter of *Équipée*, the account of his ‘Voyage au Pays du Réel’:

Ce livre ne veut donc être ni le poème d’un voyage, ni le journal de route d’un rêve vagabond. Cette fois, portant le conflit au moment de l’acte, refusant de séparer, au pied du mont, le poète de l’alpiniste, et, sur le fleuve, l’écrivain du marinier, et, sur la plaine, le peintre de l’arpenteur ou le pèlerin du topographe, se proposant de saisir au même instant la joie dans les muscles, dans les yeux, dans la pensée, dans le rêve, – il n’est ici question que de chercher en quelles mystérieuses cavernes du profond de l’humain ces mondes divers peuvent s’unir et se renforcent à la plénitude.¹³

The enterprise of writing towards the prospect of a ‘deep’ internal unity at the core of ‘self’ is not imaginable for Segalen without a correlative in the movement through physical space. “Ce n’est point au hasard que doit se dessiner le voyage. A toute expérience humaine il faut un bon tremplin terrestre. [...] C’est donc à travers la Chine, - grosse impératrice d’Asie, pays du réel réalisé depuis quatre mille ans, - que ce voyage se fera.”¹⁴ It is in respect of this outer journey that he develops his celebrated opposition between ‘Réel’ and ‘Imaginaire’¹⁵. This cannot simply be boiled down to an opposition between the prospecting activity of the mind and an objective reality of physical things. It

¹³ ‘Équipée’ in *Œuvres complètes II*, op. cit. 261-320, 266.

¹⁴ Ibid. 267.

¹⁵ These terms have of course since gone on to play illustrious roles in the thought of other figures. While reference to the ‘real’ and the ‘imaginary’ in the present work should not be taken to refer exclusively to their existence as terms of art in Segalen’s reflection, it seems impossible to advise that they should be accorded their ‘everyday’ meanings. While the dominant connotation in present-day ‘Theory’ is a connection with the work of Lacan (see Bowie, Malcolm. ‘Symbolic, Imaginary, Real ... and True’ in *Lacan*. London: Fontana (Modern Masters), 1991: 88-121) other possible sources of the term ‘imaginaire’, more consonant with a general meaning, include the *École des Annales* and also the work of Gilbert Durand (e.g. *Les structures anthropologiques de l’imaginaire*. Paris: Seuil, 1963.) Any reference to an established set of symbolic associations, via for example reference to works by Eliade – any attempt to establish an archetype of the kind that is actually treated as such by Daumal in *Le Mont Analogue* – is an appeal to such a broader, anthropological or cultural concept of the ‘imaginaire’, which might thus be thought of as a repertory of established and shared forms, ways of representing or symbolising complex ideas which are typically linked to mythological belief systems. In that what are being studied here are individually authored works of literature, it would seem logical to assert that an author could have an

is rather a duality at the heart of experience itself, the passage, in experience, of the objective into the aspectual and the modification of the aspect thereby, which makes the literary experience at once both a grounding one (from it emerges a text of the journey) and one in which the certainties of a moment never quite resolve the play of contending concepts once and for all. Hence we find Segalen warning himself out loud:

Mais n'être dupe ni du voyage, ni du pays, ni du quotidien pittoresque, ni de soi!
La mise en route et les gestes et les cris au départ, et l'avancée, les porteurs, les chevaux, les mules et les chars, les jonques pansues sur les fleuves, toute la sequelle déployée, auront moins pour but de me porter vers le but que de faire incessamment éclater ce débat, doute pénétrant et fervent qui, pour la seconde fois, se propose: l'Imaginaire déchoit-il ou se renforce quand on le confronte au Réel?¹⁶

The order of appearance of the players in this confrontation makes it clear that the *Imaginaire* is the prior condition and content of language, the positive head-start of the mental over the physical in the brewing of experience. Initially the *Réel* is what, it is imagined, will confound this immaculate order inhabited in the mind ("Car j'habite une chambre aux porcelaines, un palais dur et brillant où l'Imaginaire se plaît.") But the projected journey is that which will allow the traveller to write outside of those excursions from present reality attempted and built on the authority of language alone. The interest of the journey therefore, more than in the question of possibility which it opens up, is in the becoming-language of the *Réel* and the consequent attainment by such writing of a different status for the writing subject: "Les mules, les chars, les chevaux et les hommes de bât auront moins pour moi de valeur à passer les montagnes, qu'à me passer par-dessus ce col rocailleux: si le Réel avait aussi sa valeur verbale et son goût?"¹⁷

individual 'imaginaire'. If this is true, however, all three authors here can be seen to various extents to draw their individual imaginaries from collective sources.

¹⁶ *Équipée* Ch. 2, op. cit. 267. The question, appearing in the first chapter as 'doute pénétrant et fervent', is repeated by the narrator here verbatim.

¹⁷ Both quotations *ibid.* 267, 268.

The circularity of the complex [real-materiality-imaginary-subject] is a matter of continual demonstration in the writings of Gaston Bachelard, who systematically depicts the projection of the state of the subject onto the materially resonant external world. Bachelard is in particular suggestive on the connections between subject-hood and the ‘real’ of material ‘solidity’. *La terre et les rêveries de la volonté*¹⁸ represents his attempt to elaborate what he terms “une dynamologie du psychisme spécifiquement humain.” The material world stands not simply in a relation of object to the human mind, but as a catalyst and conductor to the creative tendencies of that subject – placing ‘work’ firmly in tandem with the imaginative work or *rêverie* of the subject. Only that which has been thoroughly, palpably imagined can become alive in the subject, ‘humanly’ real, the object of poetic ‘knowledge’ – that which integrates, through encounter, the imaginary into the real. Hence their indivisibility in the reading of ‘literary’ works. The process of realisation, accomplished through the encounter of a particular material quality, gratifies the subject, on this account, with the regained sense of its own wholeness. That sense is inextricable from an exultation of accrued potency – the subject’s reflected sense of its own creative powers:

En étudiant les images matérielles, nous y découvrirons [...] l’*imago* de notre énergie. Autrement dit, la matière est notre miroir énergétique; c’est un miroir qui focalise nos puissances en les illuminant des joies imaginaires. [...] les rêveries matérielles changent la dimension de nos puissances; elles nous donnent des impressions démiurgiques; elles nous donnent des illusions de la toute-puissance.¹⁹

An especially salient point for the perspective adopted here is Bachelard’s domestication of the dynamic which he sets up in the subject around the material imagination – within the socio-cultural propensity to production, productivity, work. The adversity of the material stimulus is what solicits in the subject the incidentally autopoietic work action, but this adversity for the human subject, the linguistic agent, is not fundamentally

¹⁸ Paris: José Corti, 1948.

¹⁹ Ibid. 23-24

distinguishable according to whether the experience is effectively ‘material’ (i.e. physical) or in the first instance linguistic – both are encompassed in the imaginary processes of the subject: “Avec le mot ‘dur’, le monde dit son hostilité et, en réponse, les rêveries de la volonté commencent.” The reflux from imagination to what is placed by the mind outside of itself – the real as theatre of possible action – relegates the imagination in a ‘reverie’ of wakefulness, indissociable from real action:

D’une manière plus précise, nous pouvons vérifier que, dans nos rêves mêmes, les images de la dureté sont très régulièrement des images de réveil; en d’autres termes, la dureté ne peut rester inconsciente, *elle réclame notre activité*.²⁰

Work, then, is theorised as the *jouissance* of an actual or imagined intervention into the order of things. Involving the subject in opposition to what opposes, its imagined resolution is not only that of the opposition, but of the subject itself, galvanised in the processes occurring around the external (‘real’) non-self. Being is unified, even as it is integrated, through work in the world:

Quand l’être se réveille c’est dans les images des objets durs que commencent les joies fortes. [...] Ainsi recommence la vie dynamique, la vie qui rêve d’intervenir dans le monde résistant. [...] Cette intégration [‘au monde’ of an ‘esprit mis en pièces’] n’est vraiment possible que si elle entraîne des actes coordonnés, des actes productifs, *bref les actes mêmes de l’être qui travaille*.²¹

In this light, the affective and conceptual overlap between sensation and ‘sense’ (*le sens*) becomes apparent. The assimilative work of writing makes them indissociable within the approach of the ‘real’. The ‘real’ of ‘experience’ imagined materially seems to confirm the working subject, to act as a unifier of the agent. The ‘work’ that concerns us here, that of the writing of ‘poetic’ texts, can be seen to have an especially complex relation to this imagination or willing of self in a relation with phenomenological space through

²⁰ Both quotes *ibid.* 64 and 72 (emphasis added.)

²¹ *Ibid.* 73 (emphasis added.)

categories and metaphors drawn from the perception of this space, and, hence, the competing discourses offering themselves as of the ‘real’. The solicitation of the real for the speaker, logically born in experience itself, appears to lead to little in the way of immediate affirmation. For each of the authors considered, it can be seen already, situatedness, rather than the source of an ontological certainty, is metabolised as a distress at whose root lies language, with its ability to reconfigure the placement of the subject as a displacement thinkable equally in terms of time or space. Segalen writes of the ‘scruples’ which, through the intimation of the ‘Real’ – at this point still of the order of a concept – invade his ‘chambre aux porcelaines’, spoiling the untrammelled enjoyment of his late-symbolist proclivities. Daumal ruefully describes an allergy to the here and now as the symptom of modern man’s alienation in the language that inhabits him at the expense of the ‘self’ (the eternally-betrayed, or deluded ‘tu’.) Bonnefoy actively savours that disquiet sown by the perfectibility installed on the horizon of the given by the linguistic imagination. In each case writing intervenes in a relation of non-coincidence between the subject and the physical experience of situation in respect of which its reflection is ongoing, in an attempt to respond to a felt contingency of the given.

The irruption of the ‘real’ into language leaves it free to float, as a kind of laudatory epithet²², along the entire gamut of postulated foundations, from the materialism of a Samuel Johnson refuting Bishop Berkeley “thus” to the much-caricatured ideality of the cleric’s ‘real’. With the ‘real’ become an object of language, a goal of writing, no absolute division of internal and external space would, for example, seem to be maintainable.²³ Their grounding interface in the physical surfaces of the individual body,

²² This superlative dimension of the semantic value of the ‘réel’ is – per Eliade – linked to the experience of the sacred, that is, the participation of physical objects in a form of transcendence. This, critically, shows the symbolic existence of the ‘real’, as that which – among the infinity of available forms and formless matter – resonates most wholly with the cosmology of the beholder. In the mythopoetic view, the real is what actually exceeds the simple fact of ‘being there’, the foundational (non-contingent) is what speaks to the speaker: “Un objet ou une action acquièrent une valeur et, ce faisant, deviennent réels, parce qu’ils participent, d’une manière ou d’une autre, à une réalité qui les transcende. Parmi tant d’autres pierres, une pierre devient sacrée – et, par conséquent, se trouve instantanément saturée d’être – parce qu’elle constitue une hiérophanie, ou qu’elle possède du mana, ou que sa forme accuse un certain symbolisme [...]” (Eliade, Mircea. *Le mythe de l’éternel retour*. Paris: Gallimard, 1949: 15)

²³ In parallel to a reflection on the ‘real’ as constitutive of a poetic concern, the coincidence of a reflection on space with that on poetic writing is linked to a conception of that writing as an art of presence, the

being an interface, is the point at which a discourse of the ‘real’ which attempts to separate what is traditionally attributed to the ‘subject’ from what can be conceived as being outside – if not without – that subject, begins to break down.²⁴ The discourse of ‘space’ can embrace all dimensions of this problem – inner and outer space, textual and merely textualisable space – and is the first solvent of any of those categories. The reality principle it makes available becomes the basis of continuity upon which qualities of the subject (situatedness, perception, imagination, language) impose discontinuities, attempt constructions.

A text which admirably switches between dimensions according to the necessity arising in and for subject-hood is *Mes propriétés* (1934)²⁵ by Henri Michaux. Beginning in a state of abstraction that uncannily resembles the blank page and navigating the correlative idea of total or pure possibility²⁶, the *je* of *Mes propriétés* concludes with a (typically grotesque) recourse to will-power:

Revenons au terrain. Je parlais de désespoir. Non, ça autorise au contraire tous les espoirs, un terrain. Sur un terrain on peut bâtir, et je bâtirai. Maintenant j’en suis sûr. Je suis sauvé. J’ai une base.

Auparavant, tout était dans l’espace, sans plafond, ni sol, naturellement, si j’y mettais un être, je ne la revoyais plus jamais. [...] Mon terrain, il est vrai, est

presence / present of the apprehension of the ‘real’ become a sort of present of the artwork through the work of the artist. ‘Presence’ frequently carries the connotation of a metaphysical / theological concept, concerned with the presencing of what is not ‘there’ before the presencing act. But by instituting its (absent) object in terms of what is ‘there’, a reflection on ‘presence’, which is often the meta-discourse of ‘presence’, makes of the physical world the limit as against which poetic work will be constituted – be it through respect, surpassing or abandonment as the case may be.

²⁴ “Nos sensations sont (...) à nos perceptions ce que l’action réelle de notre corps est à son action possible ou virtuelle. Son action virtuelle concerne les autres objets et se dessine dans ces objets; son action réelle le concerne lui-même et se dessine par conséquent en lui. Tout se passera donc enfin comme si, par un véritable retour des actions réelles et virtuelles à leurs points d’application ou d’origine, les images extérieures étaient réfléchies par notre corps dans l’espace qui l’environne, et les actions réelles arrêtées par lui à l’intérieur de sa substance. Et c’est pourquoi sa surface, limite commune de l’extérieur et de l’intérieur, est la seule portion de l’étendue qui soit à la fois perçue et sentie.” Bergson. *Matière et mémoire*. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1939: 58.

²⁵ In *Œuvres complètes I*, op. cit. 465-69.

²⁶ “Dans mes propriétés tout est plat, rien ne bouge [...] Nulle ombre.”; “[S]ouvent je voulus y disposer de belles avenues, je ferais un grand parc [...]”. Both *ibid.* 465.

encore marécageux. Mais je l'assécherai petit à petit et quand il sera bien dur, j'y établirai une famille de travailleurs. [...]

Il y aura toujours nombreuse compagnie. Vous savez, j'étais bien seul, parfois.²⁷

Michaux, especially in respect of the period in which *Mes propriétés* was written, is often described as a creator of 'imaginary' creatures and 'imaginary' *ailleurs*, and this is not an inaccurate view in itself. But what he does here to a rare degree of explicitness is to place the question of the 'imaginary', and thus of the figure as it emerges as a textual entity, in a dual relation with the question of space and the question of the viability – and givenness – of the writing subject. This subject is circumscribed in the first instance by what the resources of its situation (in time, space) allow it to accept as truth: "Au palier où il se trouve, l'athée ne peut pas croire en Dieu. Sa santé ne le lui permettrait pas."²⁸ The limit of the subject's capacity for adhesion (a unitary mode) is thus directly linked to the maintenance of the space of the subject itself. But this dynamic of retraction through 'lucidity' (bound to the circumstances) is set against the equally strong (and preceding) imperative of assertion:

Par hygiène, peut-être, j'ai écrit « Mes propriétés », pour ma santé./ Sans doute n'écrit-on pas pour autre chose.²⁹

There is a curious *mise en abyme* here, which takes us from the 'health' of the author reflecting on the creation of a text, via the conditions in which that work could occur and the comparable dispossession of the *je* of the piece itself, to a situation in which hypothesis and futurity become possible in an established, parametered space (*terrain*), thereby leading the *je* out of the solitude in which creation seems both impossible and necessary. The commentating author's 'health' is bound up with the production of a finished object (through statements made in an apologetic afterword – the book itself is complete) just as the continuation of the *je* is set up in an active imposition of form ('je bâtirai'.) A pantomime of physical effort results in the viability of a subject previously at

²⁷ Ibid. 469.

²⁸ 'Postface' to *Mes propriétés*. Ibid. 511.

²⁹ Ibid.

an entire loss. The *espace* in which the subject of the poem dissolves is discovered to have the potential of a *lieu* in which that subject can survive – while finding the strength to continue to question itself and to engage anew in practices of linguistic deferral.

2. Poetic placements

In Michaux's authorial commentary on the writing of *Mes propriétés*, the maintenance of what was termed the 'health' of the subject initiated work on the twin fronts of the real and the subject's implication in the real. The text of *Mes propriétés* was the site of an actual establishment of parameters – the work taking on the importance and function of a transitional object³⁰. It is an extreme, or contrasting, example of what can be observed under variable layers of 'real' effect in other writing. The activity of writing towards an of achievement of 'sense' can continually be seen to occur within the bounds of a situation / situated-ness (that is, a construction, memory or vocabulary of situation) with respect to a subject of the poem, whether implied or assumed in a *je*. 'Sense', which is neither the exclusivity nor the exclusion of the writing instance, bolsters the subject by optimising its relation with what it encounters as its immediate 'world' – that space which is bounded by the 'horizons' of the speaker becoming subject.

The refinement of a consideration of space in the question of *place*, the *lieu*, represents this human parameter to the utopian dynamic in the writing of experience. From a scene of 'pure' possibility, which is in effect no scene at all but a repertory of lines of development, this parameter is that of the conjunction of the problem of the 'real' with the problem of 'sense' in a tension played out and defined spatially. The question of the *lieu* is thus the referential confrontation with the problem of closure in poetic experience.

³⁰ "La description très fine que donne Winnicott du sevrage nous offre en somme un scénario d'acculturation fort suggestif. Ce processus ne peut s'effectuer sans ce que Winnicott appelle un «objet de transition», ni ce qu'il appelle une «aire intermédiaire d'expérience». [...] L'objet et le jeu auquel il donne lieu existent dans un espace intermédiaire qui a perdu sa subjectivité magique sans accéder encore à une complète objectivité. Ainsi, la magie infantile et sa toute puissance illusoire se transforment en ce que Winnicott appelle «la magie d'une vie imaginative et créative». [...] [L'objet de transition] permet aussi à Winnicott de rétablir ce «cercle de l'*Innenwelt* à l'*Umwelt*» dont Lacan avait proclamé la rupture définitive." Thomas Greene. *Poésie et magie*. Paris: Julliard, 1991: 86-87.

Construed as the totality of relations between the elements of an observable space, the *lieu*, through its semi-negation the horizon, is the paradox of meaning proffered and simultaneously withdrawn, deferred. The referential world comes to be experienced as a comment on the linguistic response it provokes, or which evolves in parallel with it. The typically ‘poetic’ moment is a privileged harmony between both – experienced as a transcending of each term. Such is the quality of experience in this extract from ‘Silence’ in *Sol absolu* by Lorand Gaspar, whose very title shows an awareness of the exceptional qualities of the poetic *lieu* – and the artistic commitment to the attribution of such qualities:

plus d’une fois à l’aube
dans le désert de Ram et de Toubéig
ou plus au sud sur les rives
orientales de la mer Rouge là où les
granits roses veinés de lave, grès tendres
et gypses aveuglants ralentissent leurs pentes
j’ai rêvé d’une genèse
l’univers naissait sans s’interrompre
non pas d’un ordre venu du dehors
mais ample mais plein de sa musique
d’être là caillou compact à l’infini
rempli par la danse dont vibre chaque son
foré dans la lumière –
fugue de courbures en clair et ombre
sans départ ni achèvement [...] ³¹

It appears that there are two texts involved in the construction of the *lieu* – the ‘text’ provided by the *lieu* itself, which is oriented to an outcome of ‘sense’ or the promise thereof to a greater or lesser extent, and the ‘text’ of the subject, the work or process of writing in the direction of ‘sense’, a consolidation of the writing instance via the

³¹ Gaspar, Lorand. ‘Silence’ in *Sol absolu*, Poésie Gallimard, 1982, p. 98.

encounter of the real. When, if one were to think of the poem as being in the nature of an event, space is resolved (by volition, by accident or by an inscrutable mixture of the two) into the experience (recognition) of a *lieu*, and a convergence of the texts of subject and place appears to become possible, the perspective of unity instated for the subject is at the same time a tendency of the *lieu* to its logical utopian limit as a *haut lieu*. This maximal figure is recurrent in the effort to reflect upon the unavoidable interdependence of what we have called texts of the subject and of the *lieu*. In her *Invention du paysage*, Anne Cauquelin argues for the necessity of attaching these two texts to the same source (the perceiving, interpreting, cultured subject), and thus, in the ‘recognition’ of the [‘beautiful’] landscape, for the visibility of an embedded idea of the ideal act of communication. In the recognition (which is typically presented as spontaneous, its encounter being of the order of an epiphany) of the *lieu* ‘par excellence’ what we are actually in a position to read would thus be the achieved release of an ideal act of communication – where subject and real confirm one another in the absolute coincidence of two texts in the one. The selected scene enjoys a foundational validity, a legitimacy which an overtly textual work could never hope to achieve alone.

Le paysage [à la différence d’une œuvre] n’a nul besoin de légitimation. Il semble se tenir tout seul, dans la perfection «naturelle». Tout se passe comme si s’établissait une transparence entre la «nature» et nous, sans intermédiaire. Le paysage serait transparent à ce qu’il présente. Nous aurions, grâce au paysage, un regard «vrai» sur les propriétés de la nature, que par ailleurs, avec la connaissance scientifique par exemple, nous devrions longtemps peiner pour percevoir et conceptualiser.³²

The particularisation of external space in a landscape is thus imbued with the ontological privilege of the ‘real’ insofar as it exhibits textual characteristics – which, in this analysis, are what actually occasion the settling of the gaze on a given particularisation over other possible configurations. The choice is all the more attractive, as it were, for the feeling of

³² Cauquelin, Anne. *L’invention du paysage* (2nd edition). Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2000: 108.

choice having been removed from the observer by the particularly textual quality of the landscape considered. This ‘necessity’ of the interaction, in which the real mirrors a pre-established imaginary form in the subject, which Cauquelin reads in terms of a model of optimal communication, gives rise to a visceral sense, one with both a deep non-intellectual, non-discursive as well as a conscious component, of the im-mediacy of the contact between subject and the external world, that the subject, in other words, has entered into communion – in this case – with ‘nature’³³:

La perfection est atteinte quand on croit qu’il n’y a nulle médiation entre la nature – extériorité totale – et la forme dans laquelle on la perçoit. Effacé le travail, le labeur, la fabrication. Effacés les intermédiaires, les chaînes de raisons et de justifications. Souvent pour le paysage, et quelquefois seulement pour une œuvre, ce qui est donné comme appartenant à un système radicalement étranger à notre fonctionnement mental (la nature physique, l’Autre) tombe d’accord et résonne dans cette construction même: la nature, pure extériorité, est alors aussi pure intériorité. Nous avons le sentiment intime d’une perfection, d’un rapport de nature à nature. Il s’en va d’une double garantie: la nature (extérieure) garantit le paysage et le paysage garantit – se porte garant – du naturel de notre nature (intérieure). Cette double garantie bouclée sur elle-même *est modèle ou référence pour une communication parfaite*. Comment en effet échapper à l’assurance que nous faisons partie du «Même», de ce monde, le nôtre, que notre esprit participe de son esprit, puisque le paysage nous donne la clef de l’accord harmonique avec la nature.

*L’œuvre d’art sera alors perçue à travers le modèle de ce ravissement, elle sera parfaite dans la mesure où elle reproduit cette transparence parfaite.*³⁴

³³ This being a particular denomination of what Pierre Jourde terms ‘l’authentique’, cornerstone of “le mythe d’une autorité du réel, susceptible de régenter la parole” – the dominant scene of which, since the end of the 18th Century, has been a stereotypical approach of landscape: “L’homme face au paysage, statique, calme, s’abandonne en toute sérénité à la puissance des choses, comme si le rideau des apparences et des constructions mentales artificielles, dans ce moment privilégié, se déchirait. Ce qu’il a devant lui et en lui n’a plus rien à voir avec l’expérience quotidienne dans sa tiédeur et son incertitude.” Jourde, Pierre. *Littérature et authenticité (Le réel, le neutre, la fiction)*. Paris: L’Harmattan, 2000: 18, 26.

³⁴ Cauquelin op. cit. 111 (emphasis added.)

The cultural pre-emption of the real as textual template, which redirects the experience of adhesion in the face of the natural world to the stabilising mediation of acculturated forms, is reminiscent of accounts of a Lacanian Imaginary, where all forms are resumed in the (discredited) shape of a projecting 'subject', but also of the Nietzschean critique of projection as 'anthropomorphism', the all-too-'human' factor of the intellectual or linguistic effort to engage with the world being the illusion that symbolic forms can provide real knowledge of what they make amenable to the controlling urges of the subject³⁵. There is both a serious critical function as well as a *jouissance* of lucidity involved in 'revealing' the autopoietic quality of our impressions of experience as truth, beauty or some distinctively sublime dosage of one with the other. It prevents total adhesion to any discourse of the absolute, even those which attempt to construct this in a fully ironic, personalised, subjectivised manner. It is arguable, as for example with Clement Rosset's theory of the 'real' and its 'double', that the (western) mind builds its lived reality out of the constant tension between that which in fact happens and the absent possibility which the event of the present continually cancels out (somehow more psychologically alive, consistent, 'real' despite the fact of our never having experienced it, its non-occurrence.) On this version it would seem possible to argue that the archetype of the *lieu* could sustain a cultural existence long after considerations of how things actually 'are' have contrived to make such versions seem wilfully quaint. As the absent or coming focus of a 'poetics' the *lieu* is prescriptive before ever being ontophanic :

Le sentiment d'être dupé par la réalité [...] d'être constamment trompé par ce faux réel qui se substitue in extremis au véritable réel, qu'on n'a jamais vu et qui n'aura jamais lieu, ce sentiment d'être joué pourrait être rendu par l'expression populaire selon laquelle certaines réalités, certains actes, ne sont, précisément, «pas de jeu». Pas seulement d'ailleurs certaines réalisations ou certains actes : c'est toute chose qui, en s'accomplissant, se met ainsi «hors jeu». [...] [O]n pourra dire que l'événement qui s'est produit n'est pas le « bon »; le bon événement qui aurait seul le droit de se dire véritablement réel, est justement celui

³⁵ See Greene, op. cit. 94-95.

qui n'a pas eu lieu, étouffé avant de naître par son double truqué. L'événement réel, au sens courant du terme, est ainsi toujours «l'autre du bon».³⁶

Philosophically the 'concept' of the *lieu* has proven itself of some resource to an approach which attempts to co-opt elements of a discourse of objectivity into a conceptualisation of the event of experience. With respect to the *lieu*, Ghitti, for example, equates 'expérience' with 'l'intemporel', in opposition to 'histoire', in respect of which there exists no experiencing subject. It becomes the phenomenological guarantor of a certain metaphysical discourse, placing the experiencing subject much in the same position as that of the subject-less group of ritual or 'pre-linguistic' communication, already encountered in our discussion of 'poetic' community:

“Ni l'origine, ni le destin, ni l'événement, ni l'époque ne sont des concepts entièrement historiques: ils sont des manifestations de l'intemporel dans l'histoire. [...] L'époque est le suspens de l'intemporel dans le temps. [...] L'époque ennuie et frustre notre attente. Elle ne nous expose plus à la puissance des lieux, car le suspens de l'intemporel est celui des lieux qui le manifestent. L'époque est utopique. Elle se voue aux images. [...] *Les puissances qui manifestent l'intemporel s'éprouvent dans l'expérience des lieux.* [...] L'originaire est ce que vise toute expérience. Pour celui qui l'endure, *l'expérience topique fait à chaque fois origine*, c'est-à-dire qu'elle réoriente ses durées.”³⁷

The language of such pronouncements, comparable to the discourse on origins instanced in the remarks of Agamben and L. Jenny quoted in Part I, leads us directly back to the poetic ambition of a central validity in the establishment of the subject's relation to the world. Here the experience is such as to minimise collective models for the recuperation of individual experience – the text of the *lieu* is an affirmation of the validity *per se* of the text the subject brings to it. The *lieu* facilitates a subjectivisation of the ontological – the subject ontologises itself, as it were, via the *lieu*. The anthropomorphic turn is assumed

³⁶ Rosset, Clément. *Le réel et son double*. Paris: Gallimard, 1984: 46-47 (emphasis added.)

³⁷ Ghitti, Jean-Marc. *La parole et le lieu. Topique de l'inspiration*, op. cit. 58-59 (emphasis added.)

rather than elided. The *lieu*, topos, in addition to doing metaphorical work in binding speech and a philosophical discourse of space together, establishes speech outside of that frailty, the intuition of which is a founding apprehension of the poetic.

The historicisation of what is instinctively ‘experienced’ as originary, a-historical or epiphanic, a move which renders the subject responsible for its own textual choices even as it extends the domain of textual choice to the horizon in force, does not, thus, eliminate the fascination or attraction which harmonic accord with the ‘real’, even critically anatomised, can continue to exercise. For those who write with an awareness of the question – it will be attempted to show that this is the case of all three of the writers considered here – the balance lies rather to be achieved within writing between the search for the configuration of the real commanding adhesion (*lieu*), the movement towards recognition, and the critical reflex in regard to this movement itself. If irony could here be considered as the simultaneous awareness of the temptations of lucidity and those of blindness (blindness, that is, to the mechanisms and energies of perception), and their provisional overcoming in the accession to speech, then the modern poetic refusal to discard the question of the *lieu* in attempts to circumscribe and articulate the poetic can be depicted as an ironic effort. Ironic not in the sense of an undermining of its explicit side, but in the attempt to refine the response of adhesion to the real without killing the experience of ‘l’accord harmonique’, the assurance of being a part of the ‘Même’ (Cauquelin), or, more generally, the fragile conviction that it should be ‘humanly’ possible to continue to aspire to or imagine such ‘accord’. It is a conviction that is both recognised as valid and made subject to caution in a 1990 text by Yves Bonnefoy:

Qu’est-ce qui fait l’être d’un lieu? La simultanéité de ses éléments, leur relation mutuelle, et une évidence qui en découle. Là où la pensée qui se fait par notions et lois, qui généralise, qui classifie, ne percevrait que désordre, que ce qu’elle nomme hasard, là on en vient à comprendre qu’ici, dans ce lieu, eh bien, ici, tout est ainsi, sans alternative: et c’est précisément de cette dissipation de l’impression de hasard, sinon même de la catégorie que ce mot dénomme, que pourrait *remonter en nous, si nous savons nous donner au lieu, ce sentiment de réalité*

absolue qui fait accepter le temps qui passe et la mort. *Pleinement rejoint, le lieu serait le salut. Mais là aussi bien est le piège.*³⁸

The achieved *lieu*, in this view, inseparable from the response it invites from the ‘poetic’ mind, is a transposition of poetry’s ideal self-conception: the dream of the organisation of elements, and their reception, in a manner which would provide the mind with a perfect embodiment of what it sought – the picture, as it were, of its own necessity. This mirage of self-possession in self-abandonment, a lucidity which acts as an existential comfort through the ‘rightness’ of the cosmos to hand, the figured world as it responds to the questioning subject with a dazzling tautology, lie deep in the imaginary of poetic completeness – the set of those scenes that would, it is anticipated, absorb the dynamic giving rise to poetic texts.

For Bonnefoy the pitfall in this logic, that is, in the congruence of texts achieved (or suggested) by the *lieu*, is that the adhesion first experienced and then expressed is capable, once activated in language, of indefinite repetition and erosion – as the properties of the signifier take over from the (non-linguistic and hence hierarchically superior) links of the originating contact between the subject and what both exceeds and confirms it. Bonnefoy identifies the mechanism whereby what began in a moment in which language, in the mutual adequacy of subject and *lieu*, took on the consistency of being, becomes the travesty of all elements of the relation, in an indefinite prolongation of writing. Poetic writing thus, as the evidence of a subject meeting the real with the fullest effort of its resources, needs to cut itself short, to refuse to go any farther, in order to remain open to the sense of its necessity:

Par une dialectique impossible sans doute à désamorcer – sinon, précisément, dans l’expérience mystique – les réalités mêmes qui nous avaient appelés ont été transformées par nous en signifiants de notre langage, en moments de notre écriture. Et si l’idée du lieu demeure la voie, sa pratique n’est plus que l’oxymore

³⁸ ‘Existe-t-il de «hauts» lieux?’ (1990), in *Entretiens sur la poésie*, op. cit. 352-59, 353 (emphasis added.)

*métaphysique qui nous parle d'incarnation mais cautionne en fait notre imaginaire.*³⁹

The tensions in this statement, and their implications for the 'poetic' practice in language with which Bonnefoy continually and explicitly identifies himself, are important. Over time the real that has entered into reciprocity with the subject finds itself debased in language, language become separate from the original relation to its object(s). From the initial point where it was possible to imagine an act in language fully responsive to the enmeshing of subject and *lieu* and their reciprocal conferral of a status or form of reality, language returns in the eye of the poet to the status of a generator of alienation from what it is not. This is to be avoided as, in poetry, language at the point of its irruption, its instigation of the signifying process, had made it possible to imagine an overcoming of this alienation (denoted in the meta-poetic vocabulary by terms such as 'meaning', 'presence', 'truth'.) To prolong this imagining is however to render its object wholly imaginary, with all of the half-spoken compromises and self-delusions that language can pass with existence on behalf of the speaker. And yet, says Bonnefoy, "l'idée du lieu demeure la voie". The *way* – which if taken in practice leads somewhere else, to illusion or self-delusion. The equation of the two spaces – *lieu* and *voie* – is perhaps the most formidable, and for Bonnefoy recurrent, of the potential contradictions of poetic work⁴⁰. It conjugates rhetorically two opposing ways of spatialising sense, and maintaining them beyond a conception of poetic practice – as if the knowledge one could sustain of the finalities of poetry were fully divorced from any experience that could be directly engaged of it. As if, in other words, 'poetry' as a distinguishable practice were dependent for its existence on an unrealisable self-conception – a *lieu* of the order of the absolute, which it was poetry's blessing or curse to never quite be inside.

That the dilemma of the *haut lieu* can result in a practice of the narrative, just as (if we provisionally essentialise the terms) an absence of poetry can result in a recourse to prose, is an evident corollary of the conjugation of *lieu* and *voie*, of outcome and process,

³⁹ Ibid. 354 (emphasis added.)

⁴⁰ One to which we will return in greater detail in section 5 below.

as aspects of the same problem. Blanchot's idiosyncratic definition of the 'récit', that is, of a certain literary form whose distinction he (re)invented, is worth recalling in this regard. The *récit* is thought to embody – perhaps in its own way to reconcile – certain contradictory features. First of all, it is theorised as an event in itself – this is a commitment to the autonomy of the literary text, a theme to which, in respect of poetry (which again takes the logic to its extreme), we will return in Part III. But secondly, and immediately, the event of the *récit* is assimilated to the deferral and the awaiting of the 'event', and the space in which – through a kind of mutual calling – event and *récit*, maintained separately in their names, are co-realised in a sort of mystical union. The *récit* is thought, at the same time, in terms of the movement towards a point in all respects comparable with the aporetic 'poetic' figure at the absent heart of the narratives to be discussed here – what is more, it is the aporetic quality itself which identifies this point as constitutive of the literary event of the *récit*: the *parti pris* is again that of an impossibility which realises the literary in the perpetual turning of the 'literary' towards its own realisation. This absent point – to, as it were, seal the circuit – is itself a creation of the effort to attain it. A sceptic might see in this an enterprise of spurious self-justification couched in a logic closer to 'pata– than to metaphysics, albeit with the customary gravity of the latter. Yet it describes uncannily the mechanisms of deficit within unity which prop up the space of the poetic within literary work:

Le récit n'est pas la relation de l'événement, mais cet événement même, l'approche de cet événement, le lieu où celui-ci est appelé à se produire, événement encore à venir et par la puissance attirante duquel le récit peut, lui-aussi, se réaliser. [...] Le récit est mouvement vers un point, non seulement inconnu, ignoré, étranger, mais tel qu'il ne semble avoir, par avance et en dehors de ce mouvement, aucune sorte de réalité, si impérieux cependant que c'est de lui seul que le récit tire son attrait, de tel manière qu'il ne peut même «commencer» avant de l'avoir atteint, mais cependant c'est seulement le récit et le mouvement imprévisible du récit qui fournissent l'espace où le point devient réel, puissant et attirant.⁴¹

⁴¹ Blanchot, Maurice. *Le livre à venir*. Paris: Gallimard, 1959: 15.

Blanchot makes the connection, or the analogy, explicit in his own thinking, between the *récit* (product / producer of the impossible ‘lieu’), the ‘other time’ instated in this textual space (which we might compare to the remarks of Ghitti above on the *lieu* as the site of the ‘intemporel’, the exit from a historical temporality) and the rhetorical figure of *chant* (which could be taken here to designate an imagined pure form of the ‘poetic’), the accomplishment of which (at another mythical or future point) is again imagined in terms of distance:

Le récit a pour progresser cet autre temps, cette autre navigation qui est le passage du chant réel au chant imaginaire, ce mouvement qui fait que le chant réel devient, peu à peu quoiqu’aussitôt (... le temps même de la métamorphose) imaginaire, chant énigmatique, qui est toujours à distance et qui désigne cette distance comme un espace à parcourir et le lieu où il conduit comme le point où chanter cessera d’être un leurre.⁴²

The utopian narratives of poetry to be examined do on a level of practice what remarks such as those cited serve to render transposable, interchangeable. While allowing the poet to literally ground a practice, occurring elsewhere in writing, in a structuring fiction of the ‘real’ – and there is much that is knowingly archaic and ordering in the authorial intelligence on display in each case – they ultimately dramatise the separation of the idea of ‘poetry’ from its practice, and the impenetrability of this latter for those very mechanisms which make its progress imaginable. The relevant works of Segalen, Daumal and Bonnefoy, which in their chronology cover the entirety of the 20th Century, abound in movements, documentary and imagined, between places of imagined or dreamed-of symbolic attainment, in hesitations and persistence on the verge of something other than that uncertainty in which the process of writing is ongoing.

Read as works of prose they appear as statements of the unattainable status of poetry; whereas read in the light of the oeuvres of which each forms a part, they become

⁴² Ibid.17

considerably more problematic – constructing modern poetry as constituted by its own ‘failures’, but paradoxically validated by the refusal of its own ideal self.⁴³ What the utopian narratives provide then is not a set of satisfyingly neat parallels to the philosophy of other writing proffered from the same sources as ‘poetic’, but a definition of the threshold of such a ‘poetic’ writing: the point at which it becomes possible to conceive of such writing, but at which its properties remain substantially out of reach – the canonical figure of poetic prospection that is also, as a title from Bonnefoy’s poetic work (*Dans le leurre du seuil*) emphasises, a figure of assumed subjective error.

Central to the feasibility of a poetics based on such irony, if modern poetry is not to be depicted as a pure rehash of Romantic aporetics and aspirations, will be the actual subsistence of forms which make the possibility of accord something more deeply necessary than a concept or hypothesis. If Cauquelin is right in assimilating the ‘recognition’ a given landscape with that of a perfect or ideal act of communication, is our notion of a perfect act of communication any less context-bound, any less mutable, than has been the landscape throughout the development of human inhabitation? Is the communication imaginable as ideal a matter of observable continuity, or of historically-conditioned rupture? For inhabiting the earth has, as a matter of the fact of modern history at least, been the question of its transformation to the point where a ‘nature’ or a ‘real’ with which the subject could imagine itself in a stable, reassuring accord, has become increasingly hypothetical.

⁴³ Each of the ‘utopian narratives’ can also be understood as dramatising what is to some extent a failure of representation. This is articulated by Dee Reynolds in terms of *différance* occurring in the process of imagination itself in her work on ‘imaginary spaces in Rimbaud, Kandinsky et al (Reynolds, Dee. *Symbolist aesthetics and early abstract art: sites of imaginary space*. Cambridge University Press, 1995.) The failure of representation in the treatment of the ‘lieu’ corresponds, to use a Nietzschean vocabulary, to a *dionysian* moment – where the representational (apollonian) activity either enters song or silence (which are related thereby, thinkable together, also.) The dionysian moment, to import terms from Bataille, could be thought to represent the point at which the ‘intime’ takes over from the ‘réel’, the world of external relations. It is thus the point at which poetic work is most available to idealisation as pure, radically autonomous or univocal – as language which continues to found ‘socially’, but which does so purely in terms of its own source (hence the tendency to equate lyrisme and the achievement by the subject of self-presence, even though the dionysian moment is classically one of madness, of loss of control.) In Part III it will be argued that the *non-lieu* of the poetic text proper steps back from this conclusion, with something of the order of a principle of construction being maintained.

This resistance of contemporary spaces to a process of projection-recognition is at the heart of debates on the built environment – which is also a debate on sacredness, human sociability, and the production of meaning in emerging or contemporary conditions. As an over-simplified dichotomy it could be articulated in terms of a passage from the rural to the urban, the problem being in part that that very distinction has become blurred, sidelined. The Los Angeles described by Jean-Luc Nancy in this passage from *La ville au loin*⁴⁴ displays some of the same resistance to ‘sense’ observable in the ‘imaginary’ space of Michaux’s *je* above, but this time the space is that looked to by the subject as ‘real’:

En fait, c’est à peine s’il y a des murs, et donc aussi à peine des rues. Il y a des lignes, des axes d’alignement et d’espacement auxquels abordent les brèves pelouses qui mènent au seuil des maisons. Les maisons elles-mêmes sont à peine bâties, elles sont posées le long de ces lignes. On dirait qu’ils refusent les signes du «bâtir» [...] Même la pierre ou la brique, lorsqu’on les trouve, évoquent seulement de loin l’art ou le geste de bâtir. Bâtir et habiter éloignent leur sens: on pose et on se pose, on expose, on dépose. [...] À Los Angeles, rien ne rassemble, ni l’Hôtel de Ville ni *downtown*, le centre-ville. À Los Angeles (on dit L.A., nom siglé, clair et léger pour l’énorme étendue brumeuse), les nœuds des *freeways* s’enlèvent au-dessus de cet espace sans lieu, sans localité.⁴⁵

The *de facto* erosion of the *lieu* in this standard example of the ‘post-modern’ environment occurs in parallel with an exacerbation of the disparity between language and physical world, between name and place. With an unboundedness of space – the constitution of physical space as one of pure connectivity which is evidently of a piece with the ambient discourses of virtual- or cyber-‘reality’ – goes a language of infinite, horizontal association. The space in question is analogous to an infinite narrative rather than the paradox of open containment of the poem-*lieu*. A move away from the earlier

⁴⁴ Again, to choose a contemporary example should not be to suggest an absolute newness of the question. The question posed by the essentially transient modern urban experience is already celebratedly present in Baudelaire. For the 20th Century the orders of possibility introduced by the city and the establishment in the experience of urban space of new kinds of poetic sensibility are exemplified in texts such as Aragon’s *Paysan de Paris* (1926).

⁴⁵ *La ville au loin*. Paris: Fayard (Mille et une nuits), 1998: 14-15.

attempts to think the *lieu* in terms of its possible closure (it being understood that the thinking is in part a function of that closure not actually being achieved) is thus understandably of massive cultural consequence, giving rise in equal measure to jubilant imaginings of infinite process and transition, and to a somewhat patrician reserve, which situates artistic divergence from the contemporary in resistance to the ineluctability of the dissolution of the *lieu* as a viable model for work. In Nancy's case, the vision of the American 'ville' as a negation of the philosophy of locality (*lieu*), does not lead him to a wholesale rejection of the possibility of recognition. He does not completely dispose with the paradigm of the *lieu*. Rather, developing a number of its constituent themes, he argues that this created mutation in the disposition of the built environment calls into question the attitude of residence, of fixity, to which the traditional *lieu* has given rise in poetico-philosophical reflection. Specifically, it is the Heideggerian interpretation of Hölderlin which is at issue here. The world has changed, and what it means to be human is not thinkable independently of this fact (“[L]’homme est l’incessante altération des formes de l’humanité.”⁴⁶) With closure no longer thinkable in a scenario of unbounded profusion, the subject would need to accept the dynamic nature of its own presence – experiencing this rather as passage. While the resolution of the question of the *lieu* is depicted as definitively past, the philosopher's problematic retains its imprint in thinking the new situation. The contemporary, urbanised *lieu* is resuscitated by Nancy in its metapoetic function, as what he calls a 'lieu délocalisé' – one in which sense occurs, if at all, in fragments between which the subject is constituted as pure movement:

Ainsi la ville est en soi sans jamais revenir à soi, et chaque conscience de soi y est aussi conscience de la ville qui est sans conscience. [...] La ville n'autorise guère à énoncer «je suis», mais plutôt «j'y suis». L'espace plié et déplié y précède l'être. On ne peut pas offrir de vue panoramique ou de synthèse, mais toujours seulement un vieillard assis seul sur sa chaise dans une rue droite et blanche de Rosolini, un groupe d'écoliers attendant le bus à Kyoto, les mobylettes soulevant la poussière ocre à un carrefour de Ouagadougou [...] images qui passent les unes

⁴⁶ Ibid. 61.

sous les autres, vues superposées dans une identité brouillée, dans la mêlée des lieux incertains, des lieux de passage, des lieux délocalisés.⁴⁷

It is interesting to speculate on the extent to which, in a view as sensitive to the artifices involved in the circumscription and imposition of sense via the *lieu* as that cited, the ‘*lieu délocalisé*’ could itself be said to reflect textualities reminiscent of more recent technologies such as photography or television in its seeing past those which have played a large role in the poetic, the written. In claiming to eschew the panoramic, this approach of the unlocalisable urban space has the universalising, transitive powers of the TV screen. In standing outside those spaces which, in its passing, it inhabited in the mode of the *ville* itself, the subject seems paradoxically to arrogate a greater power to itself. Disengaging from each of the *lieux-dits* so as to encompass the next, recognition occurs in respect of the movement which is outside any particular one of the named spaces rather than within each of them as situation if not traditional *lieu*. Curiously, the sense, or promise of sense, which raises its head here is reminiscent of that absolute which in a more traditional view was projected into a space as yet unattained:

Ce qui reste de la ville, une fois passées la cité et la citadelle, une fois passés le bourg et le faubourg, c’est précisément encore, au-delà de ses formes, l’expansion et la prolifération, c’est la contagion des lointains, la communication disséminée, l’énergie fragile d’un sens inédit, rebelle à toute résidence.⁴⁸

What it is important to take from this radicalisation of the problem of the real experienced in *lieu* is the closing insistence of the argument on the prospect of a new ‘sense’ which, if not trapped in the frontality-centrality of the traditional rapport with the *lieu*, nevertheless arises – even only as a prospect – from a renegotiation of the experience of physical space. The resourcing of sense for the subject, in other words, remains a matter of (ever more complicated) appropriations of the data of place, the (ever

⁴⁷ Ibid. 60.

⁴⁸ Ibid. 61.

more vertiginous) attempt to harmonise a lucidity as to the complex processes subtending individual experience with the pull of such experience on the subject.

In rethinking the *lieu* in terms of passage and transformation (or at least in being representative of attempts by many to do so), Nancy is attempting to cope with the cascade of solicitations provided by contemporary experience of space, and to imagine a response which somehow marries the open-weave of this new reality without being totally dispersed. Though the re-formulated prospect of 'sense' he suggests may be argued to arise in conjunction with a stage of human development which forces its emergence, it is possible to ask whether in certain 'poetic' ideas of *lieu* as a place of possible resolution, as a domain of sense not always this side of the horizon, there is not already a relatively long-established play between the imagined possibility of 'recognition' (with the ideality of a communicative act which such might contain) and the experience of work as the absence of this sense, its unrealised if not purely hypothetical character. Jean-Pierre Richard's introductory comments to his *Onze études sur la poésie moderne*, studies which deal with a selection of poetic-physical universes generally greatly distanced from the post-modern megapolis, were pointing, already almost forty years ago, to a conclusion of this kind – making of the 'natural' landscape the poetic question which may be continued, but never entirely discontinued, by other means, in other contexts, other places :

Dans l'avancée de [la] recherche [de la poésie moderne] surgissent des couples d'antinomies concrètes: proche et lointain, instantané et durable, ouvert et clos, expansif et replié, superficiel et profond, discret et continu, opaque et transparent [...]. Derrière ces oppositions, les creusant et fondant en paysage, un affrontement plus cardinal encore: celui de ce qui est et de ce qui n'est pas. Dans le champ du senti se découvrent donc tôt ou tard, pour le poète d'aujourd'hui, l'obstacle ou la cassure; la rêverie y traverse la mort, la limite, la fragmentation, l'absence. Chiffres d'un être à la fois fulgurant et retiré – *mais dont le retrait même nous assignerait plus intensément encore au questionnement de notre ici.* ⁴⁹

⁴⁹ Richard, Jean-Pierre. *Onze études sur la poésie moderne*. Paris: Seuil, 1964: 8 (emphasis added.)

3. Segalen before the Forbidden City.

Victor Segalen's work abounds in structures – embryonic or realised – for the monumentalisation of subjectivity, the assumption of a view within the *faux-semblant* of a cultured omniscience. The principle of the aesthetic project is typically located there where the constructs of form and of subject mesh ambiguously together. Within the outwardly sovereign gesture of the work is acknowledged to lie the viewpoint in process towards an imagined sovereign position. At the same time, the fantasy of the structuring conceit is an essentially literary one – one that can evaporate just as quickly as it 'materialised'. Quite as much as an apprehension of imaginary licence, this is a quality of which Segalen was aware within the 'real':

Terre jaune. Architectures: tours et donjons, parois, murailles, créneaux, écrans et lames affilées; pics aigus, tout est inattendu, minable et miné, doux à l'œil, par exemple, velouté, honnête et fort riche... mais si précaire, si «qui va s'effondrer». Image de la Chine?⁵⁰

Writing becomes the site of a kind of ephemeral solidity, a *faux-semblant* of physical imposition. That each of the levels of solidity could correspond to a different kind (if not form) of writing ('solidity' being equated with the conventional, public, de-subjectivised character of a given utterance) can be confirmed in a reading of Segalen's *Fils du Ciel*⁵¹ – where Imperial records and indirect speculation are inter-cut with the lyrical pining of the subject-imagined-sovereign himself (the unhappy Emperor, whose real vocation is, we are to believe, for poetic expression.) The armature of that book's formal conception is, as with *Stèles*, like a protective shell around the fragile substance of personally-assumed speech – this latter however, despite its highly allusive qualities, being by virtue of the form (all interpretative intelligence is focussed on the Emperor) that which comes closest to a truth-effect or a semblance of intimate knowledge – in spite, that is, of the patent incidental naivety of the Emperor in respect of his 'official' role and persona. The

⁵⁰ Note (dated '17 août 1909') in 'Briques et Tuiles', *Œuvres complètes I*, op. cit. 870.

⁵¹ 'Le Fils du Ciel. Chronique des jours souverains.' *Œuvres complètes II*, op. cit. 321-452.

‘chronique des jours souverains’ thus fully indulges Segalen’s attraction to legal and declarative styles, and the genius of Imperial protocol. Decrees and official chronicle are interspersed with passages titled ‘Commentaire de l’Annaliste’ – the closest of the discursive forms to that employed exclusively in *René Leys*⁵². The ‘annaliste’ is an intermediary, interpreting subject – but still very much a creature of form:

Ce que l’annaliste secrètement recueille, nul ne le saura jamais ni du Peuple, ni des tributaires. D’autres, saisis d’un pouvoir différent, effaceront tout ce qu’il conviendra. Ignorer est une faute. Connaître à l’excès: quel manque de goût! Savoir modestement ce qu’il est juste de savoir comme ayant existé.

Tels sont les desseins pleins d’intelligence que la raison d’État de la Mère ancestrale enferme en cette décision secrète.

Que cette raison sanctionne, excuse et légalise tout ce qui, - d’un pinceau tremblant, - va se fixer en ce qui suit.⁵³

Secreted at intervals between the layers of officiality, distinguished in italics, are texts ‘écrits [or] tombés de son pinceau’, allusive and variously lyrical writings interpretable according to what the official discourse reports, and which the annalist invariably commentates in a comically face-saving – or pseudo-naïvely formalistic – manner. Material to our present point is the similarity of these texts to those framed in the *Stèles* being written in the same period these texts:

Ivre de pensées insolites, je compose ce poème:

«Les ennemis sont là. Leurs cohortes ont la démarche des sauterelles et leur avancée la certitude de la mer.

Les conseillers me disent: on ne résiste pas à la mer. On n’écrase pas une à une les sauterelles!

[...]

⁵² ‘René Leys’, *Œuvres complètes II*, op. cit. 453-572. First publication, posthumous, in 1922.

⁵³ *Le Fils du Ciel*, op. cit. 330.

Mais moi l'Empereur je regarde paisiblement approcher l'Une et les autres.

Relevant ma manche avec soin, je trace délicatement ce poème.»⁵⁴

Le Fils du Ciel, which was never fully completed by Segalen, was in fact the first project hatched by him on arrival in that country. Among the diverse remarks collected in a letter to his wife dated 'Pékin, dimanche 8 août 1909' is the following: "Autre: J'ai cette chance, un mois après mon arrivée dans un pays, de tenir *mon* livre: Tahiti: arrivée 23 janvier. 1er mars: Immémoriaux... Chine. 12 juin – 1er août: Fils du Ciel – ou équivalent."⁵⁵ Henri Bouillier comments upon this claim by suggesting, with reference to Segalen's "préparation livresque fort sérieuse" for the journey, hence the *a priori* receptivity of the new arrival to such an aesthetic schema, a hierarchised terrain in which the centre corresponds in the discursive plan of *the* book to an ideal poetic writing. "Pour *Le Fils du Ciel*, toutes ses études de chinois à Paris ont servi, des mois de travail *avaient préparé le terrain*."⁵⁶ This priority of the idea over the experience imparts a definite poetological subtext to the referential schema of centre and outside, and their divergent forms of language use, a schema that is recycled more than once by Segalen in his work.

When it comes to the task of writing a novel for an imagined general readership (a project at the antipodes of his resolutely 'aristocratic' engineering of the 'poetic' address), true to his 'horizontal' form as a generator of distinction, Segalen makes preliminary notes that immediately go counter to what he takes to be the defining characteristic of the form at that point. Consonant with his artistic feel for the layering of appearances and the consolidation thereof in form, the distinction takes the form of a situation:

Le personnage haïssable de tout roman: l'Auteur. Celui-là qui sait invraisemblablement tant de choses, et les étale avec impudeur [...] l'auteur

⁵⁴ Ibid. 364.

⁵⁵ *Lettres de Chine*, op. cit. 128 (emphasis in original.)

⁵⁶ *Œuvres complètes II*, op. cit. 321 (emphasis added.)

impersonnel est un être à tuer. [...] Notons que le roman, seul de tous les genres, possède ledit personnage haïssable [...].⁵⁷

This principled aversion is at the same time an inversion of the schema adopted in *Le Fils du Ciel*. The new novel will originate from a point of unknowing, of speculation – in other words it will assume the position occupied by the author himself in the foreign place he inhabits, rather than that of the being whose person is synonymous with the entire symbolic structure of the place. Sophie Labatut, in her preface to a recent edition of *René Leys*, develops this opposition into a relating symmetry. Noting that the name ‘Leys’ is graphically an inversion of ‘Ciel’, she develops a view of the later work as a profane negative image of the earlier:

Le Fils du Ciel forme un dyptique avec *René Leys* dans la mesure où leurs espaces de lecture sont symétriques et complémentaires: celui du Dedans pour le premier, celui de l’extériorité irréductible pour le second. [...] Le mythe impérial mis à bas, désacralisé, rendu piteusement humain, met en lumière un procédé d’écriture presque burlesque, un blasphème libérateur et iconoclaste, personnel et littéraire.⁵⁸

The secularisation – and ostensible westernisation – of the approach to the scenic architecture does not, in the present writer’s view, lead to the quasi-sacrilegious feats Labatut suggests. It is fair to say that with the change of discursive register (the private writings of the western narrator of *René Leys*, for all their symbolic intuition, have none of the Emperor’s lyricism) the possibility of a qualitative rupture in that discourse becomes ever more remote and difficult to imagine. But this is counterbalanced by the genuine fascination of the ‘modern’ writer for that to which he, in his profanity, has no access. This fascination is the very source of the narrative. The principle of fidelity to a situated subject alerts us to a preceding related point of divergence with the approach to narrative characterised by Segalen as dominant. The novelistic narrative cannot, in his view, arise as a principle of expansion from a miniature of itself – a principle of absolute

⁵⁷ ‘Sur une forme nouvelle du roman ou *Un nouveau contenu de l’essai*’ in *Œuvres complètes II*, op. cit. 587-90, 590.

⁵⁸ Labatut, Sophie. ‘Préface’ in Segalen. *René Leys*. Paris: Gallimard (Folio), 1999: 7-32, 29-30.

self-possession or identity. At its core or inception should be a point opaque to the subject who, as author of the work, would become its indirect, and as narrator its ostensible source. This generative function of circumscribed obscurity Segalen sees fit to promote to the status of an aesthetic (that is, not simply or solely literary) prerequisite. All that is too readily amenable to language thus becomes either aesthetically ancillary or even suspect:

[T]oute œuvre d'art a pour noyau, pour germe, un sentiment qui se vêt et s'éclaire de tout un monde étranger de souvenirs, de désirs, de savoirs, de volitions ... Comment désigner cela! N'est-ce pas un homoncule? Et gros déjà d'hérédités ... Oui, un Germe.) [...] Il est certain que l'Anecdote n'est pas le Germe. Celui-ci est trop profond et trop obscur pour être confondu avec une sorte d'historiette dicible.⁵⁹

One must acknowledge here a direct continuity between the extra-literary experience of the author and the aesthetic principles drawn. (Segalen, like many of his commentators, is continually to be found attempting to extrapolate from the former to the latter so this should come as little surprise. The appeal to experience, as in the pairing of *Réel* and *Imaginaire*, is undertaken in the hope of curbing a speculative intelligence which seems to have arranged everything in advance.) Thus China itself readily provides the speech-generating structure of obscurity as part, as it were, of the truly inquisitive visitor's package. In *Briques et tuiles*, the (already consciously literary-tending) notebooks of Segalen's first travels in China, containing passages of which many are to be found with surprisingly little modification in *Stèles*, the movement of epistemological curiosity towards ontological satiety is present literally from day one. On arrival in Hong Kong in May 1909, at his first direct view of the Chinese world, Segalen is noting promisingly :

Et, comme un beau fruit mûr dont on palpe amoureusement la forme, notre marche, lente mais certaine, contourne d'un sillage distant la globuleuse Chine dont je vais si goulûment presser le jus!

⁵⁹ *Œuvres complètes II*, op. cit. 587-88

By his third day in Shanghai this explicit linking of the new place with bountiful experience has reached its apotheosis in ‘knowledge’. “Les mille choses plaisants que je verrai, désormais, et surtout, que je *saurai*!”⁶⁰ – instituting at the same time the link between vision and knowledge, the “pulsion scopique”, to which Christian Doumet assigns a “rôle central” in *René Leys* in particular⁶¹. Up to the time of Segalen’s definitive departure from China in early 1918 this alternating view of the place as raw material and as an object of intense fascination in itself remains explicit, and unapologetically harnessed to the grounding question of self and self-creation in literary work in terms of an experiential expectative. The unerringly sensual vein of his writing of situation has lead several commentators of *René Leys*, including Doumet, Bougnoux⁶² and Formentelli, to eschew an emphasis on the iconoclastic / de-mythologising possibilities of the modernity of its perspective in comparison with *Le Fils du Ciel*, in order, rather, to eroticise the obsessiveness with which the narrative intelligence returns to the problem of entering the mysterious or aporetic space. To cite Formentelli, for example:

Tous les modes de la possession sont envisagés – l’enveloppement, la pénétration, le coup d’œil par-dessus le mur, la traversée, la vie parallèle – afin d’investir cet espace d’un désir comme érotique pour le grand «corps équarri» de Pékin et le milieu des milieux qu’est la Cité Violette.⁶³

René Leys, which was to emerge in the wake of Segalen’s remarks on the novel above, and which was written in periods immediately prior and subsequent to the writing of *Stèles*, can be read either as a satire or as an exploration of a fantasy if not of omniscience then at least of discovery. The recurrent feature of Segalen’s ‘cycle chinois’, his sympathetic adoption of the Chinese imperial cosmology as doubly articulated in the language (in particular the written language) and in the ordering of the built environment,

⁶⁰ *Briques et tuiles*, op. cit. 846, 847. Latter note titled *Cité Chinoise*.

⁶¹ Doumet, Christian. *Victor Segalen, l’origine et la distance*. Seyssel: Champ Vallon, 1993: 118.

⁶² Bougnoux, Daniel. ‘Dix-neuf et un gongs pour boômer René Leys’ in *Poétique de Segalen*, op. cit. 14-63.

⁶³ Formentelli, Eliane. ‘La marche du cavalier’ in *Regard, Espaces, Signes (Victor Segalen)*, op. cit. 51-69, 52.

is particularly to the forefront in *René Leys*, which opens with a map of Imperial ‘Pei-king’ (the bounded old city, to the exclusion of any representation of symbolically-degraded modern excrescences). In itself this scheme is the definitive promise of symbolic adequacy, independent of the fleeting presence of a given subject to draw significance. The uninitiated narrator is thus in a position to present the reader with a fully-formed topological plot in the very first pages of the novel:

On ne peut disconvenir que Pei-king ne soit un chef-d’œuvre de réalisation mystérieuse. Et d’abord le plan triple de ses villes n’obéit pas aux lois des foules cadastrées ni aux besoins locataires des gens qui mangent et qui peuplent. La capitale du plus grand Empire sous le ciel a donc été voulue pour elle-même; dessinée comme un échiquier tout au nord de la plaine jaune; entourée d’enceintes géométriques; tramée d’avenues, quadrillée de ruelles à angles droits et puis levée d’un seul jet monumental [...] le carré principal, la ville tartare-mandchoue fait toujours un bon abri aux conquérants [...] cette ville violette interdite, – dont les remparts m’arrêtent maintenant, – devenait le seul espace possible à ce drame, à cette histoire, à ce livre qui, sans Lui [Le Fils du Ciel], n’a plus aucune raison d’être ...⁶⁴

The Forbidden City, in its presentation and analysis here as an achieved embodiment of transcendence, is an almost caricaturally ideal example of the *haut lieu*. It is that point (here a willed, constructed point) in physical space which is both the irruption of verticality (the Emperor is the incarnate mediator of Heaven and Earth (the People)) into the horizontal plane of association, and the site of the blind spot of language, the unnameable – in that it houses the person whose name is ‘indicable’ (the Emperor is referred to only as ‘Lui’) – thus linking the limits of discourse with the achievement of a full symbolic congruence, or ‘sense’ at its most positively-charged.

The novel is in effect generated from the interaction of three components: the constructed necessity (symbolic coherence) of the *lieu* that is the Imperial City; the *germe* that could

⁶⁴ *René Leys*, op. cit. 457-58.

be formulated as the narrator's drive to take hold on the 'real' of his new situation by living out the promise of the *lieu*; and the mediation (ultimately futile – but productive) of what are, at least textually-speaking, the “historiettes dicibles” of the character Leys.⁶⁵ The narrator's relations with that character, engaged by him as a teacher of Chinese, rework Segalen's recollections of his acquaintance with a certain Maurice Roy – a French youth who spoke fluent Chinese and with apparent links to the Imperial Court.⁶⁶ In the allusions of Leys/Roy to the subject of the Forbidden City and the goings-on therein, it could also be said to represent an attempt to reconstitute an aesthetic 'germe' from a sum of anecdote or 'historiettes'. This mediation arrives at precisely the point when, the initial anticipations due to the very suggestiveness of the culture's veiling of its secrets having been dissipated, the narrator is in a position of strategic retreat – renouncing the very possibility of a literary apprehension of the object:

Je ne saurai donc rien de plus. Je n'insiste pas: je me retire ... respectueusement d'ailleurs et à reculons, puisque le Protocole le veut ainsi, et qu'il s'agit du Palais Impérial; d'une audience qui ne fut pas donnée, et ne sera jamais accordée... C'est par cet aveu, – ridicule ou diplomatique, selon l'accent qu'on lui prête, – que je dois clore, avant de l'avoir mené bien loin, ce cahier dont j'espérais faire un livre. Le livre ne sera pas non plus (Beau titre posthume à défaut du livre: «Le livre qui ne fut pas!»)⁶⁷

This suggestion of the fallen condition of language of actual literary work, of the narrator's speculations and surmise, as that which becomes operative outside the space of fullest sense, goes in turn to establish the author in all of the necessity that Segalen, in his declared fidelity to situatedness, had begun to envisage. The transparent theology of the

⁶⁵ Daniel Bournoux assimilates Leys' interventions, in their ambiguity, to a principle of poetry: “On dirait qu'il veille à entourer chacun de ses énoncés de cette marge de silence, ou de blanc, en laquelle nous savons reconnaître depuis Mallarmé l'un des traits spécifiques de la poéticité. Cela s'appellera aussi chez Breton *la confession dédaigneuse*.” (*Poétique de Segalen*, op. cit. 33, emphasis in original.) If there is something of the poetic in his mediation it is arguably as a linguistic supplement to the solicitation of the place – his enigmatic, fragmentary pronouncements derive their power over the narrator via the symbolic unity of the place from which they are understood to report.

⁶⁶ See Segalen's notes titled ‘Annales secrètes d'après Maurice Roy’, given in the Bouillier edition as an appendix to *René Leys. Œuvres complètes II*, op. cit. 573-87.

lieu could hardly support the quasi-divinity of a figure whose primary characteristic is to have been denied the experience, after having constructed the promise, of sense. But as the narrator proclaims the defection of his as yet unwritten book's *raison d'être* he simultaneously locates the *germe* of the novel that the author had just begun to write. The fundamentally ironic discourse of the novel is instituted in the denial of knowledge through an exclusion, through experience, from (to use a typographical strategy dear to Segalen himself) Experience: the presence of one kind of writing is built around the absence of another – which would be the writing of the thing itself, and of the knowledge of what can be neither transmitted nor assured in the process of recounting that is presented as the standard form of linguistic interaction between subjects.

This necessarily points to an extreme tension in Segalen's construction of his aesthetic problem between the 'real' which founds the principle of situated-ness, of authenticity in the question of experience, and the *lieu*, the symbolic moulding of the 'real' encountered here in the "chef-d'œuvre de réalisation mystérieuse" of the Imperial City. The narrating mind finds its tendency to speculate aggravated by the constant becoming-symbol of the things with which it is surrounded. In other words, what from a perspective of a psychodynamics of the material world (Bachelard) might be expected to ground a practice of affirmation is reversed into an unrelenting demand for interpretation, an elusiveness of that which is ostensibly present, making of the writing a kind of *fuite en avant* curbed only by the aforementioned ironic turn. The novelistic speech is thus a deferral via a negotiation of appearances of a discourse of what is. The monumentality of the space, a monument to exclusion from the *lieu* at its centre, founds nothing other than the narrator's recognition of an inability to know and speak essence – making this, in the final analysis, a matter for decision, for foundation in an act of will or judgement.

The narrator is initially fascinated by the figure of Leys, both by his laconic ease in either cultural sphere and the direct knowledge he appears to have of the Inside – that is, what lies behind the walls that are the main feature of the imperial capital as described in the narrator's perambulations. This fascination quickly merges into the ubiquitous doubt of

⁶⁷ Op. cit. 457.

the original scenario of renunciation, doubt as to the veracity of what is being affirmed blending with doubt as to the possibility of the knowledge in question. The narrator being in the position of one structurally denied direct experience, thus required to advance through language, some readers have found it possible to theorise this as a kind of willed ignorance in the search for renewed affabulatory *jouissance*: Commenting a passage in which the narrator notices Leys looking over the narrator's shoulder while they are in face to face conversation, Doumet writes:

Ainsi advient-il par René Leys que la révélation promise du voir s'éloigne, s'obscurcisse, se voile: celui qui a vu, loin de délivrer un savoir clair, ouvre au contraire le champ lacunaire d'une *fiction*, dont l'effet est évidemment de créer le désir de *savoir encore*, plus que de le satisfaire.⁶⁸

The enigmatic interlocutor goes through a number of shifts in the eyes of the narrator, where disbelief is of a piece with a growing sense of the improbability of the imperial scene itself. Allusively mediating scenes from the 'intrigues du palais', Leys has the effect on the narrator of provoking a constant, understated defensive irony – which balances disappointment with an abiding symbolic fascination. Doumet describes this rapport with the aporia of the narrative as one of 'pleasure', but while in the view of the present writer he is correct in elevating the unsatisfied disposition of the narrator to something of the order of a guiding principle, the pleasure he ascribes to the speaker is arguably more validly ascribable – if at all – to the reader:

Le plaisir ne réside donc plus dans la chose même, mais plutôt dans son retard ou son prolongement: dans le décalage qu'instaure le temps entre la sollicitation et la réponse. Cette fiévreuse attente revêt, dans la structure du roman, une fonction essentielle: elle est toute sa métaphysique.⁶⁹

⁶⁸ Doumet, op. cit. 120 (emphasis in original.)

⁶⁹ Ibid. p. 123.

The novel ends with the mysterious death of René Leys (Poison? Suicide? Relative guilt of a doubting narrator?), leaving open the question of the status of the reported speech to that point (that is, the basis of the entire interpretative enterprise), and intact the author's sense of unknowing with respect to the figural solicitation of the 'Dedans':

Et je suis là vivant, promenant autour de sa mort mon doute comme une lanterne fumeuse ... Alors que, fidèle à lui-même, – et je m'en aperçois tout d'un coup –, je devrais d'abord me souvenir de sa parole: l'autre, l'Empereur, est mort sans un ami auprès de lui... – «J'étais son ami» – me dit avec un profond accent René Leys ...

– J'étais son ami, – devrais-je dire avec le même accent, le même regret fidèle, – sans plus chercher de quoi se composait notre amitié ... dans la crainte de la tuer, ou de la tuer une seconde fois ... ou – ce serait plus coupable encore, – d'être mis brusquement en demeure d'avoir à répondre moi-même à mon doute, et de prononcer enfin: *oui* ou *non*?⁷⁰

This characterisation of the *germe* of the novel *René Leys* as the unspeakable draw of another kind or quality of language might appear to be over-tendentious, a little too *a contrario* to stand as solid proof of a reflection on the poetic. In his note on the 'Auteur haïssable', does Segalen not attribute the situatedness of the source of language (the speaker) to all other genres except the 'novel' in the state he finds it? Presumably, then, if the fabrication in the novel of a horizon for the narrator means that language production is more acutely experienced as deferral, this does no more than bring it into line with the generalised conception of all writing as work in some degree.

In response it could be argued that what justifies our thinking of *René Leys* as a utopian narrative of poetry is precisely its construction as a series of utterances around a transformational space those utterances never in fact enter. Segalen may well consciously construct a situation in which his narrator is denied knowledge, make this the device of what in many respects resembles a particularly mannered exotic detective story. It

⁷⁰ *René Leys*. op. cit. 572.

remains that the inaccessible centre is the symbolically dominant space of the composition, and it is the one in which full symbolic adequacy is associated with an abolition of the horizon structure – that is, of the basis for all actual utterances of the narrator. Logically it might be better to equate this point with silence rather than with poetic speech – but if it is understood as the end-point of a utopian dynamic in speech, that point outside discursive space upon which all perspectives converge in their symbolic intelligence, we could affirm that the novel has constructed in its discursive mode what, in terms of the imagination of experience, of sign motivation and of possibles of speech, is formally its polar opposite. In this sense, those interpretations of the governing tension of the novel which insist upon an evaporation of the scenic architecture – like the collapse of the *Terre Jaune* imagined by Segalen above – once the narcissistic mirroring of Leys (reduced to a double of the narrator) is removed by his death, are both perceptive and conventional. In such a reading the closing ‘oui ou non’ of the narrator brings us directly to the abyss of the ‘subject’, the abiding ‘hantise’ of all Segalen’s constructions and projections onto the outside world. Labatut:

Lorsque le deux redevient un, que le narrateur ne peut plus s’éviter, l’espace urbain, l’espace symbolique et l’espace du dedans s’évident brusquement, comme aspirés de l’intérieur, et renvoient à l’ineffable nausée, au grand vertige:

Moi, courbé sur moi-même et dévisageant mon abîme. (Stèles. Les Trois Hymnes primitifs)⁷¹

Significantly, the quotation used to support this reading is not from *René Leys* itself, but from *Stèles* – a work, like the personal writings of the *Fils du Ciel* – coming from the inside of the schema we have developed. Such ‘poetic’ writing, having literally nowhere to go, is not an ‘avoidance’ of self – by analogy with an idea of language as deferral – but the space in which a confrontation, by various means, of that self occurs; in which the *moi*, abyss and all, is named and assumed. In so doing it is not in the first instance ‘silent’, but in language. Writing generally of Segalen and of a foundational duality to his persona as a writer Doumet asserts that “la littérature tient dans cette conversion radicale

⁷¹ Labatut op. cit. 24.

d'une profondeur intime en un paysage"⁷² Logically then, the exit from literature as Segalen allows us to experience it would be in the collapse of a scenic architecture under the weight of that inner aporia. The 'utopian' space of the poetic, suggested in *René Leys* via the *Dedans*⁷³, is something more like the *entre-deux* in such an equation. That space is 'utopian' in the sense that, moving from a possession of the same empirical elements – the same logical building blocks – it achieves a different (textual) outcome. It is 'utopian' in the sense of a strategy which involves the reconfiguration of the elements of a lived disharmony (typically both of and between subjects) into a décor and nomenclature of sense-full order (*mutatis mutandis*: "là, tout n'est qu'ordre et beauté, / luxe, calme et volupté") as a thinkable, or desirable, alternative to the prosaic present, and the role that present assigns to language – at once contingent, generating doubt, and all-pervasive. As such, the point ceases to be that in poetry, with a situated, circumscribed speaker, the experience of language could not be radically different (is the use of language in both situations not, after all, a proof of their commonality?), and becomes the question of the 'idea' of poetry, and the maintenance of such an idea: can we imagine a language that would be 'poetic' because it would have shown itself to have surmounted these conditions, which we recognise to be those of all individual accession to speech? Is poetic work a response to this question, or the ongoing attempt to maintain it in focus? It is that idea-question, rather than the body of a poetic language as such which, one might conclude, it is the function of *René Leys*, read as a 'utopian narrative', to allow us to formulate in respect of the 'poetic' work of its author.

⁷² Doumet op. cit. 25.

⁷³ It is arguable in this respect that the segalenian 'will' is implicated – through poetic form – in apparently contradictory visions of poetic language as the abolition or the maximalisation of the subject, which are readable as variations on a fantasy of authorial power. How, one could ask, does this relate to the question of the *Dedans* – which is a chosen, archetypal vector of accomplishment among others in the oeuvre. The interchangeable quality of spatial metaphors could be established or at least discussed with a comparison of the absent *Dedans* and the absent *Sommet* in the oeuvre. The *Dedans* is the absent centre of social cohesion, focused in an individual subject (Fils du Ciel), or in a small number of individual relationships. The *Sommet* is an apparent reversal of the question of the *Dedans* – an openly individualistic turn; that is, an inversion of the rapport with and sociability of the poetic sign as allegorised in *René Leys* and practiced in *Stèles*. It is interesting, however, that the maximalised subject, their notional opposite, flares out and dies to nothing in the closing sections of *Thibet* – a case of concordance *in extremis* between Orphic myth and Oriental aesthetics?

4. Daumal and the ascent of Mont Analogue.

With René Daumal the disjunction between the practice of writing and the idea of poetry tends ever more towards an absolute. His adhesion in the years following *Le Grand Jeu* to the teachings and meditative practices cultivated by disciples of Gurdjieff marks a turn from what Gracq had termed ‘les forces obscures’ to what Jean Néaumet, in an extended study of the later part of the work, calls ‘la voie de l’éveil’⁷⁴. Daumal makes a number of associations important to an understanding of this position in a gloss on the definition of *nirvâna*, given in a 1936 review of a work by Alexandra David-Neal:

“Nirvâna signifie *la perception de la réalité telle qu’elle est, vraiment, en elle-même*. Et quand, par l’effet d’un changement complet («retournement») de toutes les méthodes d’opérations mentales survient l’acquisition de la compréhension de soi-même (et par soi-même), cela je l’appelle le nirvâna.”⁷⁵

The equation of an absolute perception of ‘reality’ with a ‘comprehension’ of self as both subject and object of knowledge gives the measure of the writer’s aspirational horizon. The obsessive recurrence of ‘reality’ ‘as it is’ (*telle qu’elle est, vraiment, en elle-même*) as the proper locus (rather than the ‘object’) of thought is in effect the imagined elimination of a viewpoint.⁷⁶ The ‘soi-même’ is constructed as a potential object of knowledge by analogy with this drive towards an absolute or Unique. As the goal of Daumal’s personal reflection, this was already in place prior to the period of *Le Grand*

⁷⁴ Néaumet, Jean. ‘René Daumal ou la volonté de connaissance’, in *René Daumal ou le retour à soi*, op. cit. 189-204. “Il ne s’agit plus désormais pour Daumal, comme au temps des expériences, de mourir pour connaître à tout prix mais de se connaître pour mourir à soi, MOURIR POUR RENAÎTRE, RENAÎTRE POUR CONNAÎTRE” (193, upper case in original.) This period of Daumal’s work has attracted a critical rhetoric bordering at times on the ‘New Age’, just as that of the *Grand Jeu* attracts the discourse of avant-garde / revolt-revolution / transgression. There is an apparent consensus that Daumal recoiled from the logic of destruction entertained in *Le Grand Jeu* in favour of more life-affirming spiritual concerns, while Gilbert-Lecomte is standardly placed in the role of *poète maudit*. This has been enough to discredit Daumal in some eyes, to make him the ostensible forerunner and guarantor of a 60’s-type spiritually eclectic sensibility (publication of Daumal’s works in easily-available editions being at its high-point in the decade between 1965 and 1975) on the other. Another representative of this latter perspective is White, Kenneth. ‘Le Grand Jeu’, in *La Figure du dehors*. Paris: Grasset, 1978: 131-39.

⁷⁵ ‘Le Bouddhisme, ses doctrines et ses méthodes’ (1936), in *Les pouvoirs de la parole*, op. cit. 182-84, 183 (emphasis added.)

⁷⁶ Recalling German idealist discussions of the question – the *soi* as both pure object and pure subject of the act of ‘comprehension’ – see Andrew Bowie, op. cit. on Fichte, Schelling, Novalis, Hölderlin.

Jeu – notably in the philosophical essay ‘La révolte et l’ironie’, written in 1926 at the age of 17:

A partir de ma vie, de mes actions, je veux m’élever jusqu’à une attitude unique, la dernière réalité de moi-même, pour en redescendre ensuite vers ce monde surmonté, mais non détruit, et le saisir dans son unité. C’est cette suprême lumière, qui est le «Bien» de Platon, qui doit éclairer toute connaissance, guider toute action et faire naître toute œuvre. Ce n’est que dans l’acte que la suprême conscience s’éprouve.⁷⁷

The continuity of this philosophical imaginary, a complex in which ascension, unity and being are held in association, is observable throughout Daumal’s essayistic work, and in a manner that seems almost independent of the author or work occasioning his comments. Thus these remarks from a 1932 essay on Spinoza:

L’Être et l’Unique, sans degrés, sans plus ni moins, sans seconds, telle est la cime et le sens suprême de cet escalier éblouissant, l’*Éthique*; les degrés sont vers mais non dans l’Être et l’Unique. Le point de départ est ici où nous sommes, dans l’erreur humaine. Le point de départ est dans la haine, l’ignorance, la souffrance. Le point de départ est le nombre deux. L’*Éthique* raconte le douloureux chemin depuis la dualité jusqu’à la Joie, la Connaissance et l’Amour de L’Unité.⁷⁸

The inward destiny of all ‘opérations mentales’ makes of the inner aporia the grounding for all outward insufficiencies and deformations of language in respect of experience. That this inward pull of all attempts to know is so patently an ethic of impossibility is what imparts their exceptional transparency to Daumal’s ‘analogical’ devices, the most celebrated of which, entirely ‘analogous’ with the philosophical imaginary evident in the passages quoted, being the ‘Mont Analogue’ of the title of his last, unfinished, work.⁷⁹

⁷⁷ ‘La révolte et l’ironie’ in *L’Évidence absurde*, op. cit. 99-142, 133.

⁷⁸ ‘Le non-dualisme de Spinoza ou La Dynamite philosophique’ (1932), *ibid.* 81-96, 81.

⁷⁹ *Le Mont Analogue*, because of both its position in the oeuvre and its sustained limpidity, tends to be read as the culmination of Daumal’s literary development. See for example Powrie, Phil. *René Daumal, étude*

Though language is never equal to the ongoing revelation of what is, its deployment in the ‘symbolically authentic’ narrative has an intermediate legitimacy. Were we to read the constant emphasis on that which ‘is’ as the translation of an ontological insecurity of the subject itself (articulation of ‘what is, as it is’ as a form of reassurance as to an entity ‘self’ which, through being a possible object of knowledge, embodies in principle a unity constantly troubled and pressurised by experience) the very construction of a symbolic structure which embodies the hypothesis of unity, maintains it in a thinkable scheme, saves the engagement with language as practice from complete breakdown. The utopian narrative is what keeps in focus this imaginable-impossible other of language, within a discourse of experience (for Daumal, ‘practice’ (implying experience) was in all points superior to theory (assimilated to ‘mere’ talk) in his attempts at consciousness; the linguistic is always thus experienced as a detour or a diversion from the immediate real.) The poetic, through a pattern of opposition supported in his own affirmations, would be the accession to speech in which this detour somehow became immediacy; until that point the state of immediacy is an intuition pursued in language as the poetic interrogation, the question of the ‘poetic’.

The role of the proper name in the organisation of this reasoning is central. Unifying, thus bestowing objective force to, what emerges as an intuition, it shores up the unitary reasoning of which the ultimate goal is the propounding speaker. This tendency to attribute value to unity is indeed the motor of Daumal’s exponentially utopian theoretical imagination, unification itself becoming a theoretical panacea – as, for example, in this implicit equation of unity on one level with perfection on another:

Dans toutes les langues, les mots signifiant «deux hommes», «fils de roi», «rivière», «deux oiseaux», etc., sont en même temps des mots d’un langage

d’une obsession. Geneva: Droz, 1990, Chapter 8: ‘Le Mont Analogue’, 135-49 and Rosenblatt, Kathleen J. *René Daumal, au-delà de l’horizon*. Paris: José Corti, 1992, Chapter VII ‘Le Mont Analogue’, 207-28. It is interesting, however, to attempt to think its position in parallel to that assigned to the ‘poetic’ throughout the oeuvre – both its charm and its power arguably coming from the distance it manages to maintain from this question, without allowing it to be entirely lost from view.

universel, dont la principale caractéristique est que le nom ne peut y être entendu sans la chose.⁸⁰

The obverse of this heavily-recurrent tendency to think in terms of an absolute, the figure of the one, is often a disparagement *en bloc* of optimistic discourses of practice. When Daumal refers to the ‘Poème’ as a ‘parole originelle’ and proceeds to affirm: “Ignorer n’est qu’une maladie, notre maladie à tous; prétendre savoir est un crime”⁸¹, it would be possible to read this as utopianism become pathological and self-destructive in a trenchant pessimism of tone as much as of actual proposition. There is a fine line between the rejection of discourses of knowledge in the name of a more complete enlightenment, and a fairly shrill obscurantism – one which the polemical persona born early in Daumal’s work does not always tread cautiously. On the other hand, this position, that of a kind of epistemological Cassandra, is in itself, at least provisionally, thinkable as a discourse on knowledge – one which, albeit negatively, allows itself the grandest gestures.⁸²

*Le Mont Analogue*⁸³ is a prose narrative of remarkable stylistic clarity written at a time by which Daumal had practically renounced attempts at a ‘poetic’ writing. The “roman d’aventures alpines, non euclidiennes et symboliquement authentiques” (the description figures as a sub-title) recounts the story of an expedition in search of the mountain of the title, the existence of which is derived speculatively as an archetype in the reflection of the narrator, who is initially engaged in a primarily intellectual approach (the writing of an academic article) of a recurrent feature of symbolic practice. The mountain, the

⁸⁰ ‘Deux textes tibétains sur la conversion des oiseaux’ (1938) in *Les pouvoirs de la parole*, op. cit. 189-92, 190.

⁸¹ ‘Hymnes et prières du Véda’ (1939), *ibid.* 197-98, 198.

⁸² In the lightly-sketched allegorical layout of the ‘ville’ in which *La Grande Beuverie* takes place we again encounter the idea – or illusion – of total perspective, the final degree of the ‘prétendre savoir’. The ‘quartiers du centre’ are inhabited by a group known as Les Explicateurs the solemnly-named patriarch of which, Professeur Mumu, being “celui qui s’est mis en tête de guérir les autres.” (*La Grande Beuverie*. Paris: Gallimard, 1966:121) All positions outlined by the narrator are essentially and equally ridiculous, but this particular ridiculous pretension of the Professor gives order to a view of *La Grande Beuverie* as a dystopia of misconceived or inessential speech, one that concerns those very discourses which purport to be of analytical or philosophical knowledge. At the same time it is possible to wonder whether, stigmatisation and characterisation aside, this position is not actually the one inside the governing virtuality of the mind working towards unification, the possibility at all periods so dear to Daumal’s poetic intellect.

⁸³ *Le Mont Analogue*. Paris: Gallimard, 1981.

naming of which does nothing to diminish its schematic qualities, becomes a textual embodiment of the absolute, induced and located out of *a priori* symbolic necessity. What enlivens the symbol identified and isolated is the non-intellectual investment of the subject, which is manifested, observes the narrator, as a surfeit of the linguistic over the conceptual. The suggestiveness of Mont Analogue is linked in the text to the “poetic” leanings of the speaker, of which the narrator is conscious and prepared to write at an entirely disenchanted remove:

C’était une étude assez rapide sur la signification symbolique de la montagne dans les anciennes mythologies. Les différentes branches de la symbolique formaient depuis longtemps mon étude favorite – je croyais naïvement y comprendre quelque chose – et, par ailleurs, j’aimais la montagne en alpiniste, passionnément. *La rencontre de ces deux sortes d’intérêt, si différentes, sur le même objet*, la montagne, avait coloré de *lyrisme* certains passages de mon article. De telles conjonctions, si incongrues quelles puissent paraître, sont pour beaucoup dans la genèse de ce que l’on appelle vulgairement poésie; je livre cette remarque, à titre de suggestion, aux critiques et aux esthéticiens qui s’efforcent d’éclairer les dessous de cette mystérieuse sorte de langage.)⁸⁴

There is a constitutive tension in the question of the relation of ‘experience’ to the idea of Mont Analogue. The idea of the ‘mountain’ as pure device, something about which the author is entirely explicit⁸⁵, is relayed by the understated style of the narrative writing, which studiously avoids the characteristics of a poetic prose, that is, the noticeable distinctions of a pulsional or lyrical energy of the subject. The quality of the symbol in allegory is its transparency, its readable but unassignable character. To say as much makes the decision to construct an attempt to transpose ‘des faits réels’ around ‘la Montagne par excellence’ seem militantly, perhaps damagingly conventional. The mountain is already, by the admission of the narrator, the mythological archetype par

⁸⁴ Ibid. 15 (emphasis added.)

⁸⁵ Daumal’s description of his actual experience of mountaineering (see in particular the Letter to Vera Milanova (dated 21 August 1937) in *Correspondance III*, op. cit. 111-13) show, however, that his choice of device is far from purely intellectual.

excellence – something which would make of ‘la Montagne par excellence’ the standard figure to end all standard figures. Its proliferation in modern literature as a locus of the absolute and/or the sublime from, say, Rousseau via Senancour to Nietzsche and Thomas Mann, makes its subsequent appearances into something of an aggravated cliché⁸⁶ – an excess of the symbolising, associative function over any attempt at signification, which Daumal was obviously of a mind to embrace. In choosing to work with an archetype rather than attempt symbolic innovation, and by underlining this from the title onwards, he gives the whole (incomplete) exercise a curiously diaphanous quality.

Exercising due caution in the face of Daumal’s disdain for the linguistic presumption of others we can observe the recurrence in the passage quoted of the *lieu*, in which the intellectual text of the subject (*intérêt*) enters resonance within an affect-laden relation to the world (*passion*) culminating in a localised ‘discursive irregularity’ (*lyrisme*). Lyrical enthusiasm anticipates the imagined unification of the subject around a phenomenon with especially strongly-developed symbolic properties. The narrator’s aside to the analytical reader situates the ‘poetic’ astride this amalgamation of a complex in unification and the promise of a potentially transformational language. What is initially a frontally disenchanted approach allows the prefiguring of an experience which will be constructed in its ‘truth’ as obtaining adhesion of a different order: the virtual space of the Mont Analogue is what organises from afar the symbolic ‘truth’ of what, preceding and leading to it, is to follow in the narrative. For, despite the ironising functions of its multiple symbolic sources, the Mont Analogue is no textbook *axis mundi* or intellectually-available ‘verticality’. Its symbolising power is presented as deriving, on the contrary, from its introduction, into the experience of the thinker, of a radical difference of scale with a long-domesticated world. Its feasibility as a ‘symbol’ involves the imagination (or remembrance) of an actual physical overwhelming of the subject’s capacity to maintain its (in the first instance symbolic) bearings. It is, in the terms of the narrator, a feat of physical *échelle*, the postulate of a nameable, localisable ‘real’ yet incommensurable with the modern, reasonable, if not exclusively rational subject:

⁸⁶ See, for example, Crickillon, Jacques. *Oberland, montagne romantique; Engadine, montagne symboliste*. Tournai: La Renaissance du Livre, 2000.

[C]e qui définit l'échelle de la montagne symbolique par excellence – celle que je proposais de nommer le Mont Analogue –, c'est son inaccessibilité par les moyens humains ordinaires [...] Pour qu'une montagne puisse *jouer le rôle* de Mont Analogue, concluais-je, il faut que son sommet soit inaccessible aux êtres humains tels que la nature les a faits.⁸⁷

As the known world becomes ever more heavily described, or at least amenable to description, and the 'individual' subject more adept at containing, or at least presuming containment of the world as a knowable object inside standardised discursive practices, the linguistic means of this presumption moves to the fore. With this consciousness established, the linguistic faculty itself is what re-empowers the subject in the suggesting of a point – in a blank area of the map, or on a blank page – at which the tissue of phenomena could be ruptured and transcended. The mechanism of an intellectual fiction allows Daumal to play on this constitutive duality of language in relation to the 'real'. Symbolic 'truth' is imagined as the recounting in words of that which, available to the subject in experience, throws the system(s) of language aside. There is a language, it suggests, which can, through an attitude of the subject, make good what has been forfeited in the age-long incrustations of discourse. This turn in the thinking of the symbol as a newly generative locus of accord between the consciousness and the real, which might in economics be termed an inflationary turn, is critical for a reflection on the issues of possibility and limit in Daumal's work and their relation to the text in its most 'demanding' form, that is, when it aspires to the ascription 'poetic'. For Daumal this ascription too had become, in consonance with his conception of Mont Analogue, a reasoning of scale within which true 'poetry' and modern 'humanity' were irreconcilable:

Devant les hymnes védiques, comme devant les vieux poèmes babyloniens, hébraïques ou chinois, la pensée ordinaire – y compris celle de nos plus grands «penseurs» – doit abdiquer. Ce sont des poèmes, des créations, et l'homme tel que

⁸⁷ Ibid. 18 (emphasis added.)

nous sommes ne peut pas créer, ne peut donc pas comprendre un vrai poème. Leur origine, disent les Hindous, est non-humaine (*apaurushaya*).⁸⁸

In the case of *Le Mont Analogue*, the ‘inflationary’ turn in the demand made of the ‘human’ subject does not become a question of the technical limits of linguistic expression or lyrical mimesis. The (ana)logical pattern established is, rather, in schematic sympathy with such efforts. The greater the hold of descriptions honouring the piecemeal, rational collectivity of describers – that is, of ‘l’homme tel que nous sommes’ – the more desperate the recognition within a certain poetic logic that ‘reality’, the real’, ‘being’, or ‘plenitude’ thereof, has been evacuated from the available discursive models.

A reading of Daumal’s essays throws up multitudes of such affirmations of modern man’s inadequacy to the means and faculties at his disposal. These are of the utmost seriousness when the level is theoretical – thus for example the essays on Spinoza and on revolt cited above, those informed by heady conjunctive readings of Hegel and Marx such as *Tu t’es toujours trompé* (1926-28); and the work of the later period on Sanskrit and sacred Oriental texts. In each case the eye of the essayist is firmly on the vanishing point, or the point of resolution, of the theory in hand, and the application to a reflection on the poetic is never very far off. This fascination with the theoretical sublime, and its ultimate inhumanity, though feeding from the same source as *Le Mont Analogue*, produce more trenchantly pessimistic pronouncements in the essays. The relative lightness of touch, and the strangely optimistic tone it imparts to the confrontation of the ‘impossible’ through the narrative work of that last book seem rather to be related to Daumal’s durable attachment to the works and figure of Alfred Jarry, inventor of Père Ubu⁸⁹ but also of the associated ‘science’ of ‘Pataphysics (“la science des solutions imaginaires”), and an essentially literary utilisation of these:

«Qu’est-ce qu’un trou?» demandait un clown à son compère sur la piste de Médrano. Ayant bien embarrassé l’autre, il se hâtait de triompher: «un trou, disait-

⁸⁸ ‘Hymnes et prières du Véda’ op. cit. 197.

il, c'est une absence entourée de présence». C'est là pour moi l'exemple de la définition parfaite et j'emprunterai celle-ci pour préciser mon objet. [...] Un fantôme, c'est un absent entouré de présents. [...] Cette méthode, qui consiste à appliquer à des absences les règles de la science la plus objective, s'appelle depuis Alfred JARRY la pataphysique. [...] Il faudrait en effet, pour être bon pataphysicien, être en même temps poète: j'entends par là quelqu'un qui crée ce dont il parle au moment où il en parle.⁹⁰

The ironic mechanisms of 'pataphysical reasoning go some way to elucidating Daumal's construction of the theoretical object, which is then approached with a matter-of-factness reminiscent of a Jules Verne narrative. But in counter-distinction to the wildness of Jarry's intelligence and the lack of inhibition of Verne's imaginative developments, Daumal imparts a sense of artless candour to what initially appear somewhat cartoon-ish *dramatis personæ*. This maintenance of a state of the 'real' as a guarantor of the work's purpose or literal goal – the insistence upon an objective of the communicative act is a matter on which Daumal, for whom it is an article of faith, takes no prisoners – led other would-be disciples of Jarry to see Daumal as a 'faux pataphysicien', interested in bending its approach to speculative thought away from a practice of pure 'liberation' and back to the intuitions of a 'poetic' experience of an extra-linguistic real.⁹¹

The possible melding of the orders of speculation and of the real is brought about for the narrator of *Le Mont Analogue*, in respectably 'pataphysical style, by the intervention of a certain Père Sogol (defrocked) – a 'pseudonym' acquired back at the monastery, he explains, "à cause d'une tournure d'esprit [...] qui me faisait prendre le contre-pied de toutes les affirmations qui m'étaient proposées, intervertir en toute chose la cause et

⁸⁹ Viviane Barry cites Roger Vailland, another celebrated member of *Le Grand Jeu*, to this effect: "Notre jeunesse d'entre-deux-guerres s'est déroulée sous le signe d'Ubu.": Barry. 'D'Ubu à Voltaire, le rire daumalien.' *Europe*, 782-783 (June-July 1994): 72-84, 73.

⁹⁰ From 'La Pataphysique des fantômes' (Deuxième version, 1941) in *Les pouvoirs de la parole*, op. cit. 251-55: 251-52. See also 'Traité des patagrammes', in *L'Évidence absurde*, op. cit. 209-40, and 'Pataphysique (1938-1941)', in *Les pouvoirs de la parole*, op. cit. 203-36.

⁹¹ See for example the account of the views of his correspondent in the matter, Julien Torma, given in Van de Broeck, Philippe. 'René Daumal pataphysicien?' *Dossier H. René Daumal*. Lausanne: L'Âge d'Homme, 1993: 79-84.

l'effet, le principe et la conséquence, la substance et l'accident.”⁹² It is he, combining an encyclopaedic mind with a transgressive gift for analogical reasoning, who provides a theory of the location and the nature of what, in the affirmative company of another, is no longer experienced as ‘symbolic’, but as ‘truth’ awaiting realisation:

Il était prouvé par l'expérience, me disais-je, qu'un homme ne peut pas atteindre directement et de lui-même la vérité; il fallait qu'un intermédiaire existât – encore humain par certains côtés, en dépassant l'humanité par d'autres côtés. Il fallait que, quelque part sur notre Terre, vécût cette humanité supérieure, et qu'elle ne fût pas absolument inaccessible. [...] [H]ors de cet espoir, toute la vie était dépourvue de sens. [...] [D]u fait que nous sommes *deux*, tout change; la tâche ne devient pas *deux fois* plus facile, non: d'*impossible* elle devient *possible*.⁹³

Daumal makes of Mont Analogue the site of an overcoming of the human by an intermediate ‘humanity’. The idea of peopling the site where laws of time and space have ceased to apply⁹⁴ corresponds to the logic of placing the poetic attainment outside of human abilities, in making of the poetic the name of what exceeds such abilities, while continuing to insist thereupon as the valid goal of human energies. The inhabitants of Mont Analogue are thus those afforded the opportunity of outdoing themselves in an effort at self-recognition – they are held by the shape of their world, as it were, to the ethic Daumal had adopted for himself.

There is an observable congruence in this symbolic reasoning with Segalen's recurrent figure of the *Fils du Ciel* and the apparently similar conjunction of a failure of language at the approach of a maximal sense which that name / figure embodies (textualised narratively in the approach of place.) But the fantastical scheme of his ‘analogy’ is

⁹² *Le Mont Analogue*, op. cit. 33.

⁹³ Ibid. 40-41 (italics in original.) The ‘impossible’ of the *haut lieu* becomes ‘possible’ in the encounter of Sogol. Thus, in opposition to a widely-accepted reading of *René Leys*, in which the other is reduced at the conclusion to a projection of self, the narrator's ‘other’ in Daumal's fiction becomes a facilitator in a search for ‘truth’ to which, at the outset, he has no more access than the narrator.

⁹⁴ The mountain, composed of unknown substances, is thought to lie inside a ‘coque d'espace courbe’ – the substances are unknown because of their imagined property of ‘curving’ the surrounding space; thus the

infused by Daumal with a writing that manages to move between suggestions of literal personal truth and of pure textual façade. While the minimal décor of the narration is plainly installed for a derealising, almost caricatural effect, there is none of interior speculation and live uncertainty of the kind that make up *René Leys* in its indirect relation to the central locus of interest. This linearity of Daumal's allegory has the effect of bracing the reader in anticipation of the transformational moments its logic so readily suggests. Expectations which, once encouraged, are consigned to silence, reinforcing the 'symbolic' effect of the imaginary scheme in place. The landing of the expedition on the shores of Mont Analogue in its yacht *L'Impossible* occurs, for example, between chapters (allowing matter-of-factness to enter transformational space without perceptible difficulties.) We learn of the exactness of Sogol's predictions through a voice discovering its own strangeness, and that of its source:

Je n'arrive pas à rendre cette impression d'une chose à la fois tout à fait extraordinaire et tout à fait évidente, cette vitesse ahurissante de déjà-vu ...⁹⁵

This is a strangeness mirrored in the inhabitants of Port-aux-Singes, the port of arrival. In the almost customary way, the adventurers are taken, not to the leader, but to "un homme en tenue montagnarde":

Il parlait français parfaitement, mais avec parfois le sourire intérieur de quelqu'un qui trouve fort étranges les expressions qu'il doit employer pour se faire entendre. [...] Chacune de ses questions [...] nous perçait jusqu'aux entrailles. Qui êtes-vous? [...] Les mots que nous prononcions – nous n'en avions pas d'autres – étaient sans vie, répugnants ou ridicules comme des cadavres.⁹⁶

This embodiment of a detachment, a non-adhesion to one's language mirrors the narrative distance of the work as a whole. Even as it derives its 'symbols' in terms of a

hypothesis of its existence is maintainable precisely because it has not been established: its absence, in other words, is the main plank in the argument for its existence.

⁹⁵ Op. cit. 110

⁹⁶ Ibid. 111

physical hold on the subject (through *échelle*), this linguistic detachment again contrasts with the irony of the narrator in *René Leys* – for whom reality rather than (his own) language seems the main object of doubt. The final completed chapter of *Le Mont Analogue*, which is that of a description of the customs and terrain around Port-aux-Singes, achieves a particularly seamless marriage of symbolic distancing and *effet de réel*, where the ‘real’ is something like the intensity of an idea. In the discovery of place the analogical play is brought to the foreground, but in a manner implicating the reader in turn in an analytical stance. The narrator appears both to analyse and to live through a single experience in an undivided movement, thus acting out the ‘drama’ of a ‘demystified’ consciousness which nevertheless aspires to the unified condition of ‘poetry’. The individual attempting to exist at two different levels of consciousness at the one time, from two largely distinct periods in the history of human consciousness: this desire for lucidity would give rise intermittently to a very powerful ‘unity’ of consciousness – for which the punctual and absolute rupture of space represented by the mountain here is a powerful symbol, navigating between the ‘truth’ of poetic adhesion and the irony of narrative distance.

Similarly to the landing, the writing of the ascent, which might be expected to be of some interest in the context of analogy, is practically absent from the text as it stands. This second aporia can be attributed to the actual death of the author, whose intention appears to have been to carry it through to a conclusion of sorts.⁹⁷ A plan of work-notes for the next unwritten chapter yields, however: “je tombe malade : laissé en bas, historiographe”. Thus it is arguable that to Daumal’s mind there is a form of documentary truth for which indirect knowledge and conventional speech might continue to function even within the *haut lieu*. Confirmation of this view could be seen in a draft conclusion of the novel, which splices together direct affirmation by the narrator with the text of a fictitious popular formulation (albeit that of the humanity imagined earlier as ‘supérieure’) of the

⁹⁷ “Le livre que j’achève est une sorte de roman d’aventures symboliques, sur une fiction non-euclidienne, qui transpose des faits réels; le «Mont Analogue» est la montagne par excellence, qui est la Voie unissant la Terre au Ciel [...].” Letter to Pierre Granville (dated 5 January 1944) in *Correspondance III*, op. cit. 393-96, 394.

virtual centre of narrative progression – a ‘chant’ which in turn gives way to a characterisation of writing as the gap between ‘truth’ and the communicable:

Très haut et très loin dans le ciel, par-dessus et par-delà les cercles successifs des pics de plus en plus élevés, des neiges de plus en plus blanches, dans un éblouissement que l’œil ne peut supporter, invisible par excès de lumière, se dresse l’extrême point du Mont Analogue. «Là, au sommet plus aigu que la plus fine aiguille, seul se tient celui qui remplit tous les espaces. Là-haut, dans l’air le plus subtil où tout gèle, seul subsiste le cristal de la dernière stabilité. Là-haut, en plein feu du ciel où tout brûle, seul persiste le perpétuel incandescent. Là, au centre de tout, est celui qui voit chaque chose accomplie en son commencement et sa fin.» C’est ce que chantent ici les montagnards. [...] pendant que j’écris, pendant que je cherche comment j’habillerai cette véridique histoire pour la rendre croyable.⁹⁸

Notwithstanding the inaugural conception of the mountain as operating symbolically via scale, the cardinal property of the analogue is to convey, in a ‘schéma conventionnel’ those relations which render knowable the ‘chose à connaître’, as would an anatomical chart, or a map.⁹⁹ In the ‘Avant-propos pouvant servir de mode d’emploi’ to *La Grande Beuverie*¹⁰⁰, Daumal had postulated a direct relation between the ‘intensity’ of the thought which can be expressed with precision in language and the ‘intensity’ with which the average user of that language actually thinks. That intensity, and hence the ‘contenu réel’ of a proposition in language, is created, as we have already noted, by a common experience of that which is being spoken of, “[c]ette expérience commune est la réserve d’or qui confère une valeur d’échange à cette monnaie que sont les mots.”¹⁰¹ Hence the ‘symbolic authenticity’ of the Mont Analogue is valid for the communication of Daumal’s ‘pensée’ as ‘crédible’ because the readership in which he wishes to foster

⁹⁸ *Le Mont Analogue*, op. cit. 168-69.

⁹⁹ The contradiction here between that scale and the idea of a ‘schéma conventionnel’ is comparable to the idea of non-verbal communication of the adolescent years – the conviction that an experience which overwhelms the subject can actually be inserted into a logic of achieved communication; in this respect the ether experiment inaugurates a scene repeated throughout Daumal’s work.

¹⁰⁰ *La Grande Beuverie*, op. cit. 7.

belief could not recognise their experience in any other way. The ‘intensité moyenne’ of the approach of experience involves its maintenance at a distance from the subject, if the communicative properties of language are to take effect. Transitive, intersubjective language, then, involves a distancing of experienced truths from the *sujet de l’énonciation*, whereas ‘poésie’, as we have seen, was ascribed to the movement whereby a confirmation of self in the configuration of passion, intellect and cosmos in a physical-symbolic space was intimated to the subject. *Le Mont Analogue* can then be seen to embody a secondary movement of self-distancing in language from a primary movement of self-realisation whose more direct passage into language “l’on appelle vulgairement poésie”, and of which it becomes the ‘utopian narrative’. Poetic language, by extension, is concerned with the ‘véridique’ of an experience as it impacts upon the space of the subject; the language of the analogue is concerned with the ‘crédible’ of the same experience in what is at the same time a foregrounding of that experience’s extra-linguistic dimension and of language’s communicative function – its capacity for establishing commonalities of the extra-linguistic between subjects.¹⁰² The instances of a recognised kind of poetic use of language in *Le Mont Analogue* (the mountaineering doggerel of the ‘poète’ Camard, one of the ‘dégonfleurs’ (the narrator’s term) from the expedition, and the ‘chants’ of the mountain folk cited above) are either caricatures or the abandonment of this division as imagined and aspired to by Daumal himself: the civilised ‘poète’ debases the activity in formal opportunism, those subjects dwelling on the limits of the ideal back off from its essential silence with a lyricised form of the analogical writing practised by the narrator. As the central aporia of the narrative turns out to be its governing analogical space, the ‘grand absent’ in the language of utopian narrative is that which would be the language of the utopian space itself; or which could formulate with ‘precision’ the ‘intensity’ of the experience of truth which the narrator had sought to render thinkable through recourse to another level of intensity. Daumal’s only notes for a

¹⁰¹ Ibid. 8. See Part I, section 4 above.

¹⁰² Daumal makes of attempted communication, of utterance itself, the analogue of an increasingly quasi-religious transcendence: “Nous sommes informes, - et s’il existe un Sans-forme, qu’on peut appeler aussi Forme absolue, si l’on tient à faire ces bruits avec sa bouche, - nul n’ira à lui qu’en passant par la forme, qu’en prenant forme.” Letter to Geneviève Lief (dated 26 August 1942) in *Correspondance III*, op cit. 314-16, 314.

final chapter read as follows: “VII «et vous alors?» / que cherchez-vous?”¹⁰³ The idea-question of utopia is generalised in the imperative of quest, one which has ensured the afterlife of *Le Mont Analogue* as a parabolic form of the literary myth of the impossible – its mythical status bolstered by the resonance between textual incompleteness and biographical death. There are few such programmatically transparent and yet affable texts. Velter (2001):

Depuis des années je contemple les pages que la mort de René Daumal a laissées vacantes, comme jetées blanches au seuil du mystère, comme abandonnées une fois pour toutes près du camp de base du Mont Analogue. À peine quelques notes griffonnées qui ne font ni trame ni intrigue pour les deux chapitres manquants, et témoignent que l'impossible ne peut rester en plan. [...] L'inachèvement est désormais la condition même de ce récit inspiré, et Daumal n'a pu le poursuivre que sur le terrain de sa propre disparition. Comme si le corps subtil pouvait seul investir une montagne subtile.¹⁰⁴

5. Bonnefoy in the *arrière-pays*.

It has already been sought to illustrate how, in respect of the question of poetic speech as address, Bonnefoy adopts a stance of ethical hope, which constructs the poet as one emerging into a deficit of relation while making an article of poetic belief out of the renewed attempt at such relation in language. The extreme pressures uncovered in the formulation of the choice of the simple and the banal, the tensions internal to the dream of homeostasis, which could be thought to characterise Bonnefoy's construction of the poetic address, are evidently not thinkable in separation from the scene into which such possible relation is projected. Bonnefoy's construction of experience corresponds to the same desire to salvage the conditions of possibility of a certain mental reality, the

¹⁰³ Op. cit. 159.

¹⁰⁴ Velter, André. 'Ascension du Mont Analogue', in *Une autre altitude*, Paris: Gallimard, 2001: 49-77, 51-53. For a comparable sketch of the Daumalian quest as moral guarantor of a subsequent project of writing see Haddad, Hubert. 'René Daumal, le perpétuel incandescent', in *Les Scaphandriers de la rosée*. Paris: Fayard, 2000: 27-39.

keeping in focus of a structure of experience, while renouncing practically all of the existing mythical underpinnings of such structures. The *lieu* is the space in which experience occurs and in terms of which it can be reflected upon. The immediate is, upon reflection, what proves both most elusive and most relevant to poetic utterance. The typified *lieu* is first of all a reminder rather than a transformation of the terms of this ‘problem’:

C’est la vertu des terres nues et des ruines qu’elles enseignent qu’affirmer est un devoir absolu.[...]Voici le monde sensible. Il faut que la parole, ce sixième et ce plus haut sens, se porte à sa rencontre et en déchiffre les signes. [...] Voici le monde sensible. [...] Je dirai qu’il est loin de nous comme une ville interdite.¹⁰⁵

At the core of the construction of experience we find again, after Segalen and Daumal, something like an empirical imperative of speech. The quoted extract from *Les Tombeaux de Ravenne* actually places ‘parole’, in its mildly lyrical prose, within the register of the senses, though superior to the five commonly attested. *Parole* is the contextualised mode of affirmation which is at the same time a de-‘conceptualisation’ of language use – the realm of sense experience being, for Bonnefoy, what undermines all constructions of the intellect. Meta-discursively, *parole* identifies for the subject that which is both an objective and an end to an intellectual rapport with language: “Le sensible est une présence, notion quasi déserte de tout sens, notion à jamais impure selon l’esprit conceptuel: il est aussi le salut.”¹⁰⁶ *Parole* relates to the register of what remains non-amenable to the pre-ordained categories of a discourse of experience – embodying a principle of reality, it at the same time instigates a principle of vitality, a dynamic, saving the speaker from the reifying powers of language-become-system.¹⁰⁷ Experience is proffered to the poet in the openness of a continuity and in the guise of the multiple,

¹⁰⁵ ‘Les Tombeaux de Ravenne’ (1953) in *L’Improbable et autres essais*. Paris: Mercure de France (Folio essais), 1992: 13-30, 23-24.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid. 26.

¹⁰⁷ That the ‘notion’ of presence might itself form such a category does not appear to perturb the poet-essayist, whose rhetorical practice exhibits a preference for invocation rather than ‘explanation’. It might thus be possible to think ‘presence’ as that which in the subject’s experience of the world eludes *a priori* the recourse to language, that which is closer to the being in the world than the words with which a subject adopts a reflexive stance towards that being.

rather than in the completeness of the terms (including terms such as ‘le sensible’, ‘la présence’) through which it can be attempted to imagine and convey a generality of such experience. In seeking to be adequate to experience the poetic utterance is thus required to confront the temptation of its own linguistic properties. The preferred objects of experience in *parole* for Bonnefoy, the objects and sets of relations that retain his gaze as a poet, manifest a consonance, an analogical sympathy with this openness as a result.

La feuille entière, bâtissant son essence immuable de toutes ses nervures, serait déjà le concept. Mais cette feuille brisée, verte et noire, salie, cette feuille qui montre dans sa blessure toute la profondeur de ce qui est, cette feuille pure est présence pure et par conséquence mon salut.¹⁰⁸

The saving quality of the rejection of a purity of the mind working towards the idea has an assumed quasi-theological value in Bonnefoy’s writings. It becomes a kind of purity in and through impurity. Hence the recurrent effect of the retention of constructs within their surpassing or opposite – the feeling of an ironic, deconstructive will underlying the desire for affirmation. The principle of a superior unity in incompleteness, in the face of the evidence of death, retaining a Christian tonality in an oeuvre which is at pains to distance itself from such any such affiliation, informs the selection and recognition of the poetic experience. But it also surfaces, consistently, in the reflection on the artwork itself, and on the condition of the subject in its pursuit – as, for example, in this extract written thirty years after *Les Tombeaux de Ravenne*, from the second of Bonnefoy’s sequences on the figure of Zeuxis, where we are made privy to the thoughts of the painter Zeuxis, a cardinal personification of the artist in the Bonnefoy oeuvre:

Dieu n’avait fait qu’ébaucher le monde. Il n’y avait laissé que des ruines. [...]
Seule la lumière a eu vie pleine, se dit-il. Et c’est pour cela qu’elle semble simple, et créée. – Depuis, il n’aime plus, dans l’œuvre des peintres, que les ébauches.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid. 27.

Le trait qui se ferme sur soi lui semble trahir la cause de ce dieu qui a préféré l'angoisse de la recherche à la joie de l'œuvre accomplie.¹⁰⁹

Thus the figure or name of ultimate closure is conscripted into a meditated renunciation of that quality as an aspiration for art. The world, in the unquiet eye of both the artist and his god, is the meeting of ruins (that is, forms haunted by the question of their own impermanence) and the 'medium' of their becoming apparent (*lumière*) – itself become the means of thinking the ruin in its incompleteness ("seule la lumière a eu vie pleine"), a kind of empirical absolute, or pre-eminent element. The perspective of the ruin has consequences for the poetic response to the imperative of action, for the 'act' of presence and the 'act' of *parole* (within Bonnefoy's meaning.) It moulds, and in so doing occludes, the decisional dimension of the entry into poetic work, sustaining thereby the linking of the destiny of poetry to the idea of a *vrai lieu* (an assent of the poetic consciousness to the world) and a consequent 'ethical' orientation (decisional assent) of the poet's rapport with language. These were already the guiding theme of a poetics for Bonnefoy in his earliest works of reflection on the poetic, whether direct meditations on experience, such as *Les Tombeaux de Ravenne* cited above, or critical essays, of which *L'acte et le lieu de la poésie* is amongst the most important:

[Les mots] aussi sont ce qui demeure de ce qui a disparu. Tenons-les pour une trace du bien et non plus de la quiddité. Et comprenons qu'ils sont, comme le passé, notre épreuve, puisque eu égard à la répétition qui va être ils nous demandent d'agir au lieu simplement de rêver.

Ils nous demandent d'agir. Et d'abord d'imaginer ce profond, de lever la contradiction de l'éclair et de notre nuit. Logiquement (qu'on me permette ce mot) c'est concevoir un vrai lieu. *Car s'il est sûr qu'ici, dans l'horizon quotidien, le seul bien désirable se dissipe, s'il est donc sûr que nous sommes en désordre et divisés d'avec nous, pourquoi ne pas vouloir d'un autre lieu du monde qu'il nous*

¹⁰⁹ 'L'inachevable' in 'Encore les raisins de Zeuxis'. *La Vie errante suivi de Remarques sur le dessin*. Paris: Gallimard (Poésie), 1995: 67-78, 69.

*rétablisse dans notre loi ? Un autre lieu, au-delà d'autres rencontres, au-delà de la guerre d'être seul.*¹¹⁰

The *vrai lieu*¹¹¹, postulated in respect of the world in which the subject fights against the dissolution of its structuring drive (“le seul bien désirable”), is a virtuality of experience prior to being an act of will. Yet it is one which, while situating the source of the effect sought somewhere outside of the subject, thus in a logic of the authority of the ‘real’ (“qu’il nous rétablisse dans notre loi”), represents a conscious assumption of the role of the subject as agent of its world’s architecture. The *vrai lieu* thus draws validity from a suggested necessity of the mind independently of its being imaginable as either a physical or textual possibility. It is this possibility, nurtured by language and assumed into discourse, rather than any entire experience in the first degree, any actual situated epiphany, that comes to answer the imperative attributed to the experience of the world. The discourse of an experience of the *vrai lieu* is a creature of language, for which the unwritten text of “notre loi” is the governing criterion of recognition. The desire is that the authoritative be recognisable in what exceeds the poetic subject even as the accompanying reflection on the poetic recognises in this desire an impulse for poetic creation. “Le vrai lieu est donné par le hasard, mais au vrai lieu le hasard perdra son caractère d’énigme.”¹¹² In a way which circumvents emphasis on autonomy, and thereby a tonality of will, the poetic search for the *vrai lieu* is thus from the beginning a negotiation with the mind’s own stratagems, resources and reflexes in the construction of a liveable assumption of the linguistic condition. The *vrai lieu* becomes from the moment of its naming a locus for the question of the optimal state of relations between subjects in a world which exceeds all subject positions. This place, which would reinstate ‘us’ within our ‘law’, is at the same time assumed in terms of a willed construction – thus initiating a circularity in which there is no distinguishable first term for the ‘experiencing’ subject.

¹¹⁰ ‘L’acte et le lieu de la poésie’ (1959) in *L’Improbable et autres essais*, op. cit. 107-33, 130 (emphasis added.)

¹¹¹ More consideration will be given to the idea of the *vrai lieu* in relation to the poetic text itself in Part III.

¹¹² ‘L’acte et le lieu de la poésie’ op. cit. 130

It is this reflection on the *vrai lieu* that results, in Bonnefoy's *L'Arrière-pays*¹¹³ (1972), in the foundational association between quest and the poetic imagination being turned back against itself even as it is entertained, anatomised and personalised in the process of its ever-less clear advancement in the modern world. The inaccessible centre of a *René Leys* or a *Mont Analogue* translates, in the move from fiction to aesthetic autobiography, as an absent component of every instant, of each 'experience' undergone by the poetic consciousness. In this respect the work is a diffracted narrative of the narration mechanism left transparent by the preceding 'utopias', one which remains loyal to a concept of a space of 'poetic' plenitude with similarly radical standards of exclusion only because the author has chosen to define his 'poetic' attention in terms of a holding-back from such a space. Hence the opening scenario¹¹⁴ of the book sets out the 'inquiétude' of the first-order temptation of the horizon. The subjection of perception to the 'poetic' imaginary naturally tends towards the construction of a promise of an 'essence plus haute' in an indeterminate elsewhere, and simultaneously of a community which would partake of this essence¹¹⁵:

Là-bas, grâce à la forme plus évidente d'un vallon, grâce à la foudre un jour immobilisée dans le ciel, que sais-je, ou que par le fait qu'une langue plus nuancée, d'une tradition sauvée, d'un sentiment que nous n'avons pas (je ne peux ni ne veux choisir), un peuple existe qui, en un lieu à sa ressemblance, règne secrètement sur le monde ... [...] les êtres de là-bas n'ont qui les distingue de nous, je suppose, que la bizarrerie peu marquée d'un simple geste ou d'un mot

¹¹³ 'L'Arrière-pays' in *Récits en rêve*. Paris: Mercure de France, 1995: 7-76. *L'Arrière-pays*. Paris: Gallimard (Poésie), 1998, reproduces the iconographical accompaniment of the original Skira edition (1972). The difference between editions underlines the interesting migration in the career of the text in question from being a reflection in relation to visual art to a fully autonomous 'récit en rêve'.

¹¹⁴ "J'ai souvent éprouvé un sentiment d'inquiétude, à des carrefours ...", quoted in Part II, section 1 *supra*.

¹¹⁵ The personal origins of the myth in Bonnefoy as revealed in the book are discussed by several commentators, e.g. Mortal (*Le Chemin de personne*, op. cit.), Née (*Poétique du lieu dans l'œuvre d'Yves Bonnefoy ou Moïse sauvé*. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1999), and Jackson (*À la souche obscure des rêves, La dialectique de l'écriture chez Yves Bonnefoy*, op. cit.) While that discussion is necessary, implying that the prospective imagination is a development rooted in childhood experience and to a degree constitutive of the later self, it is arguable that the central interest of the structure set out in *L'Arrière-pays* is its ultimately banal, generic quality.

que mes proches, en commerçant avec eux, n'ont pas cherché à approfondir.
N'est-ce pas toujours l'évidence qui nous échappe le plus?¹¹⁶

Whereas Daumal in his determination to respond to the 'évidence absurde' of individual experience could be thought, in the final years of his writing, to be engaged in a progression towards the definitive theoretical abandonment of language – and the aspiration to a horizon-less present could well be suspected of harbouring vegetative as well as ecstatic potential – Bonnefoy's project in a renunciation of 'la gnose' (his term for acquiescence to the combined temptations of the horizon) is to reclaim those dimensions of human experience which give rise to speech as being valid in their own right and adequate to a humanity which aspires to a transformation of its consciousness without an abandonment of the means of that consciousness. Just as the real condition of the subject is its situation, the irrevocable medium of the subject is language – together with those of its resources that might be characterised as 'counter-situational', its ability to dispel – or problematise – the reality of the condition.

The resistance to the intellectual and poetic temptations of the *arrière-pays* (poetic alias of the *là-bas*) is also a refusal of the projects to which those temptations, fully ceded to, can give rise – the experiences recounted and interwoven by Bonnefoy in the text of that name are bound up with the progression of his artistic work, his questioning of the notion of 'poetry', which here reads as a progression from one renunciation, one abortive attempt to work beyond the primary temptation within the given of an individual body of memories and experience, to the next, equally if differentially inconclusive. Stated flatly, the project would seem at first to institute a utopia of the present in the attempt to achieve a relation to the contingent – the here and now – which could be experienced as an absolute – that is, as fulfilling the promise of sense initially only experienced in the disquiet of the intimation of the *arrière-pays*, the eternally 'other' place.¹¹⁷ This utopia is

¹¹⁶ *L'Arrière-pays* op.cit. 10-11 (emphasis added)

¹¹⁷ One would thus be inclined to agree with Anne Mortal when she affirms that "pour Yves Bonnefoy [...] on peut réellement atteindre le haut-lieu, ou, plus exactement, en faire l'expérience, et c'est le lieu d'une pensée particulière – une pensée, pour simplifier, d'acceptation de l'expérience." (*Le Chemin de personne*, op. cit. 331) While remarking, however, that if the aspiration towards the *haut lieu* is assimilable to the aspiration towards an acceptance of experience, the work itself is the constant act of readjustment that

in its turn just as elusive as the spaces of Daumal and Segalen, just as much in want of an adequate language, because of the pull of language and experience away from the operative parameters of a mortal subject in any given time and place. What in the earlier utopian narratives read as movements 'towards' the fulfilment of a principle of necessity in an elsewhere of realised subject-hood – the discursive sorties that made up the body of the texts – here become movements of recoil from or in resistance to a space with something like the same imagined properties, with the writing attempting all the while to cut back to the bounded-ness of its source, to expose the processes connected to that state that ineluctably induces in the subject the error of the way of 'gnostic' speculation. Conceived of thus, the attempt to surpass the structure of the basic dynamic cannot but become a question of the *lieu*. The recoil from the idea of the *lieu* paradoxically initiates another search, reading obscurely like a progression, through the places, works and texts of the poet's development.

This 'search' is presented as a review of the confrontation over many years between the subject and the artwork (in the broadest sense of human constructions capable of supporting aesthetic reflection) in the places of the work's coming into existence.¹¹⁸ The nature of that confrontation, while articulate as to what is observed and sought in the work through the event of encounter, is not scholarly, progressive, or of the order of a project. The various artworks play host to the preoccupations of the fluid observer; the ongoing business of speculation makes of them mirrors of the play of doubt and certainty as to the speaker's own hope of speaking what 'is'. The travels recounted through this moveable pretext are primarily in certain provinces of Italy, between provincial museums, village churches and the great poles of artistic realisation that include Florence, Venice, Rome. But the *pays* is prefigured in the promise of the artwork and the texts of their first encounter – the experience of the traveller is prefigured by an imaginary

implies that such acceptation remains a goal (of the writing/ speaking subject) rather than a position within which writing can occur. That we are in the presence of the utopian dynamic, in other words, rather than of utopia achieved.

¹¹⁸ That there is a literary branch to the development of the dialectic between the here and the elsewhere is explicit in Bonnefoy's discussion of episodes from his reading as a child, but that it is a characteristically literary problem, a reflection nourished and amplified through literature, is a corollary of (*inter alia*) Madeleine-Perdrillat, Alain. 'L'Arrière-pays et la patrie inconnue de Vinteuil', and Roudaut, Jean. 'Les Arrière-livres.' *L'Arc*, Numéro spéciale sur Yves Bonnefoy, 1976: 48-55 and 56-57 respectively.

unavoidably instigated in the experience of the would-be connoisseur, as with Segalen's arrival in China, already equipped with what he imagines to be the symbolic intelligence of the place, and the literary ambitions to match. In their delineation of an ideal or an aesthetic perfection these works first pose the question of the mind's dynamic towards an inarticulable lack, they generate a promise in the eye of the viewer, which is a premonition already of the *arrière-pays* as an answer become 'habitable' place. Yet almost immediately the narrative voice adopts a reflexive stance towards its own prospecting, leaving what – enchanted – it might have attempted to seize as attainable in a move towards the horizon of its own language to become a disquiet intimately experienced and sought out in turn in the works of particular artists.

Je marche près de l'eau, je regarde bouger l'écume, signe qui cherche à se former, mais en vain. [...] Et plus je vais vers l'intérieur, dans un pays de la Méditerranée, plus fortement l'odeur de plâtre des vestibules, les bruits du soir, le frémissement du laurier, changeant d'intensité, de hauteur (comme on le dit d'un son, déjà aigu), vont se faire, jusqu'à l'angoisse, évidence, bien que close, et appel, bien qu'impossible à comprendre.

Aussi bien je ne regarde jamais le labyrinthe de petites collines – chemins faciles, mais arrière-plan infini – du *Triomphe de Battista* de Piero della Francesca, sans me dire: ce peintre, parmi ses autres soucis, a eu celui-ci, qui me hante. Mais j'aime aussi, sous ce signe, les grandes plaines, dont l'horizon est si bas que les arbres et presque les herbes le dérobent. Car alors l'invisible et le proche se confondent, l'ailleurs est partout, le centre à deux pas peut-être [...].¹¹⁹

The associative flux of Bonnefoy's prose moves in the style of a *rêverie* towards the goal of an act of lucidity achieved in the respect of the practice of illusion. For the writer determined to keep open the possibility of the poetic this is inevitably a balance which concerns the use of language, but it is capable as a principle of extrapolation into all domains of human intervention, even unto the landscapes of those civilisations "nées du désir de fonder" and of the ultimate pathos of such a desire observed in its ruins. "Je

¹¹⁹ *L'Arrière-pays*, op. cit. 13.

pense à l'Inde, writes Bonnefoy, où cette dialectique, d'affirmation qui se nie, a été vécue, si consciemment."¹²⁰ In the fortress of Amber – a concentric series of increasingly elevated spaces – the guarding wall seems to depart from the form appropriate to that function. Looking out from the interior of the fortress the visitor suddenly experiences something of the order of a revelation:

La ligne des remparts n'enclôt rien qu'on n'ait songé à défendre, elle coïncide avec l'horizon, tel qu'on le voit d'où je suis. Partout où le regard pouvait suivre le ras du ciel dans les pierres, un prince a fait courir la muraille, qui, de ce fait, ne retient pas ce qu'il possédait, mais le visible. Un lieu et l'évidence ont été identifiés l'un à l'autre, l'ici et l'ailleurs ne s'opposent plus, et je ne puis douter que ce fut là l'ambition première puisque [...] ce trait de couleur cerne [...] la présence, le fait du sol, dans son recourbement sur soi qui produit un lieu.¹²¹

This built affirmation is thus experienced as a project of meaning, with the man-made presenting itself as perfectly adequate to the 'real' – drawing the real into itself and thereby abolishing the oppositional powers of the *ailleurs*. But the eye of the interpreter, inside what was momentarily a *haut lieu*, then notices "que le mur à un endroit puis un autre (en fait, souvent) se sépare de l'horizon." The degradation of what had seemed to be the mechanism of sense throws the observing subject back on his own status as interpreter – before a second level of 'compréhension' is reached:

L'affirmation a été voulue, mais aussi l'aveu de sa démesure. L'ailleurs a été «aboli», dans l'instant premier, mais la lucidité a suivi, qui a laissé la profondeur non détruite briser le pouvoir de clore. Le prince a moins voulu achever son rêve qu'en méditer l'illusion. D'où vient, pourtant, que là où se marque l'échec, j'éprouve ce sentiment – où l'inquiétude, qui recommence, s'efface – de réalité approfondie, et rejointe? ...¹²²

¹²⁰ Ibid. 27.

¹²¹ Ibid. 28-29.

¹²² Ibid. 29.

It is thus no longer a unity of itself that the subject is seen to solicit from the *lieu* – a unity which would be a kind of sublime and voluntary containment through creative intervention, but the very oscillation of consciousness between surpassing and adhesion, mirrored in an imperfect correspondence between nature and artifice – an imperfection theorised by the interpreting mind as an overcoming of perfection and thus a more perfected approach of the world whose presence is the abiding and elusive mirroring goal of the poetic mind for Bonnefoy. The *lieu* in its resolution is an intermediate stage in the evolution of the gaze towards ‘pure’ presence, and it sets up a process whereby writing occurs in the breakdown of idealised space through the imagined breakdown of the idea itself. Between the idea of the *ici* as a containment in the given present experience, and the promise of the *là-bas* as an expression of the deficiency of that first idea, there is the practical reality of process, the process of the mind in which those two ideas are indissociable.¹²³ As with his more recent remarks on the existence of the *haut lieu*¹²⁴, Bonnefoy at this point trades one organisational metaphor for another and equates the ‘deeper’ truth of presence in a place, of the reality of one’s presence, with its abstraction into motion, process. The full dialectic of (dis-)affirmation becomes a diachronic axis along which the promise of the *lieu* coexists with a posture of lucidity (which sees through, as it were, without looking ‘beyond’). The chapter of travels under the influence of the *arrière-pays* closes by invoking and figuring this development:

Je me demande, en quittant Jaïpur, si le monde des coupoles, des villes fortifiées, des feux brûlant sur les cimes n’est pas celui, surtout, d’un chemin qui s’en éloigne, non pour l’ailleurs dont pourtant l’on rêve, mais pas davantage pour le rebord du grand vide que le bouddhisme suggère. *C’est un chemin de la terre même, un chemin qui serait la terre même.* Qui en assurerait – revenant sur soi, se faisant en cela esprit – la révélation, l’avenir.¹²⁵

¹²³ Collot: [L]e dualisme qui déchire la conscience de Bonnefoy n’est pas résolu davantage par une conversion à l’ici qu’à l’intérieur d’un système clos de signes ou d’images. Toujours demeurent en conflit les forces rivales, d’incarnation et d’excarnation, et le triomphe apparent de l’un s’accompagne d’une réhabilitation de l’autre qui, releguée à l’horizon, continue d’attirer un attrait irrésistible.” Collot, Michel. ‘Yves Bonnefoy et l’arrière-pays’. *L’Horizon fabuleux II*. Paris: Corti, 1988: 137-78, 164.

¹²⁴ Quoted in Part II, section 2 above.

A given world can thus be characterised in the concert of relations between each of its elements, but the ultimate incompatibility of the perceiving mind with the limit it seeks in the *lieu* is embodied in a pseudo-element, the trace of a passage inside but away from the *lieu* and the elements of the spectacle it provides. The *chemin de la terre*, suggesting a refusal to place the horizon beyond the step at that moment being taken within the *lieu* (the gaze is resolutely towards the ground rather than towards an imaginary destination, the way itself is of the earth) is that one of those elements that is always on the point of exiting the established configuration of the real, but without being assimilable to a horizon structure and a division of the subject between a preceding dissolution and a resolution to come.¹²⁶ In other words, what in the necessity of the *lieu* is most important – and most emblematic of that necessity understood and not succumbed to – is the paradoxical maintenance of a figure of a way out in the absence of a destiny of the exterior, a figure which is a re-centering on the human subject of the poetic project, its inscription as a temporal process.¹²⁷ Though there are elements of insight in the commentary of Richard Stamelman one thus feels a certain hesitancy when one reads:

In Yves Bonnefoy's poetic world the perfect landscape is the one that cannot be described; it lies beyond the power of language. Words deflect our consciousness from the perception of a central vision; they push our thoughts in directions that

¹²⁵ *L'Arrière-pays*, op. cit. 31 (emphasis added.)

¹²⁶ Philippe Jaccottet, a poet closely contemporary to Bonnefoy, on whom he has written incisively (See Jaccottet, Philippe. 'Vers le 'Vrai Lieu.' *L'Entretien des Muses*. Paris: Gallimard, 1968: 251-257), is more roundly immanent in his poetic hopes, or at least confronts the problem of immanence more frontally : "Dernière chance pour toute victime sans nom:/ qu'il y ait, non pas au-delà des collines/ ou des nuages, non pas au-dessus du ciel/ ni derrière les beaux yeux clairs, ni caché/ dans les seins nus, *mais on ne sait comment/ mêlé au monde que nous traversons,*/ qu'il y ait, imprégnant ses moindres parcelles,/ de cela que la voix ne peut nommer, de cela/ que rien ne mesure, afin qu'encore/ il soit possible d'aimer la lumière/ ou seulement de la comprendre,/ ou simplement, encore, de la voir/ elle, comme la terre la recueille,/ et non pas rien que sa trace de cendre." Jaccottet. 'Dis encore cela' in *À la lumière d'hiver suivi de Pensées sous les nuages*. Paris: Gallimard (Poésie), 1994: 69-72, 71-72 (emphasis added.)

¹²⁷ "[O]n n'en finit jamais de «revenir» [...] C'est ce que j'ai vérifié avec *L'Arrière-pays* [...] Dans ce livre, je suis spontanément revenu sur quelques côtoiements de mes poèmes passés, les agrégeant à un sens, ou une recherche de sens, qui d'ailleurs procède de ces poèmes. [...] Et j'ai pu voir alors que la circularité peut être en pratique une spirale qui tourne sans se fermer, descendant peu à peu, sans qu'on sache même si ses boucles se referment ou s'élargissent, vers un centre toujours inaccessible, qui est en soi ma présence, qui est aussi bien celle d'autrui, puisque le questionnement que je continue garde ouvert l'emploi de mes mots." ('Réponse au Journal de Genève' (1972) in *Entretiens sur la poésie*, op. cit. 54-59, 56-57.) Thus the openness of process, transmutation of a spatial discourse into a temporal discourse, is also the move whereby Bonnefoy indirectly inscribes 'autrui' into this approach of space – as unattainable.

they, the words, want to follow. To put it in a figurative way, we cannot see the world fully because the lens, the medium of vision, requires too much of our attention. In language, our existence can be nothing but marginal, and literally so. We circulate continually on the edges of meaning. Man is in exile from the center. All works of art, including poetry, reflect this, for they too live in a diaspora. The experience of exile and, by implication, loss (since exile is a form of loss, namely that of a homeland), is not only the subject of the work, but a part of its form and style as well.¹²⁸

It could be argued that these remarks state the case too emphatically and at the same time miss the point that what is experienced in such an approach to poetry is the temptation, confronted and allegedly overcome, of thinking our condition in terms of such a 'center'. *L'Arrière-pays* constantly forces the reader to confront this point. Poetry leads to an experience which is analogous to a 'loss', but it is the loss of something (a state of wholeness of some sort) which can only be aspired to, which it is no longer possible or interesting to think of regaining definitively. Bonnefoy's problem is not that of describing the 'perfect landscape', but that of those mental processes which would have us come back incessantly, almost automatically, to such schemas – a property linked to the autonomising tendencies of language – and of how, rather, to re-orient the project of an aesthetic refoundation around the fullest apprehension of the given: that is, rethinking 'perfection' in terms of the higher (ontological and hence also cultural) value that is imperfection ("l'imperfection est la cime."¹²⁹) In this matter language is constantly experienced to be a false friend, it being in a permanent state of surfeit in respect of 'what is' (what 'is' thereby becomes an objective – what is ... is what language is not) even as it is lived as a (if not the) governing feature of the human condition. In turning away from an aesthetic of perfection Bonnefoy repeatedly treats of the idea of what, in the absence of wishful thinking, it might be possible to salvage from experience through this 'poetic' philosophy. This disposition is operative in respect of those places which exalt the

¹²⁸ Stamelman, Richard. 'Landscape and Loss in Yves Bonnefoy and Philippe Jaccottet.' *French Forum* 5 (January 1980): 30-47, 31-32.

¹²⁹ *Poèmes*, op. cit. 117.

aesthetic consciousness of the passing mortal, monumentality requiring us to become alive to our ‘finitude’ :

Quand l’expérience de l’être est honnêtement conduite, dans son reflux ou, si l’on veut, son échec, une lumière encore se donne. Savoir, avoir éprouvé sa propre limite, est, au plus près du grand manquement, une liberté et un bien. [...] A nous, consciences infiniment personnelles, refusées aux magies du sommeil dans l’universel, qu’il faut tenir pour la mort, Byzance tend une coupe. Nous pouvons y toucher un instant des lèvres l’eau invisible – finitude faite présence – qui coule au profond de tout.¹³⁰

But it is thereby equally operative, upon reflection, in respect of those places which appear to offer nothing other than their poverty to the poetic question. The consciousness developed in the spaces of exception of the earlier work is transposed in later remarks upon the featureless as the necessary space of the ethical decision involved :

Sur le terrain vague, là où l’on brûle des planches, dans la fumée, on peut comprendre ce qu’est le lieu, le vrai lieu mieux qu’à Assise, mieux qu’à Lhassa ou Nara. Reste à *tout reconstruire et d’abord la nature*, à partir de cette évidence. De grands désastres fraieront la voie, s’ils ne détruisent pas tout d’abord la Terre même.¹³¹

It seems that the *chemin de la terre*, this move to a limit of the logic of the *lieu*, within a reflection on the *lieu*, back into a figure of process and temporality, is the cardinal duality not only of Bonnefoy’s re-integration of the *haut-lieu* back, as it were, into the profane of inhabited, imperfect spaces, but to some degree of all three narratives discussed as utopias of the poetic effort here. Proceeding from a virtual figure of the ideal place, the privileged stasis or end point to the journey assimilable to the space of aesthetic closure-perfection, via a gradual disenchantment of that figure, they place poetic realisation in

¹³⁰ ‘Byzance’ (opening text of ‘Un rêve fait à Mantoue’) in *L’Improbable et autres essais*, op. cit. 175-80, 180.

¹³¹ ‘Existe-t-il de «hauts» lieux?’ op.cit. 359 (emphasis added.)

relation with the future as an aspect of the mind's distress in the present moment and originate poetic work within this tension. Understood thus, 'poetic' writing would, even as it attempts to treat identity, represent in language the cardinal effort of the mind against its own atrophy through a solidification of achieved certainties. Conviction regarding poetic work seems accessible to articulation only at this distance from the 'act' itself, experienced as process in the narrative, a thereby paradoxical effort of fixation. Bonnefoy, in a statement which displaces his concerns from the oft-repeated 'ce qui est' which has been his abiding limit and intellectual caution, manages on occasions, with a characteristic concern for qualification, to express this radical openness as an achieved state of equilibrium between language and the virtualities which draw it on. The reversibility of what had seemed to be a nostalgia for an irretrievable ideally-configured origin is again, as with the preceding quote, uppermost here. The ontological preoccupation of the poet is at the same time a 'de-ontological' practice:

La logolâtrie est un mal, dont notre siècle a souffert, mais l'idéalisme, l'adoration d'un reflet de soi, c'était tout aussi détestable, et à tenir la balance égale entre la présence monosémique et l'écriture plurielle – entre le Je et l'autre, disait Rimbaud – on pourra échanger le théologique contre le simple, le rêve compliqué de l'individu contre ceux plus élémentaires que tous les êtres partagent: et accéder au pain et au vin d'une *reconnaissance* mutuelle. La poésie a dit longtemps ce qui est, quitte à transcrire cette évidence en termes mythologiques et donc à hypostasier tels mirages, à se mettre en guerre avec d'autres. Guidée à l'origine par le déchirement de ses rêves, *elle dira demain ce qui devrait être*.¹³²

The question of what such a 'reconnaissance' might consist remains unresolved as long as the poetic, even as it holds out the idea of existential relief, is defined in terms of a resistance to all forms as forms of closure: "[S]avoir c'est l'adhésion illusoire, celle qui s'attache au dehors de l'Être, à des images, c'est le rêve, *c'est ce que j'appelle l'écriture, par opposition à la poésie*."¹³³ Bonnefoy establishes an equation between interiority and

¹³² 'L'Analogie suprême' (1978), in *Entretiens sur la poésie*, op. cit. 171-77, 176-77 (emphasis added.)

¹³³ 'Existe-t-il de «hauts» lieux?' op. cit. 356 (emphasis added.)

authentic being, and joins ‘poetry’s’ differential identity to it. The terminological exercise is also about the attempt to stigmatise the other pole – poetry is constructed here in a more or less rhetorical / polemical opposition with ‘écriture’, not only is it not ‘merely’ writing, it is the designated contrary thereof. Their point of separation is around the question of adhesion to form, in which respect the poetic arises from an effort to adhere to a beyond-form or an ‘informe’, to adopt a term theorised by Bataille.¹³⁴ The complex truth-poetry-being is entered through the overcoming of form, of which the ubiquitous perception of the ruin is a precursor – figuring both the category of form and its perishable quality over time. Finitude, the founding circumscription of being in its temporary essence, the origin of the ubiquitous decomposition, provides the verbal figure of ‘truth’, “puisque mourir est ce chemin/ De verticalité sous la lumière”.¹³⁵

This order of truth seems irreconcilable with the conception of the possible achievement of art in the following lines from the essay *Rome 1630*, where Bonnefoy, describing the work of Bernini, equates the adhesion of the subject to the experience of the space constructed by and around a cultural object with a ‘simple’ factuality:

[C]e n’est plus, cette nouvelle beauté, l’instable évocation d’une inaccessible essence, c’est un simple fait de ce monde; et c’est aussi l’adhésion confiante qui porte la personne vers lui.¹³⁶

The question is valid as to whether this simple adhesion is not exactly what constitutes the experience of the *vrai lieu* as projected by Bonnefoy all along. His description of the Bernini work as an example of the oeuvre containing, generating the adequate response, recalls the idea of landscape as a kind of infra-text of the communicational act as exemplified in the remarks of Anne Cauquelin discussed earlier. In *Rome 1630* Bonnefoy is writing more firmly with the role of a cultural archaeologist/historian – restoring and reliving the feeling of evidence / adhesion to work in its original context. In the here and now this requires an already literary ability to read the half-submerged signs of an

¹³⁴ See ‘Informe’ (1929) in Bataille. *Œuvres complètes I*. Paris: Gallimard, 1970: 217.

¹³⁵ *Le seul témoin*, I, *Poèmes* op. cit. 45.

¹³⁶ *Rome, 1630. L’Horizon du premier baroque*. (1970) Paris: Flammarion (Champs), 1994: 31

original act among the layers of construction and commentary which have succeeded it – an ability which many would associate with a certain imagination. There are, arguably, variations within the work of the extent of closure / adhesion which can be associated with such ‘vérité’ – thus while a discourse of the *vrai lieu* is often in the essayistic work the focus for a discourse of adhesion, ‘confidence’, wholeness, *L’Arrière-pays* dispenses, through the assumption of that construct into narrative, with the search for closure. The passages above on Jaipur establish this, but it is stated more or less explicitly elsewhere, for example in the later paradox of Brindisi, ‘lieu où l’on passe’¹³⁷. The narrative closes with references to the Rome of the same period as that dealt with in *Rome, 1630*, but with a different emphasis in respect of the same phenomena:

[E]t quant à l’architecture berninienne, elle acheva soudain de me dire que *l’être du lieu*, notre tout, se forge à partir du rien, grâce à un acte de foi, qui est comme un rêve que l’on a tant vécu, et si simplement, qu’il en est comme incarné ... Je m’arrêtai alors au XVII^e siècle romain comme au théâtre même de la présence.¹³⁸

In *L’Arrière-pays* Bonnefoy at the same time demonstrates amply that the accordance of adhesion is a process involving not only the intentions of the artist – which he does not discount – but also a reflection by the ‘beholder’ on the way in which a given work actually opens up the possibilities of sense, elaborates multiple possible meanings, which place it on a par with the complexity of an individual subjective rapport with the world. No image, in other words, can invariably generate a truth-reaction, no form can ordain the formless (‘poetic’) energy of the subject’s entry into encounter. Thus, in describing his own puzzling reaction to the perfection of some *Quattrocento* paintings, he writes:

Est-il vrai que l’on ne désire l’ailleurs que là où l’ici s’affirme? Eh bien, voici comment un art de l’affirmation, une civilisation du lieu assumé, peuvent se prêter, activement presque, à l’imagination d’un lieu autre, à la rêverie d’un art

¹³⁷ “Voici le lieu, me disais-je, où Virgile est mort, laissant inachevé son poème. Et moi, ce soir, qu’ai-je fait? J’étais seul avec l’infini de la mer, l’insistance de la machine, qui signifie la durée, le souvenir des dalles de Delphes, l’Italie devant moi, toute ma condition résumée.” *L’Arrière-pays*, op. cit. 65.

¹³⁸ *L’Arrière-pays*, op. cit. 76 (italics in original, emphasis added.)

inconnu; se prêter à l'insatisfaction, à la nostalgie, aider à la dépréciation de ce monde même dont ils disaient la valeur.¹³⁹

Thus even the most consummate art, the one that achieves the goals of which the observing artist is capable of formulating for it, can become a force of 'excarvation' in the observer. The artistic achievement as a mental-moral state is something which has to be re-begun, reinvented over and over again.¹⁴⁰ This recognition of the momentary quality for the creating subject of any artistic achievement in terms of its inner 'truth' is what comes to be associated with 'poetry', more than any formal achievement. Hence the necessary emphasis on experience as process, on work as 'becoming' in the ongoing construction-effort of the 'poetic'.

C'est dans mon devenir, que je puis garder ouvert, et non dans le text clos, que doit s'inscrire et fleurir, si elle a sens pour moi, comme je le crois, et fructifier, cette vision, cette pensée proche. Ce sera lui le creuset où l'arrière-pays, s'étant dissipé, se reforme, où l'ici vacant cristallise. Et où quelques mots pour finir brilleront peut-être, qui, bien que simples et transparents comme le rien du langage, seront pourtant tout, et réels.¹⁴¹

Bonnefoy links this formulation with the overcoming of a crisis of poetic belief in the passage from the Hölderlinian epigraph to his second poetic volume to the Shakespearian one of the third.¹⁴² The dissolution of the *lieu* into the temporality of poetic prospection is of the order of an importation of an existential principle into the poetic demand and the

¹³⁹ Ibid. 34.

¹⁴⁰ This perpetual re-beginning of the poetic effort is what characterises Bonnefoy's poetic 'progress' in the view of one of his most respected critics: "*Le progrès à travers recommencements et ruptures* est peut-être ce qui devient plus nettement évident, maintenant que les quatre recueils poétiques de Bonnefoy se trouvent rassemblés en un seul volume de *Poèmes*. Chacun des quatre parties constitutives trace un parcours, organise la séquence de ses éléments en les orientant dans la direction du «vrai lieu». Placés côte à côte, rassemblés sous une même couverture, chacun des aboutissements perd la qualité d'absolu que nous aurions été tentés de lui attribuer, devient provisoire, comme la crête d'une vague destinée à retomber, pour être suivie d'une autre vague." Starobinski, Jean. 'La Poésie, entre deux mondes,' preface to Bonnefoy. *Poèmes*. Paris: Gallimard (Poésie), 1982: 7-30, 26 (emphasis added.)

¹⁴¹ *L'Arrière-pays*, op. cit. 74.

resultant modification of this. It is thus that the identification attributed to Poussin, another recurrent figure of the artist in Bonnefoy's work, of Rome with the handful of soil, at the close of *L'Arrière-pays*, can be understood: the (anti-)‘resolution’ of the problem of the *lieu* in the assumption of the creative activity of the questioner¹⁴³, and a return, at least rhetorically, to the least gratifying forms of the here and now, the ‘rag and bone shop of the heart’ (“le bazar de défroques du cœur”), to borrow a phrase from another poet whose work has nourished Bonnefoy's reflection.¹⁴⁴

¹⁴² “Tu veux un monde, dit Diotima. C’est pourquoi tu as tout, et tu n’as rien.” (Hypérion) *Hier régnant désert* (1958); “Thou mettest with things dying; I with things new born” (Le Conte d’hiver) *Pierre écrite* (1965) (Shakespeare quoted in English.)

¹⁴³ In the view of Patrick Née “[la page finale de *L'Arrière-pays*] peut à bon droit passer pour le point d’articulation et de bascule de toute l’œuvre: autant celle déjà écrite que celle encore à venir.” (*Poétique du lieu dans l’œuvre d’Yves Bonnefoy ou Moïse sauvé*, op. cit. 253) It is certainly an important example of Bonnefoy's tendency to evacuate the spatial logic in which his reflection characteristically proceeds at the point where something of the order of a resolution is required (here, the completion – rather than the closure – of his utopian narrative.)

¹⁴⁴ See Bonnefoy's ‘La Poétique de Yeats’ (1989), originally a preface to his own translations of Yeats, collected in *Shakespeare et Yeats*, Paris, Mercure de France, 1999: 227-50, which carries the stance of ethical irony into this other domain of the poet's activity: “Traduire, he writes, ce n’est pas répéter, c’est d’abord se laisser convaincre.” (250)

III. Non lieu: Formative and transformational properties of the poetic text.

Il disait: «Je suis sans place», comme on dirait: «Je suis sans liens», sachant, toutefois,
que toute parole crée son lieu.¹

1. Potentialities of the poetic text as *non-lieu*

To turn to the question of the *non-lieu* represents an attempt to consider the construction within and around poetry of what a ‘poetic’ textuality, as distinct from a poetic ‘experience’, might be, and by what such textuality might be characterised. Developing a reflection on the poetic text in terms of the *non-lieu* is to attempt to derive an autonomous paradigm from within a pre-existing paradigm. The truism that all ‘text’ is to some extent thinkable as a *non-lieu* needs both distinguishing and supplementing with respect to the poetic. To speak of the ‘poetic’ *non-lieu* implies a practical reversal as well as a verbal negation of the perspective previously explored – here speech is both ideally and practically the cause rather than the consequence of the spatial quality focussed upon, the (non-)*lieu* in question. The *haut lieu* of imagined communicative perfection, rooted in a constant overlaying of the world with an imaginary of the text and the simultaneous absorption of this imaginary in the necessity or given of lived experience gives way, at this stage, to a discourse of the *non-lieu*: that is, of the space of poetic work as at least to an extent productive of its own validity, as inseparable from a sense of what the act or work of poetic writing ‘should be’ – as thus to some extent in its action bringing about from *within* that to which the narratives discussed in Part II more or less disenchantedly aspired from *without*.

The meditation on and development of the spatial qualities of the poetic text, and the approach thereof as a constructed space with specific properties of condensation, containment and communication, have been important factors in the development of a reflection on the activity of modern poetic writing and a dominant feature of the structuring discourses of the poetic, whether by practitioners or commentators. Roger

¹ Jabès, Edmond. *Le petit livre de la subversion hors de soupçon*. Paris: Gallimard, 1982: 73.

Little has developed an account of the observable breakdown of classical French verse forms, initially towards the *poème en prose* and the *vers libre*, later in ever more strenuous attempts to establish the product of the *acte poétique* as visual enactment of verbal substance, in the random shape of an artefact-poem.² Fundamental to this sequence is, Little maintains, the transformation of the approach to words brought about by increased literacy, improved printing technology, increased urbanisation and the growing isolation of the individual in the new urban setting. He crystallises their net effect in the declaration: “Performance gave way to perusal.” The move to a poetic prose replicates this shift, with properties which were formerly distinctive of ‘poetry’ – regular metre, mandatory and codified rhyme – being understood to relate to the auditory dimension of poetic reception. Their necessity and functioning were as guides to the listener in the context of a declaimed verse form, an act of concerted orality-audition. With the advent of the silent reading of poetry, the encounter between the reader and the poetic composition, though perhaps more fraught, remained nevertheless amenable to and marked by a logic of adequation. This might present itself via the dictional choices of the poet, the rhythmic effects subsisting in the text, the persistence of this or that isomorphism – within the newly-understood resource of the printed page as consolidated object in itself, its entirety becoming the field of (re)enactment. The interest of many 20th Century French poets (Little concentrates in particular on those emerging post-1945) in the intersections and articulations of the visual arts and the practice of poetry is argued to confirm the organisation of the cratylian, enacting drive into a spatial as much as a linguistic activity within French poetry.

This grand narrative is itself that of a ‘utopian dynamic’ in the evolving view of poetic work and the artefacts to which it could give rise. That utopian dynamic, thinkable in terms of the *non-lieu*, is observable in the thinking surrounding the establishment of what would be perceived as a poetic text. All texts, prior to being speculatively transformational, are practically and pragmatically formative. Poetic texts, it will be argued here, place greater pressure on both components of that composite term: greater

² Little, Roger. *The Shaping of Modern French Poetry (Reflections on unrhymed poetic form, 1840 – 1990)*. Manchester: Carcanet Press, 1995.

‘negativity’ in some respects being accompanied (and counterbalanced ?) by a greater ‘materiality’ in others. Accounts of this negative potential need to acknowledge both the difference between theory and practice, and the varying lengths to which the logic of the *non-lieu* is taken. When the utopian dynamic is understood as one expression of the relation of an oeuvre to those others which have counted for the author, it can be observed that the limits it envisages are not always outer extremes.

A treatment of the poetic text proper involves an extension of the application of the spatial discourse encountered heretofore, then, in that ‘poetic’ texts will demonstrate an active preoccupation with their own space as the site of absence, revelation, accession to form, reconciliation, collapse – the text inheriting and transforming the situated-ness of the subject in its own handling of situation, relation, organisation. But it also represents, to a degree, a modification of that discourse. The conceptual connection of phenomenological or lived space with the notionally absolute, openly artificial space of the poetic text results in the passage from the former (the space of ‘experience’) to the latter (the space of the ‘poetic text’) of a kind of ‘caution du réel’: by engaging in spatial self-conception and self-constructions, by necessitating a reading which takes enhanced account of the text as a space, the poetic text annexes a means of articulating grounding concerns.

The perception of the poetic text moving from the entry of the category of spatiality into the writing and reading of poetry expands what can continue to be called an ‘ontological’ seriousness into the virtuality of the written artwork – its fabric being an indivisible compound of its *sui generis* materiality and the relations elaborated or made possible via this (apparent) ‘object’. The poetic text assumes qualities of the unattainable *lieu*. The textual ‘space’ in this development can come to *hold together* what contingency or the unthinkable given have contrived to keep apart – up to and including the writing and reading subjects themselves, held by the glimpse, articulated but not entirely articulated, of a unity prefigured in the unity of the ‘poetic’ unity of choice (the sign, the poem, the ‘texte’, the ‘livre’, the ‘oeuvre’).

Reflection on these processes can in practice tend towards an either/or position – according to which the poetic text is either autonomous or entirely in a logic of adequacy, either imaginary or intensely documentary, entirely given over to autopoetic play or caught in the logic of an absolute motivation to its signifying. In approaching poetic work across different ‘spaces’, the hope is that an idea is building up as to the variety and heterogeneity of the imperatives acting upon the writing actually produced. This complexity, even reversibility, is perhaps the greatest guarantor of the vitality of the ‘poetic’ principle subtending them, the basis of their ability in turn to exceed any determination or interpretation placed upon them. Thus an elusiveness which could either be thought (in the localised rationality of a meta-discourse) to be the primary gift of language as such, or its flaw:

[A] construction that hopes to dispense with the extra-linguistic is just as illusionary as one that is convinced as having attained it. [...] No text can remove itself from a relation to the extra-linguistic, and none can determine that relation. This undecidable relation to what it is constantly related to prevents the text from closing into a totality. The undecidability of its referentiality means that the text is open, and so fragmentary, at every point.³

Yet even its open denomination as ‘text’ constitutes what is written as something in some degree separate. This degree of separation is what founds the idea of textual ‘space’ beyond simple analogy, as a ‘space’ with its own properties. It is fully appropriate that the modernist consciousness of this parallel take Mallarmé’s *Coup de dés* as its starting point – no more consummate or foundational example thinkable of a ‘text’ that is ‘open, and so fragmentary, at every point’. It is the text that definitively establishes poetic writing as one calling for a fully spatial, silent, reading rather than a voiced vertical movement through verse. The inauguration of the text as ‘space’ is what simultaneously emancipates poetic writing from the preceding [and pre-eminent] shadow of the oral, ‘internalising’ to a large extent, in the process, the relation of the reader to the poetic, and shifting the horizon of closure from the work as proposition or series of propositions to

³ Frey, Hans-Jost. ‘Undecidability’, *Yale French Studies* 69, 1985: 132.

the idea of an artwork – that is, textual space as the scene of a possible autopoiesis, of significant and signifying rupture with the outside world.

Mallarmé's gesture is given its revolutionary status by Blanchot in the mid century, for whom it is as if Mallarmé inaugurates, through an occupation of the most radical position, a modern 'space' of the 'work', and simultaneously facilitates the critical discourse which establishes that space as one conjoining the 'possible' and the 'absolute'. That these terms derive from a philosophical / metaphysical baggage which is parallel to the texts themselves, even if Mallarmé for example, was acquainted with Hegelian thought, is also, thereafter, a staple of the construction of the poetic in the interplay between poetic texts and surrounding, supporting or appropriated discourses. Thus Blanchot:

Un Coup de dés n'est que dans la mesure où il exprime l'extrême et exquise improbabilité de lui-même, de cette Constellation qui, à la fureur d'un peut-être d'exception (sans autre justification que le vide du ciel et la dissolution de l'abîme), se projette «sur quelque surface vacante et supérieure»: naissance d'un espace encore inconnu, celui même de l'œuvre.⁴

This space of the oeuvre is not assimilable to that of the book either as text or as object, even if these give rise to supportive aesthetics. In the case of Mallarmé, for whom the ultimate *Livre* is of the order of a pure idea, the actual achievement of the *Coup de dés* simultaneously inaugurates a *sui generis* space and makes it very difficult to think this specific quality in terms of a closure. In Blanchot, the idea of the Mallarméan text as 'Constellation', projected onto a void, translates this achievement. It is important to remark upon the way in which this inverts the mechanics of sense-making put forward in our discussion of the *haut lieu*, which is in some way the question of projection from the space of the subject onto the ordered promise of sense in the given or encountered world. But this constellation, in its very questioning of order, is a negation which can be understood as a radical resuscitation of the problem and potential of form, one which

⁴ Blanchot, Maurice. *Le livre à venir*, op. cit. 318.

gives rise to a space of ‘possibility’. Hence for example on a general level, for Michel Deguy, Mallarmé’s practice of negation is a ‘privation non privative’, inaugurating something of a parallel universe, thus productive in its turn:

Mallarmé s’arrache à l’opposition binaire doxale, du positif et de sa négation, en arrachant le terme réputé «négatif» à son sens simple à valeur privative pour le faire rejouer au-dessus de l’opposition, le même mot subjuguant celle-ci et donc servant une deuxième fois à ne pas dire la moitié d’une partition triviale, mais la «vérité de la chose» dont il s’agit.⁵

Mallarmé accomplishes a projection, then, into the partial negativity of a *non-lieu*, seeking a founding poetic speech without the safety-net of any analogical order. The utopian dynamic within the *non-lieu* thus initially seems to result in an abolition of form. And yet the spectre of form, as an eminently poetic interrogation, is not thereby banished from subsequent interrogations of the poetic. In investing in the materiality of the text, the poet is necessarily confronting this question of the void – the possibility of imposing a shape which conforms to no outer template. Bernard Noël’s remarks on the negative afterlife of form in the more accommodating discourse of a ‘space of the poem’ – remarks made almost a century after Mallarmé’s death – are of interest in this respect:

J’ai fabriqué cette expression: *l’espace du poème*, parce que j’avais le sentiment que préexiste quelque chose ... Avant d’écrire un poème, un livre, j’ai toujours essayé de faire exister une forme vide. Une forme qui n’a pas de forme, qui a des bords mais qui n’a pas de limites. Je compte, j’ai recours à un système de chiffres faute d’autres moyens d’appréhension. Compter un espace pour le faire exister fortement, pour en faire l’appelant d’une précipitation dont il devient la mise en forme virtuelle.

⁵ Deguy, Michel. *La raison poétique*. Paris: Galilée, 2000: 73.

J'ai le sentiment, quand je parle d'espace du poème, qu'existent des formes virtuelles que le poème vient réaliser quand il a lieu. Ce qui revient à dire que le poème existe avant d'exister. Existe d'abord comme un possible...⁶

The 'vide' is a 'possible' pre-existing the poem itself – with the creation of a text it enters the order of the 'real', not in the sense, obviously, of Lacan, for whom this is precisely what language cannot do in any circumstance, but in that it participates to some degree in the order of things, even while also thinkable as a past, latent, or potentially, diversely recurrent 'event' (see Benasayag⁷ for example, whose Lacanian borrowings are acknowledged.) Given that the poem is still conceived here as a text which can be regarded in its entirety, as a whole, this makes of the 'space' of the poetic text something of the order of a *lieu* – again, mirroring the idea that the *lieu* is space which has in some sense become text. But the 'lieu' here, projection from a premonition of the void onto a possibility of the void, from the uncertain subject onto nothing more structuring than the blank page, 'constellation', 'relation', 'movement', is what would have to be called a *non-lieu*. That is, bearing characteristics of a *lieu*, but none of its constraints in the absolute.

It is worth focusing for a moment on the negative quality, the *non*, as equally constitutive of the poetic text as the embodiment of a utopian dynamic. Mallarmé is the literary personification of renunciation on all levels, and it is thus understandable that his name should attract the projections of this discourse from poets themselves, as initiator of a tradition of practice of sorts. Deguy's relatively recent meditation on the mallarméan *non*, from which we have already quoted above, is particularly relevant here, because it brings out the consanguinity of the utopian and the poetic 'negations'. The tendency of the mind to reconstruct that which is 'missing' is contrasted by Deguy with a positive apprehension of absence, a decision to savour the negative of the artwork as the very quality upon which it is founded. Very readily, a logic of the absolute reappears in which the negative fills the categories left vacant by the disqualified (or non-'poetic') positive:

⁶ Noël, Bernard. *L'espace du poème*. Paris: P.O.L., 1998: 69.

⁷ Benasayag, Miguel. *Utopie et liberté*, op. cit.

“[E]ssayons un regard pour lequel l’absence ne serait pas la part du manque, mais une nouvelle ligne sans défaut, contour vierge qui refasse de la « première fois ». Le visible alors est sans vestige, sans ruine, sans fatigue – vierge vivace. [...] *Solitude* est alors le nom qui convient, non pas à dire l’esseulement de la subjectivité d’un «solitaire» à ce moment, mais la plénitude, la magnitude du «*sol*», le rayonnement égal de la «nature» – comme si la terminaison –*itudo* se faisait entendre seule, l’*itude*; on ne sait pas ce que c’est, mais c’est la réversibilité du tout et du rien, du comble et du vide, le «moment» de leur égalité ou équivalence, l’enveloppement d’un rien par le creux d’une blancheur – comment y aurait-il «un rien» s’il n’y avait la «creuse blancheur d’un clos»? – le moment où s’échangent le tout et le rien; un rien pour un tout pour un rien en boucle; en tout rien tout bonheur, si je puis risquer ce qu’on appelle un «à-peu-près »...⁸

The continuation of a logic via its inversion is accompanied, however, by an asymptotic version of the *non*. In the logic of naming, or more broadly, the logic of the employment of language, is instituted an indirect rapport with the object – one in which the absence of the object is in fact a state of optimal (poetic) realisation. The promise of ‘ce qui n’est pas passé loin’ is the ‘avoir lieu’ of the mallarméan negative – the *non-lieu* is the utopian text of this rapport with the possible, which is a production of language at the limit (intimate / outer) of the ‘possible’. This philosophy of the negative is simultaneously presented as having roots in metaphysical humour, or what might, more broadly, be termed irony⁹:

– « ... du bonheur qui n’aura pas lieu... »

L’utopie est ce qui n’a pas lieu. Le bonheur est utopique. Mais en quoi consiste ce n’avoir pas lieu? Le n’avoir pas de lieu est-il un n’avoir pas lieu? [...]

⁸ *La raison poétique*, op. cit. 69 (italics in original, emphasis added.)

⁹ Marin emphasises the ironic quality of the generic utopia in *Utopiques*, op. cit. See also Schoentjes, Pierre. *Poétique de l’ironie*. Paris: Seuil, 2001; Dadoun, Roger. *De la raison ironique*. Paris: Éditions des femmes, 1988; Rorty, Richard. *Contingency, irony, and solidarity*, op. cit.

1. Du « couteau sans manche auquel manque la lame », proposition de Lichtenberg où Breton lisait un paradigme de l'humour, il ne reste pas rien – mais quoi, sinon, précisément, l'idée-nom de couteau, un vocable, à la façon dont la définition de l'élément géométrique, par exemple de la ligne droite, s'opère de la soustraction de ce en quoi consiste toute ligne, à savoir son épaisseur et sa segmentation [...]

2. Le bonheur ne se possède pas: le bonheur est *ce qui n'est pas passé loin*; apporté et supporté par quelque chose qui (se) passe très près.¹⁰

The negativity of the *non-lieu* can be understood, via these discourses elaborated in the interpretation of Mallarmé, as expressive of an essentially utopian quality – whereby the poetic accession to speech is both affirmation and dis-affirmation, no longer a question of presence, but of presence maintained in absence. But there is a second aspect of this negative potential which, when combined with a relation to the *lieu*, provides very different potentialities for the utopian dynamic within the poetic text. The analogy of the poetic, in our utopian narratives, with the *haut lieu* – a site intuited in terms of maximal symbolic power – while serving to construct the poem as a kind of perfected ordering of the chaos of possible experience, and thus in some form of continuity with the 'real', quickly leads to a reflection on poetic autonomy. While this can lead to mallarméan negativity, the poetic fascination with the *haut lieu* also subtends a conception of the *poem* as *haut lieu* – a text thus dignified in the reflux of the imagination of experience.

The exceptional *lieu* as it emerges as an inaccessible preoccupation of the 'utopian narrative' is that relation to space, it was argued, where the promise of sense (as an agreement of 'subject' and that which exceeds the subject) reaches its optimal intensity. The empty telos of the utopian narrative is thus able to act as a figure of both the inaccessibility of the *lieu* – and the possible response to this impossibility, its overcoming in an act of individual creativity. This overcoming is a radicalisation rather than an abandonment of the aspirations for the poetic experience as that of the 'real'.

¹⁰ *La raison poétique*, op. cit. 71 (italics in original.)

In this alternative version or conception of the poem its supplementary, *sui generis* existence is an essential extension – an aspiration to a positive amplification of the ‘real’, rather than an outright negation thereof. The ‘power’ of the poetic is, paradoxically, the measure of its adequacy to what lies outside of it – but at the limits of its imagining, this ‘power’ becomes something transformational, adding an extra dimension to the world that solicits it and distinguishing the site of the poetic in the process.

The move from experience to text in poetic work can, in this version, be thought in terms of a utopian extension of the logic of the *lieu* to that point where linguistic signs, the emergence into language of any such (promise of) sense, become the explicit and governing feature of a given (constructed or encountered) ‘lieu’, with the greater emphasis on closure, perhaps simply the greater *emphasis*, that this implies in comparison with the ‘mallarméan’ negation. The negation in question here is, one could argue, a radicalisation rather than an abandonment of the claims laid down in the pursuit of poetic experience as that of the ‘real’ – and as such in explicit rupture, if not with the foundation of the *non-lieu* in Mallarmé, then with a certain widely-accredited take on the mallarméan relation to the ‘world’:

Mallarmé repousse l’idée de substance, comme l’idée de la vérité permanente et réelle. Quand il nomme l’essentiel – que ce soit l’idéal, le rêve – , cela a toujours trait à quelque chose qui n’a pour fondement que l’irréalité reconnue et affirmée de la fiction.¹¹

One could be forgiven for taking the *non-lieu* to be exclusively a convoluted reference to the printed (or blank) page – the ‘autonomy of the text’ being comforted by the idea of a radical separation of the book-object from the outside world. But the passage from positive to negative is realised in (inter)mediate configurations, where the ontological approach of the *lieu* appears to include an experience (postulated) of the sign as itself participating in the ontological – via, in the first place, an enhanced ‘materiality’. This is the way into the active imagining of textuality for a certain tradition which has not, as it

¹¹ *Le livre à venir*, op. cit. 311.

were, ‘turned its back’ on the world, or at least attempts to think of itself as grounded in an ‘experience’ or practically charged imagination thereof. The imagined move, as it is constructed through some poetic work, from experience to speech can thus be reflected upon as a development out of the question of the *lieu* beginning from that point where linguistic signs become the explicit and governing feature of a given ‘lieu’, whether it be constructed, encountered, or constructed as encountered.

In taking an early text of Claudel’s as an example here, the idea is that, in the aftermath of Mallarmé, a part of the French poetic experience engages with a different, expansive, ‘real’-oriented method of asserting a different line on an autonomy of the poetic text – one in which the poetic text is theorised as initiating an ontology of the written word, its accession to an ontological status, its participation in the order of being rather than ‘signifying’, and thus an incorporation of the ‘real’ into the *non-lieu*. This is an especially dominant theme of the poets who, in the generation after Mallarmé, nourished their reflection through contact with the cultures of the Far East. The ‘poet’, encountering everywhere the signs of the other culture, typically incorporates them into a reflection on his own medium and its constituent elements. A canonical and directly relevant example for the present discussion is the text entitled ‘Religion du signe’ (1896), part of the first version of Claudel’s *Connaissance de l’Est*¹², an inaugural text of what might be called geopoetics, but also a direct precursor of Segalen’s poetic cosmos. In that text, Claudel eschews an absolute dichotomy between the Roman alphabet and the set of Chinese characters. Both are of the order of the sign, but whereas the alphabet, the Western “lettre[,] est par essence analytique”, Claudel’s encounter of the ideogramme leads him to speculate on its status as “un être schématique”:

La lettre Romaine a eu pour principe la ligne verticale; le Caractère Chinois paraît avoir l’horizontale comme trait essentiel. La lettre d’un impérieux jambage affirme que la chose est telle; le caractère *est* la chose tout entière qu’il signifie.¹³

¹² Claudel, Paul. *Œuvre poétique*. Paris: Gallimard (Bibliothèque de la Pléiade), 1967: 21-120, 46-48.

¹³ Ibid. 46 (emphasis in original.)

Through a practice of opposition the text comes to an organised and transcendent reading of what the Chinese ideogramme does in and with language. That linguistic sign is, on the view expressed, remarkable primarily for incorporating ‘being’ into written language. It thus participates in the experience of the real in a manner different from that of the western alphabetical mark. Being the ‘thing’ it signifies and thereby acceding to being itself, it becomes not simply an object among others – a physical part of the ‘landscape’ – but one that at the same time, its *sui generis* signifying quality intact, also embodies the ordering principle of physical space. It is spoken of as unequivocally sacred in its capacities and operations, transforming the silence of the non-linguistic objects arranged and ordered around it:

De chaque côté de la halle, nous distinguons, entre leurs rideaux, de grandes inscriptions, et, au-devant, des autels. Mais au milieu du temple, précédée de cinq monumentales pièces de pierre, trois vases et deux chandeliers, sous un édifice d’or, baldaquin ou tabernacle, qui l’encadre de ses ouvertures successives, *sur une stèle verticale sont inscrits quatre caractères.*

L’écriture a ceci de mystérieux qu’elle *parle*. Nul moment n’en marque la durée, ici nulle position, le commencement du signe sans âge: il n’est bouche qui le profère. *Il existe, et l’assistant face à face considère le nom lisible.*

Énonciation avec profondeur dans le reculement des ors assombris du baldaquin, le signe entre les deux colonnes que revêt l’enroulement mystique du dragon, *signifie son propre silence*. L’immense salle rouge imite la couleur de l’obscurité, et ses piliers sont revêtus d’une laque écarlate. Seuls, au milieu du temple, devant le sacré mot, deux fûts de granit blanc *semblent des témoins, et la nudité même, religieuse et abstraite, du lieu.*¹⁴

The process can be read as operating in both directions, as a kind of reflux. As the poet encounters ‘being’ in the sign of the other language – speech become object – the elements of the object-world increasingly occur in the text as offering speech, as imbued with a semiotic quality intelligible to the poet and his readers in turn. Signs, newly-

¹⁴ Ibid. 47-48 (emphasis added.)

acceded to an entirely physical dignity, become the being-component of the object encountered. The experience giving rise to the text, openly and superbly textual itself, establishes a whole new order of expectancy for the poetic text it gives rise to, or at least makes imaginable.

Yet that which, for Claudel, is transformed in this ontologisation of the written mark is not an intrinsic nature or power of the 'signifier' – the 'being' that is the Chinese character remains distinctly 'schématique'. The transformation is essentially of the rapport of the individual and collective 'subjects' in the given culture with the sign system they have adopted. Specifically, the 'piety' of the Chinese for the written character leads to the cited *mise-en-scène* of the sign as the cardinal physical element of the cultural *haut lieu*. The sign, and by extension the message it is thought to embody (Claudel experiences the ideogramme-signifier independently of a signified, the 'sign' in its abstract role as sign) institute sacred space by their placement therein. The logic at work arises within the domain of signifying or representation. It facilitates, when taken to its limits, a cultural crossover into the 'real', supported in the observed division of social space. "Le signe est un être, et, de ce fait qu'il est général, il devient sacré. La représentation de l'idée en est ici, en quelque sorte, l'idole."¹⁵ The Confucian temple as described by Claudel is thus a privileged point of transition from the ethic of 'poetic experience' to a certain idea of poetic text as ontological site in its own right, a *haut lieu* pre-figuring a *non-lieu*. The temple is the physical cultural space where the sign and the real are proclaimed and apprehended as being in a state not simply of perfect mutual adequacy (elements from different orders), but in a symbiosis (as exceptionally participating in the one order) – which is a regime of the materialised pre-eminence of the sign.

Claudel's text observes and articulates this space of the jurisdiction of the sign. It does not itself participate in the logic it reveals to the Western reader (it is as if the ontological quality of the sign is nevertheless contingent upon the gaze of the reader – Claudel has understood and exported the idea, without having succumbed to the original.) Central to

¹⁵ Ibid. 47.

that logic, as observed, is a certain *materiality* of the sign – its physical imposition as founded and necessary, its mute, indisputable given-ness. It would be wrong to claim that such aspirations for the sign were absent from Western poetry before the encounter of the East. The lineage generally begins with Plato's *Cratylus*, which sets out the debate for Western culture on sign motivation (and the whole basis, for Thomas Greene, of the link between 'poetry' and 'magic'¹⁶.) It is thus possible to attribute a similar 'philosophical' dimension to systems of metrics and prosody, a function of which was to inculcate the necessity of a regularity or a pattern in the establishment of the poetic text, hence the conditions for the experiencing certain signs in certain places as 'necessary'. The 'rules' of poetry as they had variously gained acceptance in the European languages, practically up to the time of Claudel's earliest work, thus already invoked a metaphorical logic of construction which made of certain words in certain circumstances the cornerstones of the entire edifice of 'poetic' effect, its achievement of 'meaning'.

The implicit equation in *Religion du Signe* of the poetic, in its difference, with the *haut lieu*, site of maximal infra-semiotic cohesion and hence generator of a promise of 'sense', serves to determine the text of the poem as a maximally valid ordering of the given of lived experience. The *non-lieu* of the poem is paradoxically strengthened in its ability to be seen to stand alone via the imaginary or literary existence of a *haut lieu* as poem *en puissance*. The ability of the sign to integrate signifier and signified in the display of its 'own' 'being' becomes, within the perspective of poetry, a claim for language rather than for the world with respect to which a new level of reference may have been imagined as established. The reflux of the imagination of experience thus enables the empty telos of the utopian narrative to act as a figure both of the *lieu* – and of its overcoming in the poetic achievement of the *non-lieu*.

In the complex reinforcing the sense of necessity through a recourse to materiality which, it will be suggested, is constitutive of the discontinuity between the *non-lieu* of a certain poetic space and the world in respect of which it continues to press its claims, there is – in the claudelian treatment just as with the mallarméan *non-lieu* – a point at which the

¹⁶ Greene, Thomas M. *Poésie et magie*, op. cit.

‘poetic’ becomes an attempt to instate a free-standing sense – one which, in *Religion du Signe*, does not negotiate the acquiescence or submission of the reader, simply proffering itself as itself to the act of reading (“Il existe, et l’assistant face à face considère le nom lisible.”) The sign, poeticised as a sacred writing, differentiates itself in that it brooks no difference, least of all in itself. It becomes the spectacle, or finality, of its own foundedness: the ‘sense’ it offers to the “assistant” (who contemplates rather than reads) is first and foremost that of the validity of what is presented. There would be a preliminary movement, at least, in the approach of such a ‘reader’ in which the material sign would be simply looked upon (*il considère*), its existence attested, before any attempt at a full encounter of what remains ‘readable’ might take place. Thus an authoritarian aspect to the materiality, or ontological moment of the sign, one that is declarative, hieratic or oracular in its advancement of a jurisdiction, as it were, of the poetic.¹⁷ Thus, also, the attempt to retain a sense of the *lieu* within the *non-lieu* makes of the latter a conjunction of the axes of utopia – posing the relation of the sign as social and as motivated in experience within a paradigm of pure possibility or virtuality. The ‘ontologisation’ of the sign is necessarily also its removal from the order of the negotiable, the response to the question of possibility with its sublimation in a given – which is, paradoxically, an extreme statement of the ‘possible’ of the sign itself.

The *non-lieu* of the poetic text thus potentially houses signs for which negative and positive traits have, alternatively, been subjected to a utopian dynamic. It is the exceptional space with which such exceptional claims can be imagined and entertained. In its singularity, it also imparts a special status to those elements which – as *lieu* – it places in relation. The negative dimension of the poetic text as *non-lieu* abolishes, for the aesthetic gaze, that which is of the order of an incompatibility between the experienced *lieu* and the written text. The negativity ensures that the text always retains the distance of its textuality from its most extravagantly ‘real’-tending self-imaginings. The negation is thus dominant where the laws and potential of textual space, arguably inseparable from the apprehension of a given referential scene as ‘meaningful’, generate effects

¹⁷ Making it an extreme form of the original relation established through writing – see Lisse, Michel. *L’expérience de la lecture. (I. La soumission)*. Paris: Galilée, 1998. This is an aspect which is particularly present in Segalen’s formal imagination.

attributable only or primarily to themselves – in other words, where the event of poetic speech itself occupies the position of generator of the ‘real’. Visual art, in its comparable maintenance of a spatial unit(y) of exception, can offer useful analogies here. For visual art this dilemma of autopoïêsis which has not renounced all representational objectives can be understood as a problem of representation via the ‘unreal’:

Ce qui donne le mouvement, dit Rodin, c’est une image où les bras, les jambes, le tronc, la tête sont pris chacun à un autre instant, qui donc figure le corps dans une attitude qu’il n’a eu à aucun moment, et impose entre ses parties des raccords fictifs, comme si cet affrontement d’impossibles pouvait et pouvait seul faire sourdre dans le bronze et sur la toile la transition et la durée. Les seuls instantanés réussis d’un mouvement sont ceux qui approchent de cet arrangement paradoxal, quand par exemple l’homme marchant a été pris au moment où ses deux pieds touchaient le sol: car alors on a presque l’ubiquité temporelle du corps qui fait que l’homme enjambe l’espace. *Le tableau fait voir le mouvement par sa discordance interne [...]*¹⁸

‘Poetic’ form would, in a manner analogous, show itself equal to the problem of embodiment and positioning, becoming a form which would offer ‘resolution’ in the sense of the possibility of seeing with some clarity – but not necessarily in the sense of solution, of an answer of the kind the question ‘form’ appears to flourish before the curious or terrified mind. This is a state of resolution, then, in which nothing is resolved. One such state is that which Deguy, to refer to that poet’s essayistic work once more, proffers as characteristic of the ‘poetic’ text, and which he terms *compossibility*. Defined as a space of compossibility, the poem’s status as linguistic object is inseparable from its attempt to meditate on the full condition of the speaker, who is both bound to and partially without language. Interestingly, in the light of texts commented upon and yet to come, this idea of disunity within ‘resolution’ is made by Deguy to adhere to the figure of the mountain, standard icon of transcendence and poetic closure. In another of his

¹⁸ Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. *L’Œil et l’Esprit*, op. cit. 78-79 (emphasis added.)

wilfully free-ranging treatises on poetics ‘La poésie n’est pas seule’¹⁹ he seeks in beginning to set out the terms for what – in explicit reference to Daumal’s last work – he calls ‘une nouvelle cordée pour le Mont Analogue’. This he appears to develop under the sign of a heideggerian foundation, as discussed earlier²⁰.

It could of course be argued that, in setting up the questions in this way, the preference for artistic creation, and in particular the poetic, as modes of reconciliation is already established. That the search is on for the communicative template which will reflect our need for sense back to our ‘creative’ selves. That even where nothing of the order of a resolution is available, theorising ingenuity will engineer a concept which can continue to go by that name and thereby buttress a refusal to contemplate the world as openly uninhabitable. Deguy proffers his artistic space, which he presents as a holding-together rather than a resolution, via the topos of the mountain summit – univocal site par excellence – in a working hypothesis. True to his logic of paradox and opposites, this release or way out offered by art, attained in an ascensional, taxing movement by poet and poetician alike, is also a limit – not a dead end, but an end point to that effort in that form:

Car il se peut que le point appelé Art soit ce point d’Archimède utopique commun à d’extrêmes adversaires, [...] point «surréal» comme le voulait Breton à condition de ne pas l’entendre comme celui de la «résolution» des contraires mais de la compossibilité paradoxale de ceux-ci; point, donc, «élevé», gagné par une pensée qui parlerait ainsi:

L’issue est [...] cette extrémité, ce sommet, si l’on veut, dur à gagner, à regagner, et tel que s’y découvre la paradoxalité ‘sans issue’ des contraires à prendre ensemble – à sym-boliser.²¹

¹⁹ Deguy, Michel. *La poésie n’est pas seule*. Paris: Seuil, 1988.

²⁰ Base camp for Deguy being Hölderlin’s dictum, distinguished and dissected by Heidegger – as discussed above (Part I, section 2): “Voll Verdienst, doch dichterisch wohnt / Der Mensch auf dieser Erde.” (Which he translates: “Riches en mérites, c’est poétiquement pourtant, / Que l’homme habite sur cette terre.”) “Comment la *poièse* des arts, comment la *Dichtung*, réfléchié dans le langage d’une poétique, peut-elle nous douer d’une capacité d’habiter?”, he asks, “Quelle issue [...] nous proposaient les œuvres de l’Art?” (16).

²¹ Ibid 16.

The imaginable attainment of art is at the figurative top of a Mont Analogue. But while preserving a maximal element to the figure (this attainment, the figuratively highest point, is what allows us to ‘inhabit’ – that is, to occupy and move with some harmony through all spaces), Deguy also brings out its generally unspoken part, its performative duality. The top of his mountain is a focus of dispersion²², not the poetic equivalent of the scholastic theologian’s head of a pin, where the voice disappears in a paroxysm of its own striving and poetic language reaches its apotheosis in silence – the customary whiteness of the peak. Thought in terms of the artwork, it is a centre to an uncentered real, a by no means readily accessible space rather than an abolition or movement out of space. To revert to the terms we have been trying to use, it represents, in its achievement of an embodied ‘compossibility’, the idea of a non-lieu, a *sui generis* ‘spatial’ formation.

We could confine a reflection on the *non-lieu* to the idea of poetic space as one of compossibility, that is of ‘holding together discernibly that which is not amenable to synthesis’, rather than of full ‘reconciliation’. Subject always to a utopian extreme, the proviso of the dream of a text’s infinite difference vis-à-vis its precursors and its material self, whereby the poetic space will always contain an element in excess of a given formulated meaning/interpretation, or, in a different register, in which the poetic text becomes a kind of mystical body, a complex symbol in its turn of the possibility of an achieved ‘sense’, which is never actually separable from the materiality of the text itself. Hence this complex of properties leading to compossibility, which we could assign to a reflection on the ‘formative’ tendencies of a poetic textuality, requires to be considered alongside another, ‘transformational’ rapport with space observable in actual poetic work.

²² “Ce que Bénichou [in *Selon Mallarmé*. Paris: Gallimard, 1995] appelle l’impasse est l’issue. Le sommet est l’issue pour un grimpeur; et le propre du sommet est d’être le bout de l’impasse. Je parle plutôt de l’énergie du désespoir.” Deguy. *La raison poétique*, op. cit. 79.

2. The ‘dionysian’ moment: limit of a spatial and a poetic logic

The view of the text in quasi-topological terms which to a discourse on the *non-lieu* can give rise, a discrete representation of the text as formation, requires leavening with a transformational view. On the most basic level this corresponds to the truism that linguistic ‘juxtaposition’, once the juxtaposed elements are read together, gives rise to something other than the sum of their parts. *Parole* is not the assembly of individual words in an utterance, but their placement under a unifying principle. The emphasis in this section is not on reading, however, but on the representations within the text of a ‘transformational tendency’ – that is, one which acts in distinction to the ‘formative’ properties of the *non-lieu*; and which, in particular, moves from the critical, ‘held together’ unity of the *non-lieu* to a more reconciled form. This could be assimilated (or dismissed) as simply a narcissistic vein visible at some point in the works of most poets. But, in terms of the *non-lieu*, it will be observed that such writing represents also a re-emergence of the rhythmic, the versified, the musical. Thus, while the *non-lieu* is thinkable in terms of a utopian dynamic that makes for a complex space of fragmented, multiple writing, this parallel occurrence is also the embodiment of a dynamic, more archaic and in continuity with a deep history of the poetic, the extreme point/principle of which will here be characterised in terms of a ‘dionysian moment’.

Supplementary, and in distinction to the treatment already given to utopian narratives, there follows, in illustration, a narrative of this ‘dionysian’ moment – whereby its occurrence in the authors discussed might be better situated. *Moriturus*, from Henri Michaux’s 1975 collection *Face à ce qui se dérobe*²³, is an intermittent narrative worked out against the background of a semi-determinate mountain landscape. That emergent form is one bodily invested in Michaux’s third-person subject N..., a symbol de-conceptualised and installed in the subject by its definitional dimension of excess, its overwhelming feat of being, or of ‘échelle’ as Daumal has already employed that term. This symbolic presence, whose power bridges figural and visceral, is the governing, unspeakable reality of the sequence of events – or stages of intensity – narrated in the

²³ Michaux, Henri. *Face à ce qui se dérobe*. Paris: Gallimard, 1975. 131-48.

text. The opening line of *Moriturus* is a dotted line, a salvo of full stops – elsewhere in the collection suggestive of duration and silence. The inception of narrative speech occurs through a fusional movement of the subject within the ostensible – and ultimately fatal – machinery of the absolute:

La Vastitude avait augmenté. Le cercle de hautes montagnes à l'entour, quoique inchangé, paraissait *au bord d'un grand changement qui ne venait pas*. Douleur, en lui une amplification inconnue continuait, sans objet, à la recherche d'un objet.²⁴

For Daumal's narrator the intellectual adoption of the longing for a Mont Analogue, the longing for a thing imaginable, results in its existence. In Michaux's *Moriturus* the given of experience and the need of the subject are fused *ab initio* in the body of the subject, where they amount to a dumb, indescribable sensation. *Bras cassé*²⁵, the opening text of the collection, provides an extended examination of such discrepancy between body and speech. Within the play of the speaker's inimitable curiosity around the loss of control occasioned by a broken right arm, the site of real suffering is adjudged to lie in the unmastered disunity of the suffering subject (another form of difference or gap across which speech can occur) that physical pain unveils:

Les rapports si difficiles à établir avec la souffrance et avec toute nouvelle esthésie, voilà ce que ne réussit pas le souffrant, voilà sa véritable souffrance, la souffrance dans la souffrance.²⁶

With this internal crisis of a self absconded – a frontline question of 'presence' – arises an inter-subjective crisis of expression. The physical dimension is an indeterminate space of isolation, which can be named but not conveyed. The converse also runs, the defeat of communicative expression being experienced as a physical hindrance:

²⁴ Ibid. 131 (emphasis added.)

²⁵ Ibid. 7-70.

²⁶ Ibid. 9-10.

La souffrance physique, on n'en peut rien faire, au lieu que les souffrances morales, c'est un délice (pour certains) de les communiquer, de s'en vider autant de fois qu'il le faut sur d'autres qui s'y associent. Mais comment associer quelqu'un à une fracture, à une péritonite, à un cancer?²⁷

In *Moriturus* the incommensurable symbolic field within which we first encounter the subject has, under the title of 'vastitude,' taken on the inner weight of an undiagnosed physical symptom, an inarticulable malaise. It thus becomes a factor of dissociation (internal) and impulsion (external). Both of these dynamics are ascribable to a meta-narrative of linguistic or poetic quest, as in the 'utopian narratives' discussed earlier. But Michaux's scenario takes us further into the transformation of a 'poetic' turn – there is no suspension of adhesion in the elusiveness of the object. Interpolated in the build-up of the subject's disarray, a one-line reflection (is it the narrator's or is it N...s ?) states: "Il y avait là comme un mode dionysiaque d'exister."

What does this classical intertext add to the model of a modern poetic quest? The *Bacchae*²⁸ inaugurates the literary existence of Dionysus. The site of the dionysian rite is in the mountain pastures above Thebes. There the Bacchae, the group of Theban women who have followed Dionysus, move to the dictates of a new logic. The Herdsman, who reports the dionysian scene on stage, stumbles at dawn upon a vision of humanity and nature reconciled. An unreal calm prevails:

They were a sight to marvel at for modest comeliness, says the Herdsman; women both old and young, girls still unmarried. [...] Some would have in their arms a young gazelle, or wild wolf-cubs, to which they gave their own white milk – [...] One would strike her thyrsus on a rock, and from the rock a limpid stream of water sprang. Another dug her wand into the earth, and there the god sent up a fountain of wine.²⁹

²⁷ Ibid. 67, endnote to the preceding quotation.

²⁸ Attributed to a 75 year-old Euripides – as is *Moriturus* to a 75 year-old Michaux.

²⁹ Euripides. *The Bacchae and other plays* (tr. Philip Vellacott). Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972: 216.

The rite of the Bacchae begins, in which the entire mountain unites as one movement within the element of music:

When the set time came, the women began brandishing their wands, preparing to dance, calling in unison on the sons of Zeus, [...] And with them the whole mountain and all the creatures there, joined in the mystic rite of Dionysus, and with their motion all things moved.³⁰

When, however, the dionysian cohort is approached, another side to this unity emerges. The possessed bodies, become a single catastrophic force, lay waste to the emblems and domains of the civic:

Bulls, which one moment felt proud rage hot in their horns,/ The next were thrown bodily to the ground, dragged down / By the hands of girls in thousands; and they stripped the flesh / From the bodies faster than you could wink your royal eyes.³¹

Dionysus' revenge on the city which denied him culminates by having Pentheus, the prince who comes to exact justice for these devastations, ripped apart by his own mother Agavé, in a deluded frenzy. Son and mother are successively confronted with a truth of pure horror at that precise point where they can no longer hope to act with the knowledge attained. The helpless Pentheus sees that he will be torn apart by his mother for not having had "a sound and humble heart that reverences the gods." The hapless Agavé learns that she has killed her son while possessed as an instrument of the god's revenge. To have denied Dionysus, and the human truth he embodies, is the cataclysmic 'sin' of these victims. Cadmus, the aged king, pleads: "Have mercy on us, Dionysus. We have sinned." Dionysus: "You know too late. You did not know me when you should."³²

The *mode dionysiaque* taken at source, then, is an intimation of unspeakable knowledge within a problem of self-definition. The dionysian presence is necessary,

³⁰ Ibid. 217.

³¹ Ibid. 218.

³² Ibid. 243.

incommensurable, destructive. In *Moriturus* it re-emerges as the liminally-oriented drive central to the project of self-knowledge, as the tacit and insistent command that the subject open itself to a destabilising ‘vastitude’, as a logic which demands the abandonment of limits laid down by reason, as a linguistic practice inexorably angling in on its own disappearance or transfiguration.

N... était arrivé à un endroit sombre, écarté, en présence d'une large et haute montagne.

Une grande faille l'en séparait.[...]

Il en émanait un appel persuasif, insistant.

Le temps s'était arrêté. La montagne et lui, il n'y avait plus qu'eux. [...]

Elle lui enjoignait d'aller se précipiter dans le gouffre.[...]

Pas de mots. S'il y en avait eu, c'eût été quelque chose comme: «Viens, ne cherche plus. N'essaie pas de te reprendre. Tu ne trouveras jamais, jamais davantage, quoi que tu fasses.» (Il s'agissait du Grand Savoir vers lequel pendant longtemps, il avait cru diriger sa vie.)

L'appel ne discontinuait plus.³³

In this structurally poetic epiphany, an unspoken call names the unknowable. The ability of the symbol-mountain to incite both meaning and affect in the encountering subject now becomes a drive to surrender rather than to ascend. The fusion on offer, felt and named as dionysian, is in this instance a dissolution of despair rather than ecstasy (which is the most readily-imaginable vector of the ‘Grand Savoir’, the revelation on the mountain top, the poetic Holy Grail.)³⁴ If we cut to where N..., from having frailty chosen the path of dissension, the narrow ridge, is said to be lying motionless, in the dark of the abyss where he has fallen (or was he pushed?) we are in a position to savour the ambiguity of a dionysian adhesion in Michaux's version. At this point N undergoes one

³³ Op. cit. 132-34 (emphasis in original.)

³⁴ In the present case the view of the vanishing point is one of disenchantment and dread. The resident god is an ogre. As such, incidentally, the landscape is not untypical of Michaux's universe, which is one of ambient horror and horrible difficulty, haunted by an idea of presence conceived in isolation. The important point being, however, the sense of inevitability, and of adhesion to this, present in the ‘dionysian’ moment.

final enigmatic brush with presence (or is it the promise of presence?) with Dionysus governing the revelation (or is it an illusion?):

Une musique s'éleva. Quoique sourd, il l'entendit, exhalaison sonore d'une pureté, d'une intensité inconnue. Venant de partout, mais de nulle part où l'on cherche des sons, de nulle part où les musiciens incroyablement trompés cherchent et continuent à chercher. Elle venait de VÉRITÉ.³⁵

The complex music-truth-adhesion as the culmination of what began as a spatial experience is also present in the *locus neo-classicus* of Dionysus, Nietzsche's *Geburt der Tragödie*. There the principle of fusion is dionysian, its art is music, its occasion is a *Versöhnungsfest*, a feast of reconciliation, and the dionysian subject is an artwork of movement, sociability and incipient flight:

Singend und tanzend äussert sich der Mensch als Mitglied einer höheren Gemeinsamkeit: er hat das Gehen und das Sprechen verlernt und ist auf dem Wege, tanzend in die Lüfte emporzufliegen.³⁶

Although Michaux's dionysian moment is solitary, earth-bound and near death, we understand that here too we are on the verge of the instant of a sea-change. Inextricably, the experience reads as an enactment of Bataille's 'limite du possible de l'homme'. Perhaps this is what authorises language to flare up again, just when it seemed to have become dispensable, making *Moriturus* a laudably frank case of ambiguity in the face of the absolute, a refusal to comment on whether every question has an answer, every projection its reality:

[À] nouveau rien. Un autre « Rien ». Une voix pourtant en émanait, voix sans une trace d'hésitation, jamais entendue, totalement sûre d'elle-même. Et que proclamait-elle? «Tu vas naître.» - «Tu vas naître.»

³⁵ Op. cit. 147.

³⁶ Nietzsche, Friedrich. *Die Geburt der Tragödie* (1871). Stuttgart: Reclam, 1993: 23.

Mais alors, il n'était donc pas né? ³⁷

It might be possible to read in N's symbolic overwhelming an instance of the Freudian 'oceanic feeling'³⁸ – the experience of an ecstatic loss of the sense of self associated with a removal of symbolic bearings. The mountain top, moving beyond the role of archetype, would thus take on a more wholly transformational quality as an imagined site of this intimate failure of the symbolic and the glimpse of 'truth' to which it could be thought to give access. The disappearance of the support of an intelligible symbolic order coincides thus with the topological point at which the structuring properties of the discourse of space abandoned the utopian narrative. The dionysian rapport with the *lieu* is ultimately that of an apotheosis of 'space' in a rhythmic musical development. The 'vrai' in poetic adhesion, its experience in terms of a poetic 'truth', is thus also intimately bound up with this transformational moment, in all of its ambiguity. Which leads to metaphorical forays such as that instanced in the following remark by Roger Dadoun:

Toute poésie [est] traversée de la nuit, même quand elle s'entend à chanter la «faucille d'or» ou qu'elle se veut promesse des blés lumineux du jour.³⁹

The two related concepts of autopoïesis and compossibility, derived at least in part, and shored up, through a reflection on the poetic 'space', the *non-lieu* of the text, can be factored back in to an ultimate turn in this discourse. They represent a move back, under the recurrent shorthand of *chant*, to voice, unity, ascension, lyricism, the expression of a 'self' – all of which can be seen to participate in the recurrent 'dionysian moment' in modern poetry, one which, in perhaps its least ironic form, represents a utopian dynamic operative at the core of poetic work. *Moriturus* reserves an upper-case presentation for a

³⁷ Op. cit. 148.

³⁸ Freud imparts Romain Rolland's claims for the 'sentiment océanique' as the source of religious disposition/feeling thus: "Diese [eigentliche Quelle der Religiosität] sei ein besonderes Gefühl, das ihn selbst nie zu verlassen pflege, das er von vielen anderen bestätigt gefunden und bei Millionen Menschen voraussetzen dürfe. Ein Gefühl wie von etwas Unbegrenztem, Schrankenlosem, gleichsam »Ozeanischem«. Dies Gefühl sei eine rein subjektive Tatsache, kein Galubensatz; keine Zusicherung persönlicher Fortdauer knpfe sich daran, aber es sei die Quelle der religiösen Energie, die von den verschiedenen Kirchen und Religionssystemen gefaßt, in bestimmte Kanäle geleitet und gewiß auch aufgezehrt werde." *Das Unbehagen in der Kultur*. Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 1994: 31.

³⁹ 'La nuit de Desnos entre Science et Alchimie', *Cahier de l'Herne*. Robert Desnos (1987): 120-29: 121.

term which condenses the sought-after conciliation of the affective and the intellectual (VÉRITÉ). A modification, if not a radicalisation of the ‘autopoetic’ tendency of the poetic space could be argued to occur when, moving from a construction of that space as a site of ‘holding-together’, the poem can be seen to generate *the conditions of its own validity, its ‘truth’* – that is, the *non-lieu* becoming thinkable as the site of a ‘utopian speech act’ – as the space within which this act, a transformation-reconciliation of the elements brought together, becomes effective. Michaux’s text gestured towards this with the irruption of the term with the surrendering subject *in extremis*, while preserving a narrative distance. In this modification, the dual characteristic of the poetic space as *lieu* and *non-lieu* becomes amenable to resolution as a *vrai lieu* (the term, which we have already encountered, being Bonnefoy’s), where ‘poetry’ is both the creature and creator of a notion of ‘truth’ which (in a manner possibly no longer consonant with the idea of a continuing utopian dynamic, and thus more properly of the order of a textual utopia) it becomes poetry’s justification to hold out as a thinkable possibility to those who read, and those who write (towards) it.

What could be characterised ‘formally’ as the *non-lieu* of the poem thereby tends to an almost strategic positioning within discourse as the ‘vrai lieu’ where ‘poetry’, in the progressive interplay of its practice with its ideal(s), becomes not simply the locus but the generator of what [in general redeeming or emancipatory] sense the poetic subject can guarantee in an act of affectively lucid acquiescence. Indeed, in poetic work’s generation of this space, the importance of a gap between poetry’s present and its foundations in future accomplishment, between its real and ideal selves, can actually cease to be that great – the will to ‘truth’, as it were, doing for the truth as an absolute structuring experience / discourse; the recognition of the desire for truth being co-opted as an open-ended instance of such ‘truth’ itself. ‘Poetry’, in this logic, is imaginable as the discursive space of those texts within which, by acting as if ‘truth’ of a certain order were available, poet and reader come to regard poetry as engaging their most rigorous appraisals of direct experience and explorations of subject-hood and hence to find sustenance in a ‘truth’ of poetry, the idea of poetry as a privileged locus of ‘truth’ – an operator thus for something of the order of Descombes’ canonical principle. Truth become the possibility of truth re-

dynamises the continuing process of poetic work, reading and writing. This possibility of ‘truth’ for the subject means in turn that the ultimate *lieu* of poetry is neither purely the *ici* nor simply some real or imaginary *là-bas*, but in the process of opening up which the writing and reading of poetry is thought to represent. *Vérité* abandons the *lieu* as fixity and end-state in favour of a discourse of the promise of poetry, the possibility of the *lieu* – allowing ‘poésie’ to write on indefinitely towards the space in which it will attain ‘itself’, and the creating subject something of the same order.

In this construction of the permanently-impending virtue of the poetic effort we can read the reply, with a celebratory undertone, to those views which place all human engagement in signifying activity under the promise of a mis-recognition of the speaking party, unilateral, necessary. This polarity, established around programmatic hope, leads us readily to the ubiquitous discourse in Bonnefoy on the *vrai lieu*, and from there back into the question of what he has termed ‘vérité de parole’ – themes which, it will be argued, have correlates in the concerns of both Daumal and Segalen. Each oeuvre provides examples of the propensities of the poetic dimension of writing as one constructed in terms of an idea of the *vrai lieu*.

If the *vrai lieu* incorporates a kind of vacillation of the critical impulse which, through Michaux, we would associate with the dionysian moment, the embodiment of such a ‘moment – its passage from ethical to physical principle – is where the *lieu* implodes under the imperative of ‘reconciliation’ (the dionysian gathering, we have noted, is a *Versöhnungsfest*.) Thought in terms of an emergence from the *non-lieu*, ‘chant’ can be understood as chasing the point of resolution – whether one chooses to call that point the ‘subject’, ‘presence’, ‘voice’, the ‘object’ etc. – within that *non-lieu*. In abstract terms this pursuit is amenable to a description around the idea of deferral/difference – or the impossible coincidence of language with its imagined object. Again, Derrida points out how this impossibility enters the core of attempts to place such expectations upon language – an observation from which he derives an other-regarding principle:

L'identité d'une langue ne peut s'affirmer comme identité à soi qu'en s'ouvrant à l'hospitalité d'une différence à soi ou d'une différence d'avec soi. Condition du soi, de l'ipséité, une telle différence (d')avec soi serait alors sa chose même, le pragma de sa pragmatique: l'étranger chez soi, l'invité, l'appelé.⁴⁰

The space of the *pragma* is the *non-lieu*, but it can lead, as *chant*, to a practice therein which tends towards that space's abolition in the paradoxical move towards 'ipséité' in the (linguistic) acceptance of a 'différence à soi'. With the lyrical turn, the entry into language is played out in the *non-lieu* as (ultimately) the writing towards and identity with self. More 'pragmatically' it represents the opening of a space within which this identity could be read / experienced as a lingering possibility or presence. There are, of course, multiple vocabularies for the description and differentiation of the ways in which this attempt becomes manifest – of how form becomes an expression of formlessness, space of what defies spatial categories. One particularly interesting reflection on the movement is that of Georges Didi-Huberman⁴¹ – interesting because it suggests that the transformational movement is contained from the very beginning in the negativity of the *non-lieu*. The spatial work put in place by the visual artist discussed by Didi-Huberman figures nothing more than what could be described as traces of the passage/disappearance of something or someone absent. This refusal of display is in itself theorised by the essayist as a subversive, utopian gesture – placing the act of the artist at odds with the system in place for its reception, and simultaneously reinstating the experience of the artwork as one of 'searching', of *recherche*, on all sides.

Revendiquer l'ombre dans le domaine de la sculpture? Il ne s'agit pas seulement, pour Parmiggiani, d'un geste «mélancolique». Il s'agit aussi d'une décision critique.

Contre l'art phénomène de mode et le système Guggenheim [...] Face à une telle *surexposition*, «l'œuvre doit absolument se faire secrète», [...] *Sous-exposer*, ou exposer en catacombes. «Chercher sous la terre pour comprendre quelque chose.»

⁴⁰ Derrida, Jacques. *Apories. Mourir – s'attendre aux <limites de la vérité>*. Paris: Galilée, 1996: 84.

⁴¹ Didi-Huberman, Georges. *Génie du non-lieu*. Paris, Éditions de Minuit, 2001 – a work of art criticism on the *delocazione* technique of the contemporary Italian 'sculptor' Parmiggiani.

[...] Non qu'il s'agît de rendre l'œuvre *invisible* à proprement parler [...] Mais il fallait transformer, sinon inverser, les conditions *visuelles* où elle nous fait don de son mystère.⁴²

Once again, Mallarmé is co-opted by a theorist as a canonical reference in the development of his line of thought, and again the idea of the poetic text as a space – here in the alternative to the constellation in the mallarméan canon, a 'demeure' – is what founds the line of reasoning. The space of the poem is the (tomb-like) monument to an absence – and what Deguy would have described Mallarmé as 'suggesting' rather than naming, Didi-Huberman develops in terms of a different decorporealisation – that of the 'hantise', ("magie noire de l'air ambiant, son étrange «vie» d'effluves propagées jusqu'au plus intime de nous-mêmes, de notre vie"⁴³), with its more temporal, melancholic overtones – and its ability to extend, or appropriate, presence into an *entre-deux* of the physical and the mental/spiritual:

«Plus rien, restait le souffle», écrit Mallarmé sur la demeure d'Igitur, ce «vieil espace» plein d'un «vague frémissement», ce lieu de tombeaux, de cendres, d'ombres qui agissent. *Delocazione* met tout cela en œuvre. Plus rien, en effet: plus aucun habitant, plus aucun objet dans cette demeure (nous, les spectateurs, ne sommes que les passants, les étrangers ou les archéologues). Restent les souffles, visibles encore dans leurs fragiles empreintes de poussière. Les hantises seraient donc les personnages principaux de ce «théâtre de silence» qu'est *Delocazione*. On pourrait, en jouant un peu sur la vieille expression «génie du lieu», qualifier ce genre de personnages: *genius deloci*, ou «génie du non-lieu». Hantises de passage, hantises déplacées. Hantises fomentées par un artiste pour des lieux provisoires – des salles d'exposition – et non pour de véritables demeures familiales.⁴⁴

This *hantise*, showing the importance of the occultation of the original object (rather than direct, frontal showing), implies a certain differentiation at work, and the destabilising

⁴² Ibid. 120-21 (emphasis in original.)

⁴³ Ibid. 123.

⁴⁴ Ibid. 125-26.

creation of uncertainty. The disquiet of the haunting or of the separation engendered within the body of the poem – the ‘demeure’ in which personae / elements emerge – is akin to a broadly critical function of the *non-lieu*. Within this haunted *demeure* is one strand, the capital ‘genius deloci’, which is the ‘breath’ of ‘chant’, the ‘souffle lyrique’ – the ghost within writing of the possibility of a dematerialised voicing of the ‘I’. This amounts to the assumption of the ‘je’ whose eviction is one of the founding gestures of modern poetry in particular – and in the first place – and of artistic modernity as a whole. This *genius deloci* is the conduit from *non-lieu* as critical space / construction, to the poetic fiction of *chant* as the space of reconciliation – and most centrally that of self with self⁴⁵.

Perhaps the cardinal metaphorical register of this idea of a ‘poetic’ resolution in language, in a transformational moment, is that of *alchemy*. As a modern myth one could trace this through Rimbaud’s ‘Alchimie du verbe’ and Mallarmé’s ‘patience d’alchimiste’⁴⁶ on to Desnos’s *Ténèbres* as far as contemporaries such as (in isolated moments) Jacques Dupin⁴⁷ figuring in each case a maximally transformational moment. Conceiving of the poetic text as alchemical is an expression of this transformational intuition / energy: one which moves from impure to pure, from base to beautiful, etc. It is thinkable as at the origins of the modern allegory of the subject in its relation to, its *mise en jeu* in poetic writing. Dadoun, in the study from which we have already quoted, of the textual imaginary of Robert Desnos⁴⁸ – which mixes ‘ténèbres’, ‘diamant’, ‘enfouissement’ etc. in the lyrical flux of which he was a particularly fine exponent – resolves this complex into the drama of a writing in quest of the subject, a transformation of the

⁴⁵ With the logic set out in these passages we are in a position to think the lineage of the segalenian *stèle* from the Mallarméan *demeure* – the idea of the poem as anti-monumentality, as durable form within which is experienced the *hantise* of an absence. The logic of *hantise* is also definitely at play in Bonnefoy’s early work in *Douve*, with of course less emphasis on the monumentality, but the very concerted creation of a diffuse presence-in-absence: with death (‘finitude’) as the philosophical cornerstone of that poet’s conception of ‘la vérité de parole’, a supra-discursive quality emerging within the *non-lieu* of the poem.

⁴⁶ Describing his approach to the ‘Livre’. Cited in Cordonier, Noël. *Segalen et la place du lecteur (Étude de Stèles et d’Équipée)*. Paris: Honoré Champion Éditeur, 1999.

⁴⁷ “Entre la diane du poème et son tarissement//par une brèche ouverte/dans le flanc tigré de la montagne/elle jaillit, l’amande du feu,[...]l’ouragan fait souche/un éclair unit//la nuit à la nuit” (‘La nuit grandissante’ in Dupin, Jacques. *L’embrasure précédé de Gravier*. Paris: Gallimard (Poésie), 1971: 115-30, 129.)

⁴⁸ ‘La nuit de Desnos entre Science et Alchimie’, op. cit.

writing subject into the “Sujet S” in the work of writing. The subject ‘surgit de la nuit’ – pre-historic, uterine etc. – a night that figures the proverbial ‘différence d’avec soi’ which that emergence is theorised as an effort to overcome. Poetic writing thus takes on the profile of a modern-day quest for the philosopher’s stone:

Pierre philosophale, c’est-à-dire à la fois quintessence de la matérialité (pierre) et expression de l’envol réflexif, de la spéculation abstraite (philosophie). [...] Nous la livre-t-il, cette pierre philosophale? Pas plus lui que les alchimistes. Et si nous revenons au mouvement essentiel décrit plus haut: s’enfoncer dans la nuit, nous marquerons, en meilleure connaissance de cause, qu’il ne s’agit, en aucune façon, d’atteindre un fond (quel pourrait bien être ce fond de la nuit, ce fond du tain?), mais de tenter d’extraire, de cet enfoncement, dans cet enfoncement même, le S pronominal, le S du Sujet. S’enfoncer dans la nuit pour que le S *se défonce*! [...] L’aventure alchimique, l’aventure poétique, est donc une aventure de l’intériorité, une odyssée de la subjectivité: avec sa nef, son appareil et son appareillage de mots, Ulysse se risque sur l’océan du langage, défiant les chants lumineux des sirènes pour tenter, explorant sa propre nuit, océane, de capter une voix qui lui soit sienne, la voix de Soi accordée à la voix du monde.⁴⁹

This closing cadence, ‘la voix de Soi accordée à la voix du monde’, is on all fours with the affirmation of an ‘identité d’une langue’ as an ‘identité à soi’ of which Derrida speaks in the passage quoted above. In this congruence we can see a link between the project of the *non-lieu* and the dilemma of poetic foundation – which is a problem of entry into speech as into a process of individuation. Here, the individuated act goes about an attempt to re-integrate the whole – the process of attaining subject-hood in a language, non-alienation, is different from individuation within language. Subject-hood is also dependent on an overcoming of alienation from language, which can very well serve as a motor to individuation.

⁴⁹ Ibid. 125-26.

All of which seems to take us very quickly away from the ‘critical’ dimension of the *non-lieu* as the space of a plurality of the possible, an inclusion and maintenance of difference. The dionysian move from form to music exemplifies this change. The exploded temporality of the work portrayed as something heterogeneous to the outside world – as in the temporal multiplicity possible in *Un coup de dés* recognised by Blanchot – suggests a general link between spatialisation and complexification of the temporal character of the work:

Le temps de l’œuvre n’est pas emprunté au nôtre. Formé par elle, il est à l’œuvre en elle qui est la moins immobile qu’on puisse concevoir [...] il est manifeste que, «*sous une apparence fausse de présent*», ne cessent de se superposer des possibilités temporelles différentes [...] ⁵⁰

This ‘temps de l’œuvre’⁵¹ is a form of compossibility taken to its extreme in the constellation of the *Un coup de dés*, a *non-lieu* which holds together different possible temporalities. Read in terms of an extreme example one can easily come to the idea that this temporality might not only be the expression but the key to an autonomy of the oeuvre – the greater the non-reconciliation within the compossible space, the greater the inassimilable quality of the artwork. But to identify this decomposition with the utopian dynamic in the construction of the *non-lieu* would be to assign orthodoxy to one particular view.

Is the properly ‘utopian’ *non-lieu* of the poem synonymous with fragmentation / constellation? Such decomposition would contrast, in caricature, with a schema of a ‘lyrical’ temporality as onwards and upwards, linear and future-tending, in short the temporality of anticipation in its simplest form and born, as it were, in a movement from the apollonian to the dionysian. In the dionysian moment, as Michaux’s parable illustrates, form gives way to music. The ‘musicality’ of this turn, together with the

⁵⁰ Blanchot. *Le livre à venir*, op. cit. 329. See Marin, Louis. ‘Le maintenant utopique’ in Furter, Pierre and Raulet, Gérard (eds.) *Stratégies de l’utopie*. Paris: Galilée, 1979: 246-53.

steady progression of the subject towards what is in more than one sense his 'end', seems to imply a move away from the divergent temporalities of a *non-lieu* in the construction above. But the poetic textuality which espouses these qualities can be seen itself to have the qualities of a *non-lieu*. This should be illustrated, to conclude this section, with an example of a directly 'lyrical' work: one in which the subject is assumed even as it evolves before the postulate of an absolute with all the canonical poetic attributes (voice, inspiration, power, elevation etc.) The dionysian moment analysed by Michaux makes of his text a space of compossibility at the level of interpretation, one where an experience is delivered viscerally, and where its potentially illusory quality, the ambiguity of the adhesion of the subject to the dionysian movement, is played out in absolute terms. In the fully transformational lyrical moment this ambiguity is relegated behind a frontally-delivered performance, a fiction of voice. It would seem that Claudel, again, provides an illustration of this difference – he is a poet whose disclosure of his founding postulates make the achievement of poetic tone in his work all the more interesting for an archaeology in less frontally 'believing' or emphatic poets of the aspiration to this same ultimate deliverance.

This transformational moment also transforms the utopian quality of the poetic effort (in some views it actually abolishes it, in a kind of uncritical, narcissistic regression.⁵²) Yet the paradox of poetic activity is that its critical effort is as much a rearguard effort to retain certain vestiges of a human experience as it is to break down external discursive edifices. These goals are not always, on a pragmatic level, fundamentally at odds. Michel de Certeau has written in a general perspective of writing as a 'pratique mythique moderne'⁵³ – a myth making of oral discourse and exchange an 'illegitimate' state of language (this myth being observable since early modern times, notwithstanding the celebrated inversion of orderings in the matter claimed for Derrida). An aspiration to an

⁵¹ The other aspect of mallarméan temporality, that of indefinite deferral, is treated by Georges Poulet in a manner sympathetic with the work itself in *Études sur le temps humain* (2). Paris: Plon, 1952. 298-355, and by Vincent Kaufmann (op.cit.) in a more openly sceptical fashion.

⁵² The criticism by a whole series of contemporary poets (Gleize, Prigent, Olivier Cadiot for example) of what they derogatively term 'la mécanique lyrique', of which Cadiot's *L'art poétique* (Paris: P.O.L., 1988) is an extended deconstruction.

⁵³ De Certeau, Michel. *L'invention du quotidien* (I. Arts de faire). Paris: Gallimard, 1990. Ch. X 'L'économie scriptuaire' 195-224.

oral quality, to an ‘effet de voix’ or even to ‘voice’ unqualified, is thus also thinkable as a utopian vector for modern poetic work, just as a kind of accepted grounding illusion against which the utopian dynamic moves. A third, integrative approach, which recognises the paradox of writing in its ability to contain or exclude a voice, and which attempts to develop along the line of ambivalence and tension created by this quality, is in its own way utopian also – poetic writing becoming that which holds together, or attempts to so hold, that which in the order which presents itself as a matter of common sense [one or other form of the duality] is thinkable only in separation. All modern written lyrical poetry is objectively involved in the embodiment of this third mode, even if the fiction of a pure orality is forcefully enacted within that embodiment.

For Claudel, the assurance of the rediscovered totality of the self involves an expression / projection in cosmic terms. The operative ‘cosmos’, that which sets up the voice, is a modelled totality. The poetic intelligence sets about the ordering of the whole according to the principle(s) most strongly apparent to itself, as a metaphysical drama of space and material. Thus, for example:

Le poète dans la captivité des murs de Pékin, songe à la Mer. Ivresse de l’eau qui est l’infini et la libération. Mais l’esprit lui est supérieur encore en pénétration et en liberté. Elan vers le Dieu absolu qui seul nous libère du contingent. [...] Vision de l’Eternité dans la création transitoire.⁵⁴

This ‘argument’ to *L’Esprit et l’Eau*, the second of Claudel’s *Cinq Grandes Odes*, effectuates a link between the bald liminal detail: “Pékin 1906”, placed at the foot of the poem, and the text of the poem itself. To use our own terminology, it depicts the poem as spoken explicitly from within the *haut lieu*. The poetic voice is not a ‘fiction’ here: *Pékin* migrates to the threshold of textual realisation while the ‘captivity’ within which the ode is dramatically worked is hinted, through the downward recurrence of the place-name, to be factual. Yet inside the poem that captivity is magnified and written back into a line of Biblical and analogous epics of exile and alienation. The landscape of the poem’s

⁵⁴ Claudel. *Œuvre poétique*, op. cit. 233-34.

composition, in an element (*terre*) alien to the poet's longings and under a regime of the contingent (the proper name and all it sets up by way of an imaginary for the reader) becomes the canonical, exemplary prelude to the re-establishment of connection with 'la voix de Dieu' – Claudel's christianisation of the dionysian moment, his alchemical point, his sublimation from within the *non-lieu*. This total voice possesses the voice of the contingent, captive poet and removes the utterance from its generative context – depicted as the estrangement of the poet from his surroundings. Those surroundings are set out according to the style and order of the poet's quest (and one which recurs in a different tone with Segalen):

J'habite d'un vieux empire le décombre principal.

Loin de la mer libre et pure, au plus terre de la terre je vis jaune, [...]

Où l'Empereur du sol foncier trace son sillon et lève les mains vers le Ciel utile
d'où vient le temps bon et mauvais.

[...] la Cité carrée dresse ses retranchements et ses portes, [...]

Dans le vent de cendre et de poussière, dans le grand vent gris de la poudre qui fut
Sodome, et les empires d'Egypte et des Perses, et Paris, et Tadmor, et Babylone.⁵⁵

These instances of exile and the contingent are combined in the one dust – chaotic, dead and in rhetorical opposition to the poet and his identification with those dissolutions of form that are 'l'eau' and, *a fortiori*, 'L'Esprit'. The encounter, reformulated elementally, begins as one between absolute opposites. To be positioned is to be landlocked. But to be placed knowingly in a state of want – to see the opposing, alien surround as such – is to begin to surmount that condition. It becomes impossible, in the dynamic of poetic empowerment, to wish oneself outside that movement and its enabling circumstances:

O mon Dieu, je la vois, la clef maintenant qui délivre,
Ce n'est point celle qui ouvre, mais celle-là qui ferme !
Vous êtes ici avec moi !⁵⁶

⁵⁵ Ibid. 235.

⁵⁶ Ibid. 240.

The genesis of *chant* occurs explicitly in a relation with the horizon. It is thus both derived from and in reaction against materiality. The achievement of a poetic ‘voice’ is conditional on situation, yet tends towards its absolute transcendence in the claudelian version in the encounter of the ‘je’ with its nameable absolute through the captivating flux of *parole* (and all the incidentally associated values in the circumstances.) Voice universalises and evacuates itself in the development of *chant*, placing all of its energy and its ambition in the power of the signifier fully in the possession of the subject:

Et moi qui fais les choses éternelles avec ma voix, faites que je sois tout entier
Cette voix, une parole totalement intelligible!
Libérez-moi de l’esclavage et du poids de cette matière inerte! ⁵⁷

The goal of poetic work in this lyricism is a voice fully possessed of and fully emancipated from its originating instance, in particular its materiality. ‘*Chant*’ as an imaginary of the text is the utopia of its autonomy and unified, modulated functioning. For Claudel this maximally poetic voice is “la Sagesse de Dieu”⁵⁸, upon whose encounter the ode closes. In his progress towards that point the scenery has changed from that of Old Testament exile to a pared-down Revelations-like space. Michaux’s dionysian void is only a change of mood away:

L’esprit de Dieu m’a ravi tout d’un coup par-dessus le mur et me voici dans ce
pays inconnu.
[...]
Où sont les hommes ? il n’y a plus rien que le ciel toujours pur. [...] ⁵⁹

It is this cosmified *tabula rasa* which is presented as the domain of absolute voice, of pure possibility in language. And yet *chant* itself, when not in a mode of prayer or invocation aimed at bringing about this higher state, confines itself to a reiterative

⁵⁷ Ibid. 243.

⁵⁸ Ibid. 248.

⁵⁹ Ibid. 246.

overdrive, telling of what such a voice could do. Its mode is, in the end, as much description as it is participation and it remains bound, as such, to its own imperfect origins while delimited by the sense of the ineffable at/as its end-point. While the unifying principle can be named and *chant* thus logically said to have attained it, that principle is not inhabited by the poem – which even in its desire for assimilation maintains the distance of language itself. The only other appropriate stance within sight of such an end-point is a silence between plenitude and collapse, an abdication of speech:

O ami, je ne suis point un homme ni une femme, je suis l'amour qui est au-dessus
de toute parole !

Je vous salue, mon frère bien-aimé.

Ne me touchez point ! ne cherche pas à prendre ma main.⁶⁰

Chant, issuing from an encounter with the 'real', is interdicted by an absolute which would withdraw it from that fertile confrontation. It sustains itself in its self-imagination as unsupported speech – right to the limit of its potential as autonomous, unifying text (potential in the sense both of possibility and of dynamic difference between points.) The supportive function of encounter is thus not to guarantee the referential veracity of such speech but to provide the structure within and as against which the 'veracity' of *chant* as the disembodied drive towards something absent is assured. Poetic work enacts the movement towards – and lives as the vital affirmation of there being something else, something relentlessly not-there.

3. Segalen: establishing the *non-lieu*

The aesthetic espoused in Segalen's *Stèles* is, on first appearances, entirely consonant both with the logic of the tableau of *Religion du Signe* and with the mallarméan conception of the book. An important consanguinity with the former is attested by several details – not least the dedication of *Stèles* "en hommage à Paul Claudel". Segalen was

⁶⁰ Ibid. 248.

subsequently to organise from Peking what Claudel himself described as the ‘canonical edition’ of *Connaissance de l’Est*. Published by Crès in 1914, it was the second volume in the so-called ‘collection coréenne’ – of which Segalen was director and which had been initiated with the second edition of *Stèles* itself. The heavily bibliophile leanings of these productions are of direct descent from the original edition of *Stèles*⁶¹ wherein the distinctiveness of Segalen’s approach to the book-object is taken to its extreme⁶². In the cases of both the original and ‘Korean’ editions there is an amplification of the material qualities of the text which is entirely compatible with a version of poetic writing which Segalen can be argued, with *Stèles*, to have taken to a certain extreme, and for which *Religion du Signe* provides, not a template, but an inspiration within the canon that *Stèles* is very explicitly attempting to both integrate and extend.

The editorial policy adopted in respect of the two earliest editions of *Stèles* is, again, in resonance with the poetics elaborated by the artist at a purely textual level. It is noteworthy in this respect that Segalen was actively involved in the commercialisation of the second edition after having removed the *édition princeps* from the commercial domain altogether. In a prospectus for the impending ‘collection coréenne’ addressed ‘Aux Lettrés d’Extrême-Occident’, the distinctions claimed by Segalen for the collection all tend to emphasise the importance of the materiality of the book as an integral part of its signifying power – but also clearly in an appeal to a presumably universal sense of the value of luxury. Detailed descriptions are given of the four varieties of special quality paper from which subscribers could choose⁶³. There are, in addition, descriptions of the paginal layout in its mimetic ambitions: “C’est une réduction proportionnée des stèles de

⁶¹ 81 copies of some luxury in paper and binding, all of which were presented as gifts to figures of the French literary scene of the time.

⁶² From Bouillier (*Victor Segalen*. Paris: Mercure de France, 1961) onwards this has been a central theme of Segalen commentaries. Perhaps the most methodical and complete of which is Doumet’s *Le rituel du livre (Sur Stèles de Victor Segalen)*. Paris: Hachette, 1992. For Doumet the distinctiveness of the conception and distribution of *Stèles* requires a unified reading: “Sans doute, une relation aussi cohérente entre rareté et mimétisme doit-elle se lire comme une véritable stratégie d’auteur: destinée à influencer la lecture, elle entre de plein droit dans une *logique du péritexte*.” 24 (emphasis in original.)

⁶³ Claudel had remarked to Segalen in respect of the most luxurious: “Quel papier! Où l’avez-vous trouvé? Cette espèce de feutre nacré où l’on voit par transparence des algues, des cheveux de femme, des nerfs de poissons, des cultures d’étoiles ou de bacilles, la vapeur de tout un monde en formation.” (cited in Segalen. *Œuvres complètes II*, op. cit. 138)

pierre, pages monolithes partout dressées à travers la campagne chinoise”⁶⁴, of the folding of the paper and the ornamentation and cover of the book – in respect of which the prospectus announces: “[La couverture] sera faite, ou de bois mince (deux planchettes de camphrier mâle serrées de liettes de soie écartent les insectes par leur odeur âpre & fine); ou de tissus de soie, brute, brochée, ou tramée de couleurs.”⁶⁵

What is immediately striking about the project as mediated to a French reading public is the extent to which a principle of mimesis or microcosm is prevalent in the ‘concept’ of the collection as a whole, of which *Stèles* is not only the ‘premier essai’ (as per the prospectus) but the cardinal embodiment. *Stèles* is not simply an instance of the ‘stele’ form being introduced into a book, but of the book being drawn into and modified by the character of the stele – becoming the imaginary insertion of the Western poetic text into the fabric of the ‘real’ while retaining all of its ‘linguistic’ force, and power of evasion. Indeed, there is an amalgamation of the autonomy arrogated for the text at all levels – sign, page, poem, book – via the choice of a form embodying imperative and its mediation as such. As such, *Stèles* is exemplary of the indivisibility of ‘content’ and ‘form’⁶⁶. That the innovation originates in a conception of the written poetic utterance is, however, clear from the very beginning of Segalen’s ‘Préface’ to *Stèles*, which announces a fully-formed theory of the poetic text as autonomous physical signifying reality within the real:

Elles sont des monuments restreints à une table de pierre, haut dressée, portant une inscription. Elles incrustent dans le ciel de Chine leurs fronts plats. On les heurte à l’improviste: aux bords des routes, dans les cours des temples, devant les tombeaux.⁶⁷

⁶⁴ Ibid. 141.

⁶⁵ Ibid. 142

⁶⁶ Noel Cordonier (*Segalen et la place du lecteur*, op. cit.) makes the point that no satisfactory edition, other than a facsimile of the original, is commercially available – precisely because of the extreme to which *Stèles* brings this indivisibility.

⁶⁷ Œuvres complètes II, op. cit. 35.

Of Segalen's programmatic, stelar text, as of that of the Chinese 'religion du signe' in the eyes of Claudel, it is thus possible to say that there is aspiration to a condition of being: that the sign (in Claudel) and the text (in Segalen) 'be' the entirely unique configuration of a reality which is both 'réel' and 'imaginaire'⁶⁸. But as an enactment rather than a reference to such an ideal, *Stèles* could be argued to epitomise an explicit practice of the poetic text as *non-lieu*. Two formal innovations as regards the actual text (as distinct from the realised distinctiveness of its production, discussed above) provide particularly clear support for this case. The first is the placement of the written elements of the text inside the 'frame' of an unbroken black line. This reinforces in the first instance the mimetic effect of the 'format' of the book – the space of the stele, with the discourse of verticality, autonomy, durability attached by the poet to that form, is explicitly represented as an effect both of the materials used and of a semiotic device⁶⁹. The visible 'border' of the written text being part of the 'writing' (even if non-linguistic), there is a second effect whereby the 'autonomy' achieved in the whole of the production extends to the use of language it incorporates. Coupled with the historically declarative function of the stele, averred to by Segalen in his preface, the stelar text becomes the unambiguously distinct space of the validity of what is said (even where what is said is far, in itself, from being unambiguous).

The semiotic effect of the first innovation is radicalised by that of the second – that is, the apposition at the top part of each stele of an epigraph in Chinese ideogrammes.⁷⁰ There are a number of ways of thinking about the role played in the text by these characters. The quickest would be to dismiss them as merely decorative, indulgence in *chinoiserie* – or as baldly signifying 'Orient', 'China', 'East' to the eye of the 'Lettre d'Extrême Occident' (as is their present-day function, say, on the signs of certain restaurants, on new-age crockery and designer t-shirts.) One argument for doing so could be the claim by

⁶⁸ Cordonier (op. cit. 62) correctly points out the fundamental difference between the texts in terms of an identifiable 'je' figure – the ordering principle in *Connaissance de l'Est*, the central enigma in *Stèles*. This claudelian *je* is, it might be argued, only ever approached in Segalen's artistic work in *Thibet*, and even there it retains a certain capacity for irony.

⁶⁹ See Doumet op. cit., Cordonier op. cit., Postel, Philippe. 'De la pierre au poème: la forme stèle' in Mayaux (Catherine), *Lectures d'une œuvre, Stèles et Équipée – Victor Segalen*. Paris: Éditions du Temps, 1999: 43-74.

Segalen himself that his work is addressed to the French, or at its widest the European, reader – thus one for whom in principle such signs are incapable of fully functioning as signifiers. The characters could then be assimilated to the décor of the original edition, anchoring the resolutely Western signifiers in a whole both weighty and opaque, but in a sense entirely complementary to the underlying ‘Western’ character that Segalen the editor claimed for the works to be published in his collection:

Il ne faut donc chercher ici aucun élément de pittoresque ou de fausse nouveauté, aucune importation chinoise. Le seul but qu’on espère atteindre est d’offrir aux Lettrés d’Occident amoureux et décemment respectueux du Livre, un art du Livre classiquement élaboré dans cette Chine, royaume ancien des Lettrés et des Sages.⁷¹

The fact that for Segalen himself, unlike Claudel, or several other modernist writers for whom they occupied a special position in a reflection on poetry⁷², these characters were chosen in the knowledge and by virtue of their meaning must, however, be considered material to the interpretation of that ‘whole’. Indeed, while some of the epigraphs were gleaned or adapted from classical Chinese texts, others are compositions of the authors himself. They function, when encountered as fully-signifying language⁷³, much as epigraphs in the standard Western mode – generally alluding to the text or an aspect of the text, with the possibility of interpretative development in the dynamic between the two. It would thus seem reasonable to speak of them as a signifying dimension of the *non-lieu*, and potentially part of a reading thereof.⁷⁴

⁷⁰ See Détrie, Muriel. ‘Le modèle de la langue et de l’écriture chinoises dans *Stèles et Équipée*’ in Mayaux, Catherine. *Lectures d’une œuvre, Stèles et Équipée – Victor Segalen*, op. cit. 193-220.

⁷¹ *Œuvres complètes II*, op. cit. 141.

⁷² See Formentelli, Eliane. ‘Rêver l’idéogramme: Mallarmé, Segalen, Michaux, Macé.’ *Écritures, systèmes idéographiques et pratiques expressives*. Paris: Le Sycomore, 1982.

⁷³ The edition of *Stèles* in the *Œuvres Complètes* afforded the present reader with translations which were not included in earlier editions.

⁷⁴ To adopt Doumet’s terms, there is thus both – or alternatively – an iconographical and an epigraphical value to the Chinese *cartouche* – a *lecture sinologique* and a *lecture non-sinologique*. (Doumet, op. cit. 21-51)

Ernest Fenollosa, in his work on the subject made famous by the intervention of Pound, describes the preponderantly visual quality of the linguistic experience of ideogrammatic writing, which transforms reading from a manipulative to an almost contemplative activity:

The untruth of a painting or photograph is that, in spite of its concreteness, it drops the element of natural succession. [...] One superiority of verbal poetry as an art rests in its getting back to the fundamental reality of *time*. Chinese poetry has the unique advantage of combining both elements. It speaks at once with the vividness of a painting, and with the mobility of sounds. It is, in some sense, more objective than either, more dramatic. In reading Chinese we do not seem to be juggling mental counters, but to be watching *things* work out their own fate.⁷⁵

The stele is, then, textually constructed *as* a material space. The reader is at the same time to some degree involved in an act of contemplation. The stele is said at the same time to *occupy* space and render it intelligible, to humanise it: inaugurating the geography within which it appears. This geography ranges from the personalised geography of assorted significant spaces as in the *Stèles du Bord du Chemin* to the formal template of the cardinal points of the compass in turn [NSEW] – that is, a leaning away from singularity and locality to the ordering potential of a conventional symbolic scheme. The steles attributed to each of these points are further distinguished by their focus on a particular dominant theme. There is thus, inhabiting this formal arrangement, a referential profusion of the chosen exotic setting, in for example the employment of proper names and in the ‘pastiche’ of what reads like translation from a Chinese text, retaining what might be supposed by a Western reader to be its native manner. In the French we read of love, of sovereign commandment, of friendship, of war – to which the Chinese script provides (to those who can decipher) an echo or an amplifying epigraphical comment, or (to those who cannot) the ambiguous textuality of an unintelligible yet clearly signifying script.

⁷⁵ Fenollosa, Ernest. *The Chinese Written Character as a Medium for Poetry*. San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1968:9. An important text for the development of francophone sensibilities to the poetic properties of the Chinese writing system, in addition to the poetic works mentioned, has been Cheng, François. *L'écriture poétique chinoise* [nouvelle édition]. Paris: Seuil, 1996.

This coexistence of signifying practices within the one highly material poetic form of the ‘espace stélaire’⁷⁶ can thus be experienced as a shock (visual) or one of complexifying complementarity (where all elements are elucidated.) Doumet in his analysis of *Stèles* distinguishes the approaches to the Chinese sign in *Religion du Signe* and *Stèles* by attempting an intellectual resolution of these two positions, in which it is not clear whether the ‘resonance’ (a theme evident in other works of Segalen, such as *René Leys*, and *Thibet* (“pays sonnant!”) postulated for the stelar text is on a textual or a meta-textual level:

[Les deux entreprises] divergent en ceci que là où Claudel fonde, par le détour de la Chine, une métaphysique du signe en général, Segalen, lui, ne cherche qu’à favoriser une expérience de l’écoute, ou de la résonance de sa propre langue dans le système chinois. Ce dévoiement, ce déportement font toute l’originalité et toute la richesse formelle de l’exploration ségalénienne.⁷⁷

It is true that the juxtaposition of Chinese and French is physical, and thus more disconcertingly present in a reading of the French text, in Segalen – but this does not prevent the transfer of traits between the two languages and their characterisations. The *non-lieu* is a space in which the incompatible sign systems are first of all held together, but also, in the declared autonomy of the space, in which the beginnings of an osmosis can occur in the eye of the reader. For Claudel the understanding of the sign-being originates through the Chinese and relies for whatever generality it has on a similar – but non-visual – osmosis. The strategy with *Stèles* is to encourage a reading of poems in French as if they were capable of that same ontological autonomy first claimed by Claudel, and developed by Fenollosa, for the written Chinese language, even if there is an ironic edge to the entire formal project. In imitating what he describes as an actual part of the Chinese landscape – the substratum to the category of the ‘réel’ in all of his designs – Segalen structurally abolishes his own working *Réel-Imaginaire* polarisation. This is

⁷⁶ The term is that of Jean-Pierre Richard, in *Pages-paysages*. Paris: Seuil, 1986.

⁷⁷ Op. cit. 17 (text appearing in a footnote.)

done in the same movement that establishes the text's autonomy from a signified – its 'being' in its own right – in a poem in French.

It is interesting, in developing a view of the poetic *non-lieu*, to run together the two possible roles which could be assigned to the Chinese component under the conditions of an initial mutual unintelligibility. This is the inaugural move, in other words, of Segalen's own *Esthétique du Divers*, whereby the work is what arises, through a will to intelligibility via the dialectic of *imaginaire* and *réel*, in the face of an experience of the unintelligible. The juxtaposition of the Western and the Oriental marks place the whole at a different imaginary level from its putatively Chinese originating context. This level is a product of the tensions brought into play rather than any one set of elements or prior codes. *Stèles* in this sense is 'about' neither East nor West but the (historical, situated) human mind in the act of coping with their combined resources of expression and of being alive in the world. The book thus requires to be read as an *entre-deux*, which is literally neither here nor there, and which is thus also a *dehors*. It is a territorialised⁷⁸ space become possible only as written text. This establishment of the space of the *entre-deux* tallies with Deguy's relation of the poetic to the idea of compossibility – the *non-lieu* in this case is one in which parallel versions achieve some kind of dialogue or interpenetration, if not fusion, within an embodiment of the whole in which each acquires significance. The autonomy of the *non-lieu* is what grounds this new formulation of the whole (notionally, the 'Extrêmes' of Orient and Occident, and everything between), in which the (typically 'Western') reader receives a message from the 'other' pole, readable in terms of the reader's own position (the strangeness of the references to the French in which they are articulated frequently gives the pieces the feel of a mask or allegory), while at the same time being confronted with the inscrutability, or 'otherness', of the language of its first formulation.

⁷⁸ As suggested in the Introduction, a reading of Deleuze and Guattari (e.g. *Mille plateaux*. Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1980) would have one associate the utopian dynamic with what they term 'deterritorialisation' – whereas the consideration of the *non-lieu* as a utopian space, and the 'poetic' in terms of poetic 'foundation', is an attempt to account for the 'poetic' as both negative/critical in this inaugural move and as a (re-)territorialisation in its own terms / space. The entire ambiguity of Segalen is in

The view of the poem as *non-lieu* which emerges from a consideration of *Stèles* is thus both a formal characterisation, with the poem as a frame within which elements can be brought together under the protection of the poem's supposed formal coherence, and a meta-poetic programme in which the 'whole' is the achievement of the poet in the face of what is diverse and uncontainable. In inventing a combination of elements as does Segalen there, the poet presents a new object to the reader – that object being the interaction of the formal elements within the unit of their interpretation together. This spectacle is thus no simple mirroring of 'things seen' but an operation mirroring the diversity of a single mind within a postulate of unity and the aesthetic reality of that unity. That the *non-lieu* of the stele is a utopian space of compossibility does not entail its conscious divorce from the influence of things or places. But rather, its ability to exceed and integrate any or all of these. While creativity is understandably theorised in terms of the *ex-nihilo*, with which the term *non-lieu* displays an affinity, the desire for affirmation, for foundation we encounter here seems particularly to come about in relation to a succession of the given, to the 'world' rather than, as in a view already alluded to, an extreme absence of elements.

On ne crée rien et on ne parle d'une manière créatrice que par l'approche préalable du lieu d'extrême vacance où, avant d'être paroles déterminées et exprimées, le langage est le mouvement silencieux des rapports, [...] L'espace poétique, source et «résultat» du langage, n'est jamais à la manière d'une chose; mais toujours «il s'espace et se dissémine».⁷⁹

Blanchot's derivation of the 'espace poétique' with reference to Mallarmé is open to the objection Segalen's stele is, precisely, 'à la manière de' something that is not 'simply' a text, and the non-textual element of which he foregrounds to the degree of making it the obvious central plank of his 'poetics'. This is a central plank from which the text itself can then, however, digress in total, or with increased, security – the compossible

his magnification of the play between minor and major, emphasis and elusiveness, establishment and escape.

⁷⁹ Blanchot. *Le livre à venir*, op. cit. 321.

operations of the stele, the crystallisation of the *non-lieu*, do also implicate the negativity, the subtraction of that ‘space’ from the lived world.

We have developed the consideration of the *non-lieu* in respect of Segalen through an argument as to the materiality of the sign, extending to one of the page. This, if it does not overstate it, probably over-privileges Segalen’s ostensible position. The ‘materiality’ of Segalen’s work appears, rather, in dialectical contrast with the *non-lieu* of the Mallarméan space and experience – it is an attempt to respond to this negativity without surrendering anything of the ‘fictionality’, the principle of art as construction, which appears in the stele. *Stèles* thus represents quite well the accumulation of elements from mallarméan and claudelain ‘positions’. Rather than extreme statement of ‘materiality’, or pure ‘declarative’, *Stèles* requires consideration as offering several possible versions, that is, the ambiguity taken to its ‘utopian’ limits, of a *non-lieu* – a text constructed in the tension between form and formlessness, between ostensible hybrid closure and an opening onto an exceeding totality.

The culmination of this dualistic logic, and the apotheosis of the form, is to be found in the final sequence, *Stèles du Milieu* – those ‘speaking’ stones that no longer derive their significance from a relation to topographical space but which, falling out of this, “désignent le lieu par excellence.”⁸⁰ The first poem of the sequence, *Perdre le Midi quotidien*, accumulates the totalising possibilities inherent in the symbolic compound of the stele – not least those presented to the creating subject, in the presence of the new map, or image, of its own fullness. The guiding polarities (the cardinal points, the real and the imaginary, the ‘Empire de Chine’ and the ‘Empire de soi-même’) are collapsed into the viewpoint and the voice of the poet, the hypothetical unity behind the constructed unit, which in this case recognises *itself* upon the furthest extremity of the construction that holds it together:

⁸⁰ *Œuvres complètes II*, op. cit. 38.

Perdre le Midi quotidien; traverser des cours, des arches, des ponts; tenter les
chemins bifurqués; m'essouffler aux marches, aux rampes, aux escalades;
Éviter la stèle précise; contourner les murs usuels; trébucher ingénument parmi
ces rochers factices; sauter ce ravin; m'attarder en ce jardin; revenir
parfois en arrière,
Et par un lavis réversible égarer enfin le quadruple sens des Points du Ciel.
[...]
Mais, perçant la porte en forme de cercle parfait; débouchant ailleurs: (au beau
milieu du lac en forme de cercle parfait, cet abri fermé, circulaire, au beau
milieu du lac, et de tout,)
Tout confondre, de l'orient d'amour à l'occident héroïque, du midi face au Prince
au nord trop amical, – pour atteindre l'autre, le cinquième, centre et Milieu
Qui est moi.⁸¹

The 'moi' that emerges as a complement to this poetic progression is named generically within the unity of the *non-lieu*, but is very obviously no simple reflection of that unity itself. The 'passing-between' that is a 'putting-together' of elements in the *non-lieu* appears as an aspiration to sense driven by a contained tension between the elements included. The poem is 'attained' through a stage of co-ordinated movement in conventional, referential space. This journey between things, in all the conduits and modes of actual travel which characterise the encountering subject's movement through a referential Chinese universe, are retrospectively recuperated by the arrival at the other, ideal place where no shadows are cast. The specific quality of the poetic *non-lieu* is thus that it continues to articulate in a kind of continuity that which, under a philosophy of identity, non-contradiction, would 'naturally' be separated. The text has become a kind of linguistic mandala, or magically compressed panopticon ("... au beau milieu du lac en forme de cercle parfait, cet abri fermé, circulaire, au beau milieu du lac, et de tout ...") Having integrated and moved beyond the detail of encounter it speaks of itself both as an ideal geometric space (*cercle*) and as a shelter (*abri fermé*). This *lieu par excellence* is

⁸¹ Ibid. 106.

that marked out by the poem itself – which perfects documentary reference by moving beyond it.

Julia Kristeva defines a ‘subjectivité kaléidoscopique’ in a reading of *Les Chants de Maldoror* which is arguably appropriate to the discussion of the circulation of the subject in many of the texts of *Stèles*. It involves “une fluctuation du sujet de l’énonciation: d’abord posé comme appel de l’autre ou en lutte avec lui, il tend à prendre sa place ou à intégrer cette opposition en énonçant des troisièmes personnes, des «personnages» qui prennent en charge l’énonciation.”; “ ‘Je’ n’est plus ‘un’, il y a plusieurs ‘je’-s et donc plusieurs ‘un’-s qui ne sont pas des répétitions du même ‘je’, mais de diverses positions (en ‘tu’, en ‘il’) de l’unité.”⁸² The declarative function of the stele means that the ‘moi’ of *Perdre le Midi quotidien* can be read immanently as denoting the object itself, or as a revelation *in extremis* of an authorial pronoun. In either case, it reads as the point within the book where this ‘circulation’ is seen to stop. The poem/subject of the *lieu par excellence* stands perfectly discrete within a referential world and yet, existing outside the co-ordinates of geographical space, exists independently of it. Crucially, it is what lies beyond the apprehension of that world – it is the point to which striving attains and, as journey’s end, stands as the culmination and perfection in retrospect of experience, process, work. The poem, in its ‘real’ and ‘imaginary’ hybridity, is the space within which this gnostic fusion occurs. The *non-lieu* of the poem imposes itself as an embodiment of the spoken ‘moi’, undercuts reference and rhetorically transforms the status of its own material(ity) in the pirouette that names this *moi* autopoetically. This is a move which we will have occasion to observe as characteristic of the segalenian *non-lieu*. The book of *Stèles* concludes, for example, on a short piece titled *Nom Caché*:

Le véritable Nom n’est point lu dans le Palais même, ni aux jardins ni aux grottes,
mais demeure caché par les eaux sous la voûte de l’aqueduc où je m’abreuve.[...]
Mais fondent les eaux dures, déborde la vie, vienne le torrent dévastateur plutôt
que la Connaissance! ⁸³

⁸² Kristeva, Julia. *La révolution du langage poétique*. Paris: Seuil, 1974: 316, 318.

⁸³ Op. cit. 124.

Here again is the idea of the name as providing a metaphysical convergence point to the unifying activity of the poet, one from which he shys away after having bowed to its logic – or shunned as the notional end point to what is experienced supremely as process. The name is a kind of end point both to the poetic process and to the space of the *non-lieu*. Thus the possibility of another contrast with *Religion du Signe*. For Segalen, the declarative poem, the enactment ceases before an unrepresentable name – a religion of taboo associated with its own central activity, naming. Condensing the fantasy of a pure performative, *Nom Caché* also constitutes an apocalyptic version of the performative logic which particularly strong examples of the *non-lieu*, such as those of Segalen, attempt to place within a practice of openness, experience, difference. These two movements remain separate – the end-point is always, to some extent, that which escapes the process, that which definitively refuses or eludes the decided form. The ‘génie’ of the *non-lieu* (Didi-Huberman) is what both escapes the logic it initiates and what it manages to suggest in distinction from its own presence. A reading of Segalen suggests that, within the paraphernalia of imposition and permanence, this ‘genius’ is often a pessimistic one – a pessimism which the author, to judge from the early date of this note from *Briques et tuiles*, carried to the experience of the ‘divers’ more or less fully-formed from his Western aesthetic apprenticeship:

[*Le Voyageur*, addressing *Monument*]:

[...] Et le Monument Rouge ... et les arcs de triomphe, et la tortue énorme, les ponts, les ravins, les bêtes couchées, les bêtes assises, les bêtes debout face à face, les colonnes, les officiers, les pavillons et les voûtes et les stèles ne mèneraient donc que vers un tombeau Vide... Vide?

Le Monument d’une voix sourde d’écho – Vide.⁸⁴

Here the traveller has already – it would seem spontaneously – developed the enumerative style which later characterises the poet’s ordered enumeration in *Stèles*, his descriptions of imaginary processions and cortèges in *Peintures*. That style seems directly

⁸⁴ *Œuvres Complètes I*, op. cit. 850. Note titled MONUMENT(23 juin 1909.)

imputable to the symbolic overcharge of the first direct encounters with China. At the same time, however, the ventriloquism of objects has emerged as a compositional strategy, a kind of pious attention to the detail – cultural – of the new place. The ‘monument’ speaks, even if only to confirm the traveller’s worst suspicions. This resistance of the voice is what will characterise an evolution (some might argue a regression) in the poetics of Segalen – a gradual move from a monumentality of appearances to one of voice (both thinkable in terms of utterance, but with an ever-increasing assumption of a position of the speaking subject.) Whereas the *non-lieu* within a literally monumental logic results in the compossibility of the utopian space of the stele, the re-centering of the poetics on the voice makes of the *non-lieu* the space of a utopian speech act.

The artistic logic of such an ‘act’ is, as we have seen⁸⁵, exemplified in a work such as *Peintures* – a collection of what might with respect to form be called extended *poèmes en prose* in that, prose texts of a certain linguistic density, they each function as an *ekphrasis* to a non-existent original object-scene. What is exceptional in Segalen’s approach is his making entirely explicit the performative mechanism of the work, its intention to remedy the felt insufficiencies of an impoverished ‘reality’, and its reliance on the active consent of the reader in the achievement of the absent pure state of Chinese ‘painting’ it is the function of the ‘paintings’ to bring to the mind.

Compossibility was depicted towards the end of section 1 above, via a citation of Merleau-Ponty on Rodin, as giving rise to a sense of the ‘real’ without being realist, without being either ‘this’ or ‘that’. Segalen exploits the transferability of this aesthetic principle between different media in *Peintures*. A consideration of that book as a theatre of immobility created as ‘dit’ shows the imaginary, verbal painting as the union of impossibles in the pursuit of a ‘reality’ not directly available. In particular this treatment is bound up in the question of temporality – the unity of being occurring over time, with representation being a matter of the instant; seeing time within stasis. The verbal, ‘literary’ reality of the ‘paintings’ actually solves a performative contradiction

⁸⁵ See Part I section 3 above.

between this immobility and the (imagined) manner of its exposure, which is a kind of schizophrenic balancing of dynamic and static elements. *Peintures* is different from *Stèles* in that the monumental is contained entirely within the act of utterance. The scene is entirely coextensive with this act – the whole book is experienced in the present tense, even though its imaginary is to the highest degree archaic and distanced.

Hence the first of the ‘paintings’ proper is in a position to ‘begin’ thus: “Et, d’un coup, nous voici jetés dans les nues, en plein ciel.” Adding helpfully: “Tout ceci daigne apparaître.”⁸⁶ *Peintures* is playfully adamant as to the transparency of its own medium and the globality of the purview of its speaker. Segalen has it both ways within a strategy of ostensible reference. His text formally declares itself autonomous from any incorporated reference and is particularly controlling in turn (through this constant effect of unveiling) of the interpretation which his words may be given by the reader. Familiarity with the Chinese culture gives him a vast shadow-land within which referential models may be constructed and an original ‘commentary’ hoisted into being in the concomitant imaginary space. This makes of the utterance of the scene a formal imposition of the ‘truth’ of its own ‘place’, an autopoetic act – which is performed, takes ‘place’, in the re-enactment of the writing in a reading. The writing presents, as a general rule, all the questionable certainty of any textual exegesis, and plays on the ample scope for ambiguity provided by the exercise of which it has defined the rules. An example :

D’ailleurs, ces quatre grands caractères, placés comme un titre en exergue sur la volute enveloppante, sont là pour avertir justement de la nature, de la valeur, du *sens* des figurations peintes qui vont se succéder. Ils forment une phrase complète et bien balancée que l’on doit lire:

CORTÈGES ET TROPHÉE

DES TRIBUTS DES ROYAUMES ⁸⁷

⁸⁶ *Peintures*, op. cit. 158, 159.

⁸⁷ Ibid. 190 (emphasis in original.)

The initial proleptic ‘ces’, designating nothing that has been previously mentioned, condenses that fiction of performative truth, and foregrounds this fictionality – the reader becoming aware of the performance taking place in the ‘real time’ of the text’s unfolding, its re-performance in the ongoing reading. What is mediated here in real time is a *cartouche* of the kind actually incorporated in *Stèles*. Only here the ambiguity has migrated in its focus from the visual spectacle of the text to the power (also linguistic) of a certain form of utterance.

Within his formal elaborations Segalen generally allows the guiding voice room for a quick escape. Within the compossibility of the manufactured, exoskeletal *non-lieu*, typically that of diverse juxtaposed elements, the fact of juxtaposition is forwarded as a successively true and false representation of a speaking position. In the closing section of *Peintures* the exponent voice, having established and developed a whole system of symbols for the externalisation of sense, collapses that framework into the idea of an unspoken and validating core of the individual subject (with the identity of writer or reader being secondary.) This is, again, Segalen’s characteristic closing gesture of evacuating the aesthetic structure put in place by reference to the system’s supplement, as with *Perdre le midi quotidien*, above, or with the enigmatic object of the struggle of the ‘deux bêtes opposées’ at the end of *Équipée* (the thinking thus arguably extends to the literary text *per se* as the attempt to capture a governing or foundational essence.) The text, titled ‘Le spectacle n’est pas clos ...’ closes the book as follows:

Sachez qu’au-delà de toutes les saisons il en est une que le jeu des lunes ne règle point, qui n’obtient pas son équilibre à l’heure du solstice et que nul astronome officiel ne peut dénoncer ni mesurer. Semblable, en lui rapportant les points cardinaux, au Cinquième, centre et milieu qui est soi, la Cinquième saison n’a pas d’âge et ne relève point du calendrier. Elle vit en nous, elle se mesure à nous-mêmes. [...] même après le cycle total des autres, c’est à nous, c’est bien à nous de la voir, non plus dans les nuages, mais dans le puits au fond de nous. C’est dès

lors en amusement pour elle que tournent autour d'elles les quatre autres, ses diverses images, reflets égarés dans les nues.⁸⁸

The spectacle that constitutes the poetic text is thus, within this exceptional space of 'truth', presented as the epiphenomenon bolstered in a phenomenon of the subject beyond direct representation. Its elements prelude and stand in for an unspoken language of interiority – an idea which constructs them as contingent and yet grounds them in respect of a designated absolute. Each subject party to the text is co-opted as a guarantor of its ulterior truth value. The poem points the way towards that other truth, brought to it by those who know how to see it as it happens to wish to be seen ('[la Cinquième saison] vit en nous'). The logic of the performative would thus have itself extend to the declaration of a poetic disposition in the ritual space of the indirect presencing of the subject.

If they illustrate a virtuality of the poetic temperament, and in particular those of the conjunction of imposition and finesse, of fragility and force within the one textual operation, texts of the likes of *Stèles* and *Peintures* simultaneously maintain a critical or ironic distance from the practice of an authorial voice, an implication of that voice, where identifiable, in anything of the order of a direct experience. This is a distance which is inseparable from a foregrounding of form and structure over the movements of language which these are on more or less literal display as housing and enabling. In *Stèles*, for example, the extreme foregrounding of the mimetic form, while serving to establish a *non-lieu* out of the tension between compossibles, at the same time masks the tension between the dictates of language as something spoken, produced by a speaking subject – a situated body – and the potential of such 'speech' for formalistic excess – a pure, seemingly impersonal performativity or imposition. Poetic writing, the sense of the work, can be seen to occur across this tension also, making of it a structuring tension of the non-lieu – the one which allows us to move towards a construction from out of the formal space of a 'pure speech' – the 'dionysian' moment discussed above. The very exaggeration of form in Segalen sets up a dialectic of monumentality – anti-monumentality. Between the *porte-à-faux* of the poetic speaker and the *faux-semblant* of

⁸⁸ Ibid. 259.

the *non-lieu* as presented, the lyrical voice is first of all a negative presence at the core of the monumental, then a force explicitly assumed, and which assumes the generation of poetic form itself.

This move from an exoskeletal to an endoskeletal conception of form is the move from the figure of the *tombeau* to that of the *Grand Fleuve*⁸⁹ – the passage from ‘religion’ of the sign as material object to the question of the *génie du non-lieu*, that of the possibility of a visceral rather than monumental self-identity. We have already identified this with a growing investment in an embodied ‘voice’ – this is of necessity also a move from the static or hieratic, to the pulsional, the rhythmic, the dynamic, the ecstatic. It is a move inchoate in Segalen’s early attitude to the monumental, one whose preoccupation with the material is inseparable from the perspective of its decomposition, which thus logically progresses to a conception of form in terms of movement, a conception of separation in terms of continuity. Witness another early note from *Briques et Tuiles* titled ‘Essai d’orchestrique sur l’architecture chinoise’:

Dépouiller enfin la monumentaire en Chine des deux qualités qu’elle récusé et dont on s’obstine à l’accabler d’absence: la Stabilité, la Durée (cf. Prose pour le Fils du Ciel: Aux dix mille années, et notes sur le Mystérieux des Arts qui excèdent leur domaine). Reprendre les critiques d’art monumentaire, en substituant aux définitions pesantes et géométriques *tout un cortège de rythmes, d’ondulations, de dynamique et d’impérennité...*

[...]

*Beau discord, irrémédiable porte-à-faux.*⁹⁰

Segalen’s sensitivity here to a feature of pseudo-stability is similar to that evident in the fascination for the *terre jaune*, the idea of forms that give way, experienced as illusory. The poetic turning of the encounter (i.e. of place) reaches the universal pitch of *chant* by

⁸⁹ Compare the recurrent theme of the empty tomb, as for example in ‘Le Siège de l’âme’ (the second of the texts of *Imaginaires*, again dedicated to Paul Claudel) to the magnificent, vital writing of ‘Le Grand Fleuve’, the concluding text – wherein the ‘great river’ is a chaotic, multiform and yet relentlessly linear embodiment of the writer’s energies. ‘Imaginaires’, *Œuvres complètes I*, op. cit. 795-838.

a reading of the material world which leaves the ultimate prerogative to the accession to speech as always, in the end, supplementary, of the order of an event, in the world where it occurs. Both Claudel and Segalen had sensed and expressed this moment of speech as the *transformational* moment in their different ways. Whereas Claudel located *chant* in the disembodiment of a ‘spirit’-seeking effort of intelligibility, Segalen appears to have predicated the possibility of *chant* upon the attainment, however fleeting or tangential, of an order of things undelimited in which the ‘je’ is at once assumed and transcended:

Le verbe intelligible, et la parole exprimée et la voix qui est l’esprit et l’eau!⁹¹

A moi, Thibet, à l’aide ! à moi ! voici l’imprévu et l’obstacle,

Voici la frontière du fini.

Il faut passer. Je dois passer, et malgré toute la débâcle,

Franchir le Grand-Fleuve d’Infini.⁹²

In both cases *chant* moves forwards as a fiction of voice as the overcoming of delimitation and physical form, the transformation of the poetic *non-lieu* in a quasi-musical compression. This is what allows for an attribution of value to *chant* as the stage in poetic writing where voice can be imagined as liberating itself fully, as attaining an absolute precedence over both textual and referential spaces in the adhesion of the speaking subject to its own forward movement. *Chant* can thus be understood as the imagined domestication of a *genus deloci*, the recognition by the speaking subject within the movement of utterance of an *informe* inhabiting what is given or maintained as physical form – even where the idea of form reaches a purely hypothetical, or unverifiable, stage.⁹³

Chant represents the attainment of the imaginary reconciliation in the linguistic medium of disembodiment and being in a totality of autonomous speech. As such it marks the

⁹⁰ Dated “4 déc. 1909”. *Œuvres complètes I*, op. cit. 900 (emphasis added.)

⁹¹ Claudel. *Œuvre poétique*, op. cit. 247.

⁹² Segalen. *Thibet*, Séquence XII, *Œuvres complètes II*, op. cit. 614.

apotheosis of the materiality of the text-being. That this is the logical progression from the first stage of empowerment of the sign through the discovery of its being-through-materiality in the encounter with China, is clear from Segalen's own definition – in his untitled introductory remarks to *Odes* (1913):

Ce sont des chants. Non point affichés sur des pierres; - et la peinture même est trop lourde pour les illustrer. Ce sont des élans temporaires et périssables. Des gonflements impétueux qui d'abord, suffisant, ne s'expriment point. Le cœur est ému et bat. La parole n'ose interrompre ... et soudain, les mots d'eux-même surgissent. C'est la Poésie.⁹⁴

Segalen's customary expository voice moves here from the consideration of a single sign to derive an entire theory of poetic / ritual address. The transition is from the focus on the sign as the point of support for an entire poetics to a metaphysics of voice as the poetic medium – and of poetic communication as an immaterial 'spiritual' (inter)action, rather than a matter of texts. This represents both a further stage in the imagined emancipation of the sign, this time from its material manifestation in a written / graven signifier, and an end to that emancipation as thinkable in terms of 'writing'. Simultaneously we find ourselves in transition from out of a discourse of the *non-lieu* – through what Segalen has the irony to present as a pure act of volition on the part of the utterance itself:

Ce n'est pas un caractère, mais une « forme ». C'est la « forme OBLATION ». Voici pourquoi l'Ode est ce qui ne peut être inscrit dans un cadre rectangulaire et qui ne se peut peindre en couleurs. Mais le cadre éclate et crève la couleur. L'Ode reste indépendante et allègre. Elle ne daigne s'incruster que dans les mémoires vives.⁹⁵

⁹³ A reasoning comparable, for example, with Bernard Noël's comments in section 1 *supra* on the idea of form persisting in the creation of the poem even in the apparent absence thereof.

⁹⁴ *Œuvres complètes II*, p. cit. 597.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.* 598.

Whereas a poetics of pure form and materiality could pursue a fiction of autonomy, the dematerialisation operated by poetic voice completes the circle of poetic communication. The development is towards the *pneuma*, the entry of the ‘poetic’ through respiration into the air. Yet the imaginary system which subtends this flight remains highly formal, material. Even when Segalen imagines his text in terms of a free-floating voice, the poem is bound into an originating tension. If it comes to rest as a kind of deposit (*s’incruster*) in the human memory, it emerges as address from an ‘Offrant’ to a designated figure embodying ‘l’Espace Supérieur’ (all *chant* tending upwards, heaven-bound.) The crux, in short, of the attainment of *chant* is the proper imagining, as with Claudel within the walls of his ‘Pékin’, of this model of egress:

... cela pourrait être ce qu’on désigne sous le nom d’un Seigneur Suprême [...] Cela peut être plein d’amour et de passion vers un être que l’on divinise parmi les bons [...] Ou ces imprécis compagnons, ces ancêtres: Solitude, Vent des Âges.⁹⁶

The materiality of the text is replaced by, or migrates to, a ‘materiality’ of the addressee – the text itself then partaking of ‘life’ in its incrustation in living memory. The privileges of the voice: immediacy, presence, transparency adequately compensate for any possible rhetorical loss of ‘material’ power, in the sustaining of the pageant of imposition, perfect ‘communicative’ transmission.

In his last and (also) unfinished work, *Thibet*, Segalen summons up as his addressee the spectacle of a highly symbolic landscape in a rhythmically-formalised and name-rich invocation – a landscape which is immediately reversed and abolished to show the deepest personal recesses of the declaimer. The movement of the heavily rhythmic lines⁹⁷ is one that actually inverts the logic as well as the formal priorities of the writing – the

⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁷ Having remarked on the Whitmanian resonances of Segalen’s rhythmic scheme in *Thibet*, Michael Taylor attributes this scheme to the ‘epic’ and almost ‘barbaric’ aspirations of the poet: “...donnant ainsi au poème un aspect rude, puissant et exotique. De plus, de l’alternance des vers de 9 pieds et d’autres plus longs naissait un mouvement à deux temps propice à rendre, par son rythme, la sensation d’une escalade [...] Ces rythmes, organiques et concrets, se fondent sur le vécu du corps et non pas sur une idée de symétrie et d’abstraite régularité.” (Taylor, Michael. Preface to Segalen. *Thibet*. Paris: Mercure de France, 1979: 9-22, 20.)

fifth element here actually escaping into the ‘self’ of the object, rather than being declared absent:

Toi-même THIBET, rocher pur, es pénétré de ces carrares,
Toi-même es veiné comme un amant. [...]
Sous tes glaciers étoilés d’air, et sous tes pics en endentures,
Voici cet éclat non sidéral:
L’Autre élément qui n’est de feu, ni de bois ou fer, ni de terre,
Ni d’eau, - et ni même de lumière:
L’Autre Être toute de mon sang [...] ⁹⁸

At one level in *Thibet* the putative landscape and its incidents can be held in focus as a surface for the development of meanings, but the progress of the image is strictly and consciously determined by its relation to an ‘inner’ reality. This means that it is possible to focus upon a relative proximity to the utopian narratives already discussed, as the poems can be read in terms of a progression towards an ever-more-purified *haut lieu*, reversibly of the self and of the world – in other words, of their reciprocity and conjunction. This linkage is most characteristic of *Thibet* when interweaving the vocabularies of space and poetic creation – co-opting, as it were, a referential mass into the perfectly-adequated body of the verbal monolith; assimilating the ‘absolute other’ of the mountain to an absolutely unusual level of adhesion (for Segalen) to a lyrical voice identified with its production:

D’un pied dur j’aborde ta colline,
Bod, o Tö-bod, o THIBET! Lutrin du monde chantant,
J’ose en toi ce poème exaltant. ⁹⁹

Mais sur les coupes de tes croupes, par les rimes de tes cimes, les créneaux
Béant en tes rejets synclinaux,

⁹⁸ *Thibet*. Sequence XV, op. cit. 616.

⁹⁹ *Ibid*. Sequence I, 609.

Et par les laisses de tes chaînes, par les cadences d'avalanches
 Des troupes de tes séquences blanches,
 Il le faut: que – magique au monde rare dont tu fais le toit, -
 L'Hymne ne se fonde que sur toi.¹⁰⁰

This 'embodiment' of a referential space which is also its imagined 'Aufhebung' in the lyrical form, valorised by Segalen under the name of *chant*, presents itself as the epitome of physical encounter, not only between subject and external reality, but between the linguistic medium and the model which it adopts and which comes into being through it. As the second extract cited above makes explicit, the poem in its structural features *is* the 'Thibet' of the title, of address. Prosody is the overlay and the reverse of geography. That which the poem summons up is equally that which draws the poem 'onwards and upwards'. Each is a metaphor of the other within the specific domain of metaphor that is the human mind. The inexorable progress of this logic is towards the full autonomy of the poem-object as the embodiment of 'experienced' truth of the subject – and an act of consolidation of that truth as communicable. The dedication of the poem to Nietzsche¹⁰¹ serves to emphasise the self-consciously 'voluntary' aspect of the entire enterprise and a certain swaggering triumphalism in parts:

Toute la terre se déprend; tout désir tendu s'amollit [...]
 Où donc est le haut et le pur quand le plus Grand se surabaisse: [...]
 Je te somme Prince des Pics. Je t'affranchis de tous les dèmes.
 Je TE fais ton propre diadème.¹⁰²

¹⁰⁰ Ibid. Sequence II, 610. Jean Roudaut makes the point that this autopoetic quality of the cosmic symbol within the text is what distinguishes Segalen's mountain in *Thibet* from Daumal's *Mont Analogue* "... [qui] fixe, sous forme imagée, les étapes d'une expérience qui n'avait pas besoin de l'écriture pour être." (« Un poème : le Tibet » in *Regard, Espaces, Signes*, op. cit. 31-50, 36) The symbolic aspect of *Thibet* is thus understood as inseparable from the work of writing, and subsumed to the writerly investment in this.

¹⁰¹ Segalen dedicated the poetic cycle of what he calls the 'territoire ineffable' "[a]u dompteur éternel des cimes de l'esprit. Friedrich Nietzsche." For a treatment of Nietzschean reception in France at the time see Le Rider, Jacques. *Nietzsche en France*, op. cit. in which there is some mention of Jules de Gautier, the correspondent who introduced Segalen to a certain version of Nietzsche, but no mention of Segalen at all.

¹⁰² *Thibet*, op. cit. Sequence LIV, 637.

Thibet seems on the one hand to speak the satisfaction of the task-driven poet giving full vent to the thing to be spoken and, with common sense almost disturbing in the throes of such achievement, realising that the only way to go having climbed up to the top of the hill is to march back down again. But there is a separation, in the final sections, between the poetic gesture and that of the adventurer – those entities whose unity was in the past a prime object of literary articulation for Segalen. The lyrical scheme, which finds the resources to engage in the declarative which Segalen had previously cloaked in monumentality – hinting thus at a new encroachment of that logic – also preserves an integrity of the poetic gesture independently of the objective failure (both documentary, in Segalen’s career as an explorer, and alluded in the text of the poem) of the project of knowledge of the real. The lyrical achievement is what allows for a renunciation of the will to dominate:

Le geste est fait: le but est là: J’ai touché du pied le mystère:
 J’ai dit ce qui saurait n’être dit.
 Je me reprends et t’abandonne en emportant ton Reliquaire ...
 Trône là-bas! dans l’Interdit.
 Étant allé je me reviens; ayant bien marché, je m’arrête:
 Riant à ta domination
 Cet Hymne au désir des sommets purs se résout avant la crête
 Éclatent les vœux de négation!¹⁰³

The ‘object’ has been overcome in the accomplishment of a ‘geste’. But what is the object? *L’Hymne* should exclusively found itself – we read firstly – on the *tu* which is the whole of which *croupes*, *cimes*, *créneaux* etc. are named parts. But by the close of the work¹⁰⁴ this *Hymne* is one ‘au désir des sommets purs’. In this guise its definitive attainment, its ‘resolution’, is situated ‘avant la crête’ – this attainment marked in the poet’s potentially comic enactment of the regaining of self-possession (“je me reprends”). The self can mediate its departure from the scene affirmed albeit subdued, having held its

¹⁰³ *Thibet*, op. cit. Sequence LV, 637-8.

¹⁰⁴ The work is unfinished, but it does have a presentably complete conclusion, Segalen having worked on this prior to gaps left in earlier sequences.

own explicitly against and upon its chosen embodiment of the absolute. The repossession of self is a reaffirmation of textual distance, the allegorical object can thus be supplanted as the outcome of a complete textual construction by the writing subject which has successfully embodied its desire for the absolute. The lyrical rejoins the earlier monumental construction of the *non-lieu*, expressed again as an injunction, founding the poetic subject:

– Fais alors, en prières et grâces, en donateur immense, - et don et démon
 Qu’au vers le dernier des novénaires,
 Au pied de la séquence ultime, – ici, au bas, – ici au coin – de la sculpture de tes
 [monts,
*Mon nom, comme un sceau, se régénère.*¹⁰⁵

4. Daumal: the *non-lieu* as site of ultimate affirmation

The utopian dynamic of the *non-lieu* which establishes Segalen in a formal show of materiality has a radically different manifestation in Daumal. The question of experience for *Le Grand Jeu*, rooted in the pre-symbolic of a shared ‘real’, culminates in a symbolising strategy of all-out negation – an assault within language on the generally presumed ability of words to adhere. In *Clavicules d’un grand jeu poétique*¹⁰⁶, still firmly inside the communal imaginings of his avant-garde project, Daumal finds both the poem to come and the subject capable of articulating the ‘je’ it would embody in the principle of negation reduced to a capitalised ‘NON’. Daumal’s hybrid text, part-poem part-exegesis, thereby incorporates what is literally the *lieu* of the *non* – a space distinguished by the practice of negation rather than by any formal device or characteristic. The poetic text as that which arises from a practice of this principle is inaugurated in the simplest, most emphatic of mantras – it takes on the force of a proper name, melding the generality of an intellectual law to the affective force of personhood

¹⁰⁵ Thibet, op. cit. Sequence LVI, 638 (emphasis added.)

within a verbal display that tends towards materiality. Through the placement of this mantra at the source of the flux of verbal production, within the rhythms constitutive of ‘poetry’ and down to the sign of refusal itself, the opening accession to poetic speech proclaims the identity of the attributed name and the impossibility of such identity at one and the same time:

NON est mon nom

NON NON le nom

NON NON le NON ¹⁰⁷

This inaugural statement embodies a limit-possibility of adhesion for the speaking subject in a mechanics, a physical mode of pure affirmation coupled with a discourse of pure negation – the resultant text, being neither one nor the other, containing the aggregate of their theorised effects. But this compossibility within the active, ‘poetic’ component of the *Clavicules*, is mirrored and made relative as discourse, within the overall scheme of the composite text. For in a manner reminiscent of Segalen¹⁰⁸, the operative part is accompanied by exegesis, commentary, a discourse of distance. The full text of *Clavicules* acutely dramatises the duality in Daumal’s approach of the question of poetry, in which theory of an achieved practice underwrites attempted practice – both of which lead the reader towards a third, absent element: the realisation of the poet’s imaginings. As Segalen elaborates various formal supports (mixing suggestion and display) to a ‘poetic’ utterance, so here does Daumal – but through a mixture of personae (poetic speaker and reflective / commenting voice) rather than the mask of mimetic play visible in *Stèles*, for example. ‘Operative’ segments, as one might speak of the operative provisions of a legislative text, alternate with their extensive commentary in the didactic voice of direct address which recurs throughout the work of Daumal the writer.

¹⁰⁶ In *Le Contre-Ciel suivi de Les dernières paroles du poète*, op. cit. 23-54.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid. 25.

¹⁰⁸ In, for example, *Odes* – where the interplay of ‘poem’ and commentary is formally analogous, but with the additional element of a fictitious difference of authorship. *Clavicules* makes no play of fictionality on the level of commentary.

The question of the 'space' instituted by the text as a whole is thus a complicated one. The reader is involved in an oscillation from something approaching a performative voice to an analytical component which, unlike Segalen's play on the same contrast, actively displays its earnestness, even unto inducing an effect of distress or frustration. There is no affective confusion for Daumal, however, as to where the site of the subject's realisation or recognition in language lies – namely, within the act of poetic utterance. The *Clavicules* are the first and most elaborate of Daumal's imaginings of this act both within and fundamentally at odds with the *non-lieu* of the written poetic text.

It is within the poetic components of the *Clavicules*, denoted by a typographical difference, and an attempt at 'versification' which is mainly concerned with the incorporation of a general principle of the importance of rhythm – conceived in terms of the somatic or the pulsional rather than in terms of regularity (apart from the initial mantra cited above) – that a certain suspension of the subject's critical faculties can be countenanced (the 'critical' being in any case being the mechanism of the poetic via the principle of negation.) The unified or reconciled subject thus enters a framework of thinking as a possible attainment, occupying the position of a telos within the practice of poetic speech. Yet provisionally it is also the individual mind which has to think its way towards this point of resolution. The poetic, even as it is constructed as a practice of ultimate sufficiency, is not separable from its intellectual approach, however ambivalent or torn the modern individual might be on this point. Hence, in the commentary to the opening salvo cited above, the theoretical voice announces the following:

L'esprit individuel atteint l'absolu de soi-même par négations successives; je suis ce qui pense, non ce qui est pensé; le sujet pur ne se conçoit que comme limite d'une négation perpétuelle./L'idée même de négation est pensée; elle n'est pas «je». Une négation qui se nie s'affirme elle-même du même coup; négation n'est pas simple privation, mais ACTE positif.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁹ Op. cit. 26.

The negative imperative of the *Clavicules* is thus oriented in the first instance towards self. The human subject is recognised, and maintains self-identity, through a practice of negation – one which is enacted and analysed as the sole point of stability within the experience of consciousness, the gesture around which sense can be imagined to accrue. It is from this point that it can function as a cornerstone of the proclaimed *Grand Jeu* communal project of révolution/révélation. As a reading of the essay posthumously published under the title *Tu t'es toujours trompé*¹¹⁰ shows, the process of negation in the *Grand Jeu* phase, born in a mix of Hegelian dialectic and esoteric 'knowledge' within sight of a messianic view of the Whole, is grounded in the desire to experience the self as 'real' – which goal is placed logically prior to any valid act of communication. Functionally then the name of the principle of negation occupies the same position as the mimetic device of Segalen in *Stèles* ("Elles seules impliquent la stabilité"), the gesture which Segalen accomplished through an emphasis on materiality being dematerialised, arguably even intellectualised – in his dual approach – by Daumal.

Equally, though the founding gesture in *Clavicules* is thus multiply 'negative', there is a telos of the poetic act in Daumal that is temperamentally of a piece with Segalen's ostensible aesthetic of pure affirmation in *Stèles*. The purity of the negative line is what gives it its satisfyingly abstract quality of "ACTE positif". It is, indeed, a negation which is only typographically distinguishable from a kind of primal affirmation, "NON NON le nom" making of the poem the compossible site of the no(n/m). NON thus (with the evident paradox which resonates with Daumal's interest in 'Pataphysics) becomes the primordial textual mark of self-presence, of an affirmation which has intellectually liquidated the uncertainties of its own status. It is also, in its capitalisation, the materialisation of the nothing, of absence, which has literally become the cornerstone of a possible poetic affirmation, the lived, performed promise of that (self-)presence.

¹¹⁰ Op. cit..

This nominal point of resolution established in its absolute affirmative capacity, it quickly gives rise to a pseudo-cosmological scene of the type at which Daumal was to remain adept¹¹¹:

Et de là contemple:
Une Mer bouillonnante devant toi;
le mot OUI brille innombrable, reflété par chaque bulle.
Mâle le NON, il regarde la femelle.¹¹²

The would-be ‘subject’ bears witness to a cosmic textuality – one now independent of a figure of a speaker and written as an epic metaphysical *mise-en-scène*. The subject purified in negation sees language reduced – and magnified – to its great underlying modes, with the textual progression out of negation into a genesis of language in duality. Anchoring negation in ‘maleness’, a move consonant with the pseudo-originary designs of the title, has as one of its effects the passing-off of what began as an abstract intellectual principle as participating in a dichotomy of the ‘natural’ universe and of thus positing the continuity of the self-identical, perpetually dynamic verbal act of the ideal poem with a force of nature, even as the commentary admits to a certain approximate quality to the apposition:

La négation est un acte simple, immédiat et procréateur, autant vaut dire mâle. Ce qui est nié, pris en général et a priori, peut être considéré comme le principe commun à toutes les productions de l’acte négateur, comme la matrice de toutes les apparences, donc comme femelle.

L’acte de nier, privé par définition de toute détermination positive, est identique à soi dans son mouvement perpétuel [...] ¹¹³

¹¹¹ See, for example, the later allegorical ‘poem’ ‘Le Père mot’ (1938) in *Le Contre-Ciel suivi de Les dernières paroles du poète*, op. cit. 198-201.

¹¹² Op. cit. 27.

¹¹³ Ibid.

This commentary contains a cardinal ambiguity of Daumal's poetic aspirations, which is the violence with which he couples a discourse of the 'real' with a rejection of the order of the visible world – a world which is both necessary to the 'salutary' practice of negation and automatically consigned to the realm of inauthenticity and alienation. The gendered analogy is thus an appeal to a 'natural' register, showing a taste for the elemental / parabolically simple that Daumal cultivated – but on a metaphysical, or even simply metaphorical, level. An absolutely transcendental conception of the categories of the poetic is spliced with a conception of the subject as knowable only in the innermost recesses of a singular experience. In practice the text of *Clavicules* holds these demands together with the combined affirmative powers of poetic and commenting text – pragmatically one is dealing with an assured, affirmative speaker on both levels. Intellectually however the tensions that those discourses embody, thought under an imperative of resolution, lead to an implosion of the poetic space, a modern take on the classically tragic *crise d'espace* which is imagined in an absolute poetic 'event':

Et la Parole parle!

Et le Souffle souffle!

La Parole délivre les cohortes du langage.

Le Souffle anime et meut les mots.¹¹⁴

Daumal makes a point of harnessing this absolute in *Clavicules*, where it is translated as performative of the speaking subject.

Ici le JE parlant du zénith absolu d'un point particulier,

là le NON parlant de l'absolu Zénith de tout point.

Ici petite parole ouvrant les portes du palais vocal d'un homme particulier,

Là, Grande Parole, parfait Mâle tout pénétrant.

¹¹⁴ Ibid. 45.

*Et maintenant essaie de parler. Dis quelque chose d'important. Parle; la chose ou le fait que tu nommeras sera immédiatement réel, si c'est vraiment toi qui parles.*¹¹⁵

This association of totality and of subject-hood within the imagination of the poetic speech-event, mixing messianic and confidential tones, is characteristic of Daumal's intellectual style. He retains the methodical negativity unveiled in the *Clavicules* long after the demise of the Hegelian perspectives of a grand dialectical resolution as an intellectually sustainable position in his view. He also retains holistic aspirations or leanings, albeit with a sense of their definitive inaccessibility for the modern subject. Thus from the time of *Clavicules* the tension between the repressive postulate, the achievement of awareness through a practice of negation, and the equally extreme positive movement of affirmation is resolved at a distance, the resolution narrated within a textual space rather than enacted, in an imagined archetype of the poetic act-event. It is an event that reads like an apocalypse, being one ever more permanently deferred to a theoretical imagination; the everyday of the would-be poet being confined to the effort to lucidity that remains deeply suspicious of all linguistic appropriations of 'experience'. There is, then, a difference between a conceptualisation which renders possible a greater awareness, and the living experience of this possible new consciousness – a difference which is established between 'possibility' and an implied 'realisation'. This is a difference which is central to Daumal's work, but which he refuses to allow to become definitive. Wakefulness as a continuing process of the subject is called to confirmation in acts – it thus becomes necessary to be able to model such acts, and to live in the genuine conviction of their possible accomplishment:

[“[T]a réflexion sur cet éveil perpétuel vers la plus haute conscience possible constituera la science des sciences. Je l'appelle MÉTAPHYSIQUE. [...] si elle exprime la possibilité d'une conscience toujours plus haute, elle n'en exprime que la possibilité. [...]

¹¹⁵ Ibid. 53 (the indented italics represent the 'commentary' element of Daumal's text. All emphasis in original.)

“[L]e possible comme tel n’est rien, et se satisfaire d’un possible, c’est dormir”¹¹⁶

Despite the idealist influences apparent in Daumal’s attempts to think the poetic act in terms of maximal unity, he moves at the same time from a priority of experience over, and in distinction from, the text. The works both from the *Grand Jeu* period and after abound in warnings against the autonomising tendencies of language production, the ‘vérités verbales’ of intellectual exchange, which represent a dissociation of the activities of thinking and being (“Je dis mentir, c’est l’acte mental.”¹¹⁷) The ideal text – the poetic text which, in a 1935 essay on *Les limites du langage philosophique et les savoirs traditionnels*, goes beyond mere discourses on knowledge – is that which in no way modifies what he imagines as the pre-formed integrity in experience of a content for transmission, a ‘pensée’.

Le propre du poème – non pas du «poème philosophique», mais du poème digne de ce nom, création d’une pensée vivante – est d’être un objet fait de mots, capables de suggérer à la fois des images physiques et des attitudes corporelles, des sentiments et des idées. Il est ainsi un vase propre à recevoir une pensée réelle, une pensée douée de forme et viable.¹¹⁸

There is a certain amount that is potentially misleading in this attempt of Daumal’s to convey the instrumentality of the poem through a simple comparison. The ‘vase’ theory posits a content – ontological, prior and hence superior to the form which would become the vessel of the ‘poetic’. It reads as a relatively rudimentary separation of form and content. This comforts a view of the ‘pensée’ conveyed as integral, unaltered from the authenticating instance of the body giving rise to it, a simple continuation, as it were, of this intimate certainty by other means. But in the imagery can also be read the search for a parabolic simplicity which is at least in part due to the analogical example of Sanskrit poetics.

¹¹⁶ *Tu t’es toujours trompé*, op. cit. 27.

¹¹⁷ ‘Suggestions pour un métier poétique’ in *Les pouvoirs de la parole*, op. cit. 153-58, 153.

¹¹⁸ ‘Les limites du langage philosophique et les savoirs traditionnels’ in *Les pouvoirs de la parole*, op. cit. 9-32, 16.

It is upon these that Daumal settles his thoughts on the body of the poem in the aftermath of *Le Grand Jeu*. Posing as they do the question of the achievement of communication through the mastery of the coded subtleties of grammar and prosody, they inaugurate in him a fascination for the complexity of grammatical and poetic systems, thereby at least implying that the art of saying is as material to the 'poetic' event as that of living in some way outside language. The demarcation of the linguistic from the 'ontological' on which Daumal insists even while urging the use of language towards the ontological limit of the self finds in this tradition a resonance which is all the more seductive for being the very epitome of cultural distance in both time and space. As a body of thought on the poetic text and more generally on the traditions of theatre, music, dance and the spoken word, it is readily apparent that what attracts Daumal the commentator and exegete is that tradition's constant focus on the continuity if not the unity between the deployment of language in utterance and the experience at the level of the infra-linguistic, the body, the senses of the speaker. The theoretical metaphors of the tradition are intensely practical, pitched at the level of sense experience, its objectives those of maximal inclusiveness in the 'communicative' act.

La matière travaillée par le poète est faite de vocables (*çabda*) et de sens (*artha*). Un mot (*pada*), c'est un vocable associé à un sens. Le « sens » d'un mot n'est pas une simple désignation abstraite ; « *artha* » veut dire « chose, objet, valeur », mais aussi « but », car le contenu psychologique du mot, c'est l'intention de celui qui parle, c'est une modalité de son « je ». Le sens est d'ailleurs aussi nommé « fruit » (*phala*) du mot, quand on considère son effet sur l'auditeur.¹¹⁹

Several degrees of disembodiment as exemplified in the modern, Western relation with modern, Western languages are reversed here in a 'system' of relations extant in the other language. Words participate in a 'materiality' which integrates sense and signifier, this materiality being the domain of the 'poet'. Ontologising affect assured, the associativity

¹¹⁹ 'Pour approcher l'art poétique hindou' (1940) in *Bharata. L'Origine du théâtre, la poésie et la musique en Inde*, op. cit., 79-93, 86.

of the Sanskrit then allows another leap, from an *en-soi* of language as shored up in the world of things to an instrumentality for the purposes of the affirming 'je', the word as the pure subjectivity of the speaker. The 'material' of the classical poet in Sanskrit, conjugating the entire gamut from object to subject positions inside an act of communication (a performance facilitated by the polysemic qualities of the terms of its poetics), seems a miraculous one, leaving us only to doubt on what the 'modalities' of the speaking 'je' might be. The sense of the poem as experienced by the receiving subject, "est nommé « résonance » (*dhvani*) ou « suggestions » (*vyañjanâ*), ou encore « gustation » (*rasanâ*)."¹²⁰, each rekindling the idea of the poem as an object of the most intimate transfer, a presence reaching well into infra-linguistic levels of perception and reception. Whatever the term applied to the somatic penetration of this poetic 'sense', their shared governing 'concept' [or anti-concept] is an essentialising metaphor. 'Saveur' unites metabolism and pleasure, taste and 'reality', inside and outside, in a model of apparent accessibility:

Viçvanâtha dit : «La poésie est une parole dont l'essence est *saveur*.» [...] Oserais-je dire : une émotion objective ? [...] La Saveur est essentiellement une cognition, «brillant de sa propre évidence», donc immédiate. [...] C'est cette Saveur que le «pouvoir de suggestion» du langage a pour fonction de manifester.¹²¹

The experience of the poetic is clothed or idealised as unmediated and unequivocal (Saveur, évidence, émotion objective), whereas the language which causes this experience now appears to stand in a slightly ambiguous role of manifestation via 'suggestion' of what is experienced. In his reflection on Mallarmé, Deguy places the act of suggestion under the sign of a negation of the object : "... *suggérer*, ce verbe de l'opération mallarméenne[.] Non pas de « suggérer à un lecteur », opération secondaire. Mais de suggérer la chose dont il s'agit. Autosuggestion, si l'on veut. Soit se suggérer, mais «ici», objectivement. [...] [L]'expression dit une chose et une autre chose."¹²² These remarks underline the difficulty elided by Daumal in his adoption of Hindu poetics as an

¹²⁰ Ibid. 87.

¹²¹ Ibid. 88-89 (italics in original, emphasis added.)

¹²² Deguy. *La raison poétique*, op. cit. 74.

articulation of his own poetic ideal of a speaking of the ‘thing itself’, an articulation of the real. Thinking in the regime of the *non* thus leads *out* of ‘experience’ (typified in ‘encounter’) into a parallel existence – the “quasi-rencontre ou quasi-apparition” of the *non-lieu*, the indirect approach of the verbal operation. To imagine that suggestion provides direct access to the intimacy of experience, as the register of sensory metaphors can give to understand – that it can make of the *non-lieu* (freed up by the textual ‘non-’, and the parallel affirmation of the text as the site in which the ‘whole’ can be held together) a *lieu* in terms of experience – is a step with which Daumal never quite dispenses, even as he attempts to maintain an idea of practice.

This ambiguity notwithstanding, Sanskrit poetics offer Daumal the possibility of imagining an ordered, rule-based approach to the *réel* of his earliest yearnings, through the practice of the arts of language viewed as a bodily, objectivating and transcendent activity – a practice which allows the disciple to envision a perfected state (a squaring of the linguistic circle in “émotion objective”) and yet assures him of its attainability only through full personal immersion in processes of exercise, meditation, of physical, intellectual and spiritual discipline – re-releasing an ethic of experience into discourse on artistic practice. The erudite interest in the Sanskrit tradition is one that revolves around the conventional ordering of speech – but very much *in situ*, in the idea of something performed, of an event. There is thus also a social imaginary, but which Daumal attempts to condense onto the body of the written work itself. Hence also the parallel interests in the music, the theatre associated with the same tradition, and in movement as a key to the enlargement of personal consciousness. The various scenarios of the *mot total* can thus be read as projections of the broader *désir d’être*, the constant deficit of ‘being’ experienced by the aspiring poet confined to the sole plane of language. The aspiration to be a poet represents the determination to confront this lack as somehow surmountable in an accession to speech, even if the broader cultural conditions necessary for such an accession – such as a theatrical or musical tradition of integrated performance – are absent from the practical horizons of the modern poet¹²³. The *non-lieu* excludes this dimension of reality, while acting as an incitement towards its (re)creation.

¹²³ The affinities with Artaud, and also with Michaux – also a friend in the 1930s – are again evident here.

In this respect it becomes impossible to think the *non-lieu* in total isolation from the transitive perspective and broader cultural questions implicit in Part I. The poet could be characterised by a nostalgia for a more propitious cultural and social context, as we have seen. Daumal's early work already constitutes an attempt to address this problem. But there is a migration inwards of the terms in which the problem is posed in the subsequent developments of his writing. Whereas the poetic 'moment of truth' recurs as an explosive, irresistible one throughout the oeuvre, the quality of this moment is seen more and more not only to inhere in but to act upon a quality of the subjective poetic attention. The reform of the *lieu commun*, the space of communication and reception, becomes increasingly secondary to an attempt to think the poetic act as an utterance in terms of the quality of an originating attention – and thereby the attribution of qualities to the *non-lieu* of the poem.

Poésie noire et poésie blanche is important in the theoretical treatment of this development, as it is the final consolidated statement of something like a daumalian 'poetics'. At this stage in his reflection, more obviously steeped in the lessons of his Sanskrit studies, Daumal sees the poem as built around a "germe lumineux" which takes hold in the cultivated silence of the poet. He describes as a mystery the process whereby this *germe lumineux* arrives at poetic expression, a mystery occurring within the conjunction of the 'power' of the *Chose-à-dire* (which is of the poet, although presented as alien to the speaking subject) and the fullness of the individual human complex. It is further characterised by what Daumal calls 'le rythme du poète', which becomes the ever-singular poetic principle of textual organisation :

Ce pouvoir s'exerce grâce à la liaison particulière qui existe entre les éléments de la machinerie du poète, et qui unit en une seule substance vivante les matières si différentes que sont les émotions, les images, les concepts et les sons. La vie de ce nouvel organisme, c'est le rythme du poète.¹²⁴

¹²⁴ 'Poésie noire et poésie blanche', in *Le Contre-Ciel suivi de Les dernières paroles du poète*, op. cit. 189.

The mixture of event and object which delivers the ‘poetic’ in Daumal’s view is evidently mediated by the person of the poet, who, as ‘poète blanc’, but also as ‘poète’, Daumal essentialises by reference to “ce ‘don’ commun à tous les poètes”. The ‘poète’ is an individual unified via the relation-building practice of the poetic, imagined – in a manner which recalls exactly Segalen’s postulate of the unity of the person beyond his different roles as the goal of the literary text, at the beginning of *Équipée* – in terms of the unified articulation of a “liaison particulière entre les diverses vies qui composent notre vie.” The ‘lyrical’ goal does not, at this point, seem very distant:

C’est une liaison particulière entre les diverses vies qui composent notre vie, telle que chaque manifestation d’une de ces vies n’en est plus seulement le signe exclusif, mais peut devenir, par une résonance intérieure, le signe de l’émotion qui est, à un moment donné, la couleur ou le son ou le goût de soi-même. Cette émotion centrale, profondément cachée en nous, ne vibre et ne brille qu’à de rares instants. Ces instants seront, pour le poète, ses moments poétiques, et toutes ses pensées et sensations et gestes et paroles, en un tel moment, seront les signes de l’émotion centrale. Et lorsque l’unité de leur signification se réalisera dans une image qui s’affirmera par des mots, c’est alors plus spécialement que nous dirons qu’il est poète. Voilà ce que nous appellerons ‘don poétique’, faute d’en savoir plus long.¹²⁵

It is thus instructive to observe how, in attempting to describe an ‘organism’ which in its complexity would seem to be capable of rivalling the human organism itself, Daumal is careful to depersonalise the necessary human agent without going so far as to disembodify its textual presence. The poetic event is not an exaltation of the subject, but the point at which it could be imagined as attaining to being. The transformation occurs within the person, the ‘machinery’ of the poet, and is perceived in its textual animation as the ‘rhythm’ of the poet, but it is not the work of either of the customary war horses of poetic endeavour that are ‘combinaison intellectuelle’ and ‘l’instinct’. The poem is the product of some kind of human performance (the dominant quality of which is a supple but

¹²⁵ Ibid. 185-86.

absolute scepticism), yet the human performer of the poem, the poet, is an agent, is being spoken to and through. Thus the writing subject, though preserved, subsists within this poetry (and survives by it) as part of a complex much wider and more multi-faceted than even the individual will. *Noire* and *blanche* are, for example, said to be distinguishable at various points by the conscious strivings of their performers:

Le poète blanc cherche à comprendre sa nature de poète, à s'en libérer et à la faire servir. Le poète noir s'en sert et s'y asservit.¹²⁶

But equally by the effect of the poetry itself and even by their formal consonance or dissonance with the proprieties of other-regarding 'language', a kind of *Geist* of admissible, if not received, usage:

Sa [poète noir] poésie lui ouvre de nombreux mondes, certes, mais des mondes sans Soleil, éclairés de cent lunes fantastiques, peuplés de fantômes, ornés de mirages et parfois pavés de bonnes intentions. La poésie blanche ouvre la porte d'un seul monde, de celui du seul Soleil, sans prestiges, réel.[...] Parmi mes phrases, je vois des mots, des expressions, des parasites qui ne servent pas la Chose-à-dire [...] et, chose remarquable, du même coup c'est une faute de goût, de style, ou même de syntaxe.¹²⁷

Each of these intuitions of *poésie blanche* is set within an ethic of experience, of poetic practice. *Noire* and *blanche* are vectors of the human instinct towards closure in the activity of text-building. They denote forces at work in every actual text. The 'goal' of a successful poetic work gives way, yet again, to the 'process', the ever-renewed commitment to a poetic practice for which that work is a virtuality:

¹²⁶ Ibid. 185.

¹²⁷ Ibid. 189-90.

Chaque fois que l'aube paraît, le mystère est là tout entier. Mais si je fus jadis poète, certainement je fus un poète noir, et si demain je dois être un poète, je veux être un poète blanc.¹²⁸

The decision to conflate these intuitions on what may be going on in poetry into the single, typically brutal opposition of black and white might well be criticised as reductive. The *poète blanc* is the one who in some way 'masters' the process, since he shows signs of trying to liberate himself from his 'nature de poète' and to make it work for him towards the objective of a realised humanity. Yet *poésie blanche* is a process of not interfering with the *Chose-à-dire* as it matures into a poem via one's 'machinery', and is also dependent on what that 'Chose' happens to be (*poésie blanche* being a matter of 'le seul Soleil') Moreover, the *Chose-à-dire* is characterised by light, it is visual rather than verbal, or is at most pre-verbal at its inception in the silence of the *poète blanc* – nevertheless, elements of the linguistic institution (felicity of style, syntax etc.) are thought to operate normatively upon the manner of its actual saying.

Within what could be regarded as the poetic *non-lieux* of Daumal's oeuvre the imposition of 'form' on this formless energy has two major modalities, neither of which in practice correspond to those patterns to which he responded so enthusiastically in his readings of Sanskrit. A move inside the space of an attempted poetic writing in Daumal's work can very quickly lead to the experience of a dissolution of that space in the (forward) movement of 'parole'. This is what will be treated below in terms of a daumalian 'lyricism' – and which is transparently a rhythmic dramatisation of the crisis, or constitutive absence of the subject. But it also gives rise to a parallel practice of the tableau-like *poème en prose*, ekphrasis of variable degrees of horror, which achieve a poetic weight, and a consistency, through a deliberate anti-lyricism reminiscent of some of Segalen's irony in *Stèles*.¹²⁹

¹²⁸ Ibid. 187.

¹²⁹ Powrie (*René Daumal, étude d'une obsession*, op. cit.) operates a chronological division between the poems of the *Contre-Ciel* and the more prose-based, allegorical compositions later assimilated to the poetic effort. While there is very definitely an increased recourse to the latter form in later years, it is one observable to a degree in the earlier compositions – where, also, the compound influences of Rimbaud, Nerval and Lautréamont are more evident.

‘Entrée des Larves’, Daumal’s poetic contribution to the first issue of *Le Grand Jeu*, is an example in point. The variability of the ‘versets’ is one of a gradual release of information – the utterance is entirely within a logic of reference rather than of a ‘poetic’ movement in language – it is thus the variability of a certain prose practising the dangerous concision of an apparently poetic form. The sense of menace is grounded in the reference to a scene slowly revealed, the cohesion of which is all the more unanswerable for being unheard-of. The obscurity of the text is in part the creature of the clarity of the prose, the omission of explanation or development from a *mise-en-scène* proffered in a jarringly neutral tone. The ‘poet’ is a muted, distanced visionary of that which, through this neutrality, attains something of the order of an anti-poetic purity, a demonstration of anti-lyricism:

Quelques enfants mouraient ou séchaient aux fenêtres – c’était le printemps et les mains des hommes se déroulaient au soleil, offrant à tous le pain de leurs paumes que les enfants n’avaient pas encore mordu.

Sur les terrasses on se retrouvait entre terre et ciel; il y eut beaucoup de crânes brisés ce jour-là, de jeunes gens qui voulaient voler au-dessus des jardins.

[...]

Les femmes hurlent soudain toutes avec des gorges de louves, parce que dans les faubourgs s’est glissé un homme nu et blanc venant des campagnes.¹³⁰

The mute, oneiric scene again translates something of the tone of the ‘original’ scenes at the foundation of the group. In its dispassionate presentation as documentary this ‘poetic’ text, modern in some of its images, is in direct descent from the vision of a Nerval (“Le rêve est une seconde vie.” (Aurélia)), who, as various essays and references make clear, was a tutelary figure of the *Grand Jeu* group as a whole and René Daumal especially. Behind the constative construction of the text is the performative intention that it be read as capable of being constative. The *vrai lieu* of the poetic scene moves here from accord of the mind and the body suggestive of a certain degree of automatism – leading us to

¹³⁰ *Le Grand Jeu* I, op. cit. 41

read the limpidity of Daumal's *vrai lieu* then as partly dream-originated: taken from a position of non-participation in the scene of the subject. The 'automatic' effect here is far from unpremeditated, and thus very far removed from that of the Surrealists of a few years earlier – one of whom, Desnos, was also a contributor to that first issue.

Once the subject attempts to speak directly, once the real is made the object of a conscious assault, the scene becomes far more fraught; the demands made on language and the uses made of it become more violent. The body of Daumal's versified writing is paroxystic perhaps, but is no *écriture automatique*. His affinity at this stage, and in this mode, with Desnos at the same period, is worthy of remark. The latter was attempting to overcome the excesses of the automatic period which, depicted here via the account of Blanchot, recall, but in a curiously more pre-meditated manner, the group-building activities of *Le Grand Jeu*:

Chacun des amis de Breton cherchait naïvement la nuit dans un sommeil prémédité, chacun glissait hors de son moi coutumier et se croyait plus libre, maître d'un espace plus vaste. Cela donna lieu à des désordres auxquels il fallut mettre fin pour « des considérations d'hygiène mentale élémentaire ». On pourrait se dire que la prudence n'avait que faire ici. Mais l'imprudence ne conduisait pas bien loin, conduisit, par exemple Desnos, non pas à se perdre, à s'égarer loin de lui-même, mais, dit Breton, « à vouloir concentrer l'attention sur lui seul ».¹³¹

A consideration of the writing subject became necessary to the survival of the enterprise of writing in such conditions. In the case of Desnos this emerges in the conjunction of a lyrical voice with an obsessional thematics of the 'obscur', the operational matrix of a lyrical activity described frequently, as we have observed, in terms of the master-metaphor of alchemy¹³². The poetic utterance acts out the losing of the self so, as it were, to find that self all the more. This boundless investment of the subject is taken up on the

¹³¹ Blanchot. *L'espace littéraire*, op. cit. 213-48, 235.

¹³² See Dadoun. 'La nuit de Desnos entre Science et Alchimie' op. cit. Also 'L'hypothèse du temps alchimique: Poésie et alchimie' in Chitrit, Armelle. (de) Robert Desnos. *Le poème entre temps* (Québec, XY2 éditeur / Lyon, Presses Universitaires de Lyon, 1996), 216-224 in particular.

rhythmic level in a respiration which, as Michel Murat points out¹³³, refuses all regularity in a kind of acceleration of utterance where the ever-greater mass of the *verset* is accompanied by a flight from one image to the next, figuring thereby a kind of intimate collapse of figuration.

For Desnos the theme of the muse or the love-object arrives to put a palatable halt to this process: “Tes yeux tes yeux si beaux sont les voraces de l’obscurité, du silence et de l’oubli.”¹³⁴ In Daumal’s lyrical attempts, however, there is no object creditable or believable enough to distract the subject from its own negative imperative. Confronted by and confronting the world, the direction of the NON is away from that world (“Je me retranche encore de moi-même derrière moi-même ...”) the purer form of the *moi* is situated ‘behind’ the impurer form, and although the *je* of enunciation can fleetingly inhabit either of these forms, much of the impetus in Daumal’s poetry comes from a *je* lingering as it were in front of a separate entity obscurely sensed as ‘purer’ or ‘truer’. Alternatively the poet adopts what is perhaps a presentation with more precedent and names one of these retreating layers, the less ‘real’ thus the more ‘familiar’, ‘tu’. The greater conventional and spatial distinction established in such cases allows definite territorial menace to seep into the words addressed. The inauthentic self is an encroachment upon that in the subject which has sensed the limit of being:

Tu me faisais croire que ton nom maudit
C’était le mien, l’imprononçable,
[...]
tu peux me brûler dans la graisse des dieux morts,
je sais que tu n’es pas moi-même [...] ¹³⁵

¹³³ “Desnos obtient des effets bien plus violents [que par l’ellipse et la construction en parataxe] en jouant sur des variations de masse: il insère dans le tissu aéré du vers libre des blocs déponctués, à la syntaxe enchevêtrée, qui donnent l’impression que le poète s’enfonce brutalement dans sa parole, comme s’il tombait au fond d’un puits. Le plus souvent alors le sens se perd, comme dans les *Ténèbres* du poème qui porte ce titre.” Michel Murat, ‘Robert Desnos Poète Lyrique (Fragments)’ in Marie-Claire Dumas (ed.) *«Moi qui suis Robert Desnos» Permanence d’une voix*. Paris: José Corti, 1987: 85-100, 97.

¹³⁴ Desnos. ‘Ténèbres! O ténèbres!’, *Le Grand Jeu* I, op. cit. 28.

¹³⁵ ‘Le grand jour des morts’ in *Le Contre-Ciel suivi de Les dernières paroles du poète*, op. cit. 58-60, 59.

Having negation as the founding gesture of one's verbal and spiritual universe in the form of an originary NON polarises the object of the refusal against the goal of the self – that towards which the NON is thought to propel the subject. This polarisation has, in certain passages of the one volume of poetry published in Daumal's lifetime, *Le Contre-Ciel* (1936)¹³⁶, the effect of a complete inversion of values. Non-X becomes identified as 'real'-X to the extent exactly that it does not partake of X. To the tyranny of the here and now, out of the cognitive instant re-formed as poetry, there emerges in response an absolutism of the negating self, intimately other:

Que je te sois, Plus-grand-que-moi, mon Meurtrier !
 et qu'il puisse être maudit,
 celui qui disait : je, qu'il ne soit que fumée!
 il n'est que le milieu d'un souffle.¹³⁷

A vertiginous set of distinctions divides the speaking subject. The transitory *je* – established as speaker here – is degraded in the space of four lines to a highly circumscribed *il* (whose destruction has been wished for and whose death has anyway been situated in time). The addressee (*Plus-grand-que-moi*), the non-*je*, is the *moi* of Daumal's reality, beckoning at the end of every breath. But this *moi réel* is named as *Plus-grand-que-moi*. The subject living by the negation principle will always tend towards an authentic self, but real presence to that self is an impossible akin to annihilation in terms of accession to speech, the self will never become entirely real within language, full truth is invidious to the life that aspires to poetry as occurring within language: "La nuit de vérité nous coupe la parole."¹³⁸ Daumal, making texts within this impossibly logical construct of the problem, retains the courage of his practice in the face of his convictions. The "productions lyricoïdes d'adolescence", negatively exalted, are worked out in a kind of delectation for the inauthentic, an almost didactically-minded

¹³⁶ This is also the primary title of the collection published in the Poésie-Gallimard collection under the direction of Claudio Rugafori in 1970 – one which also includes the 1930 version of *Le Contre-Ciel* (from which a number of the following quotations are taken) in addition to the bulk of Daumal's 'poetic' and para-'poetic' work from the post *Grand Jeu* period (with the exception of texts such as the *Poème à Dieu et à l'Homme*, in *Tu t'es toujours trompé*, op. cit. 129-39.)

¹³⁷ 'Le seul' in *Le Contre-Ciel suivi de Les dernières paroles du poète*, op. cit. 165-68, 167.

taste for 'self'-flagellation. His *je-turned-il* is given a difficult reprieve in poetic language. As with much such public belittlement of the speaking position, there is a residual delirium of an absolute *retournement de situation*, an omnipotence of that position :

Et s'il veut parler, qu'il se présente d'abord debout,
Nu, le regard absent, devant les trônes solitaires
Du Meurtrier et de sa Mort – et qu'il déclare :

«Je suis fumée, je n'ai pas la Parole,
je n'ai que le milieu d'un souffle.»
[...]
«Mais que je sois plutôt parfaite transparence de
ne pas être, au sein de l'union ardente
du Tonnerre Niant et de la Mer Néante.»¹³⁹

The glorious, geological presence of the indifferent poet in the *non-lieu* between present process and annihilating end-point is the body of the poem itself. (Daumal remarks elsewhere upon the analogies established in Hindu poetics between the poem and the human body.) The *je* is never at rest; the poem is the virtual physicality of the 'centre de l'être', which having passed the *je-conduit* is projected subjunctively into the nowhere between speech and silence (*Tonnerre Niant* and *Mer Néante*).

Here at a deep level we again encounter the poet's love-hate relation with the concept and power of institution in the realisation of self through language. The pre-eminent language of poetry will later become Sanskrit – a language remarkable as the deliberate creation of convention and developed consciously to maximise certain channels of associative expression. But the possibility of poetry is crucial precisely because of the destructive pressure of the conventional, the grip of the social on how the subject lives in language;

¹³⁸ 'Nénie', *ibid.* 65-67, 67.

¹³⁹ 'Le seul', *ibid.* 167-68.

and the motor of the poem is a thing of silence, whether that thing be called the *centre de l'être*, the *Plus-grand-que-moi* or the *Chose-à-dire*. How is this sequence of understandings to be harmonised in the space of a poem, let alone resolved in the turn of a binary categorisation ?

Encountering this sense of an impossibility leads one of necessity to a distinction to be drawn within the works of Daumal, and in relation to the poetic work in particular – that between on the one side the poetic manifesto which will naturally have as its focus the ideal towards which the poetic sense strives (“Grand-Poète, provoquant, libre selon le Mot Total.”¹⁴⁰), together with poems which seem to adopt this tone of the *mot total*; and on the other the poetic work which can be read as process, as development towards such ideally poetic speech. In Daumal’s ‘obsession’¹⁴¹ with the unity of the speaking subject these two categories exist poetically only within a perspective of their reconciliation. Two poems written close together in the summer of 1929, *Le Serment de Fidélité* and *A la Néante*, together with a short commentary by the poet, enact this movement between absolute and approach – together with their distinctive nuances of personal mood and poetic tone. The former, Daumal’s very own *Serment*¹⁴², is a hymn of *je*-destruction in honour of “la Reine ma nuit qui veille dans ma mort”:

mais parce que

[...]

jamais je ne te vêtirai de cette trompeuse pellicule de clarté dont s’habille mon
peuple de dieux somnambules [...] je te supplie :

[...]

ne viens pas me consoler

je ne veux pas t’aimer dans ce mensonge

ce ne sera jamais toi

ici jamais toi,

¹⁴⁰ *Clavicules pour un grand jeu poétique*, op. cit. 53.

¹⁴¹ The term is that of Powrie’s title (*René Daumal, étude d’une obsession*, op. cit.)

¹⁴² Recalling his remarks on the exemplary deforming powers of the ‘serment’ from ‘La révolte et l’ironie’, op. cit.

reste là dans la nuit où je suis avec toi le seul Jour.¹⁴³

Daumal, in a commentary appended to the poem, calls this a “serment de ver blanc”¹⁴⁴, explaining:

Vous savez que les vers blancs font serment au sortir de l’œuf de ne jamais aller à la lumière; car le soleil les dessécherait et jamais ils ne pourraient accomplir leur destin qui est d’aller à la lumière après la métamorphose et le parjure.¹⁴⁵

This construction of betrayal is yet another paradox. In characterising life lived as the anti-‘Jour’, as ‘mensonge’ the poet, sure of his ultimate allegiance, is nevertheless placed in the intermediate state of living a death to the world. The situation in which the act of poetic creation takes place is one where, in a sense, the poet is wrong-footed by his own diction and placed in a state of performative contradiction. Every poem becomes a statement, an *a priori* statement of its failure as against the Poem, the poetic embodiment of the *Mot-de-la-fin-de-tout* (the imagined rather than the actual ‘dernière parole’ of Daumal’s ‘poète’-protagonist). The adolescent solution to the subject’s lack of omnipotence is a celebration of death. Intellectually this imparts a certain unity (not entirely *bona fide*, in Daumal’s later estimation of his own case) to the reasoning. One month later he writes:

Je ne peux plus te trahir, tu vois bien;
«je suis mortel»; ces mots sont la douceur du vide
qui veulent dire : «je suis à toi».
Je suis mortel ! Mortel ce que j’aime en ton nom !
Mais le jour de ma mort est interminable.¹⁴⁶

¹⁴³ ‘Le serment de fidélité’ in *Le Contre-Ciel suivi de Les dernières paroles du poète*, op. cit. 76-78, 77-78.

¹⁴⁴ Throwing light in the process, perhaps, on the contemporaneous imagery of *Entrée des larves*, discussed above.

¹⁴⁵ Op. cit. 78.

¹⁴⁶ ‘A la Néante’, ibid. 79-81, 81.

Occasionally, as here in *A la Néante*, this acknowledgement of the impasse can result in a very dark, maniacally songlike humour. Elsewhere there is the palpable suffering of the poet who cannot rejoice in a language of which he is conscious as a barrier to his deepest certainties:

Je ne parlerai à personne,
sinon en paroles d'insectes
Ou de couleuvres nues,
En mots qui vivront et riront malgré moi.¹⁴⁷

The 'lyricoïde' *non-lieu* is that in which self is involved in attempted reconciliation; where the possibility and impossibility of speech are run up against one another and the organic link between lyrical and apocalyptic theories of the poetic utterance becomes apparent. The ambiguity, the contradiction involved are suspended for the space of the work, the period of the utterance – even where this is an effort, as it is practically without exception in Daumal's poetic work, that is consciously consigned in advance to failure.

5. Bonnefoy: intimations of transformation

In a major essay on *La poésie française et le principe d'identité* Yves Bonnefoy moves through a number of reformulations in an attempt to refine something like an essential trait of a poetic tradition for the French language. The essay accordingly moves the locus of 'essence' from within the discourse and intentions of the individual speaker to a quality of the language itself, with which the speaker is bound to engage. French is characterised as 'une langue d'essences', and contrasted as such with English (the language of origin of the greater part of Bonnefoy's works of translation) – one, it is claimed, more accommodating to the immediacy and intimacy of naming. This has the pragmatic effect on the poetic project of one writing in French of requiring that the act of naming be approached in a manner that is harmonious with the relatively recalcitrant,

¹⁴⁷ 'Après', *ibid.* 75

abstracting tendencies of the language. Intellectually it gives rise to an accentuated scheme of language as veil, or barrier, which it becomes the work of the poet to transgress:

Je crois que la poésie d'une langue d'essences comme le français a pour tâche toujours urgente de constituer, ou de retrouver, l'ordre profond, infra-conceptuel, au sein duquel le poète pourra se vivre comme présence, ayant vérifié les analogies, ayant défait les aspects opaques, ayant rouvert la voie qui mène vers l'intérieur.¹⁴⁸

Poetic work (which, as it were, the French language forces into a theoretical self-perception) is presented thus as the attempt to re-ontologise a language refractory towards the creation of a sense or effect of presence faced with the temptations of the 'concept'. The poet in so doing is leaving one order, that maintained in the standard practice of the language, so as to integrate another, 'profond, infra-conceptuel', within which, thinkable as a writing subject, that subject can be experienced as 'present / presence', or, again, as an unfolding 'interiority'. That this presence is indeed another 'order', and one which is placed in what appears to be priority to the order vehiculated by the language and its historical development, is characteristic of a certain existential 'optimism' to be discerned in Bonnefoy's treatments of the poetic within a context of disenchantment. While elsewhere¹⁴⁹ more evidently wary of a role and workings of an unconscious in what purports to be a lucid approach of the desire for the 'poetic', the voluntaristic purchase offered by the idea of an infra-conceptual order from which presence would not be banned is recurrent in Bonnefoy's work as the gesture which conflates the affirmation of the desire for poetry with the poetic act itself. But to more immediate effect for present questionings are the implications of such an order for a view of the poetic work as a separate creation, a distinctive space. The poet-essayist, having gestured towards interiority, does indeed take his reasoning via the analogy of physical construction, suggestive of a heideggerian line of poetic 'habitation':

¹⁴⁸ 'La poésie française et le principe d'identité' (1965) in Bonnefoy. *L'Improbable et autres essais*, op. cit. 245-73, 268-69.

¹⁴⁹ See for example the 'Lettre à John E. Jackson' (1980), op. cit.

[La poésie] est ce qui réunit, comme le maçon qui choisit ses pierres – et qui peut certes les commenter, ou parler, même, apparemment au hasard, mais avec pour fond ce silence où il voit déjà le seuil futur se dresser. [...] De même que le maçon a différencié le lieu, d’abord abstrait, de la vie, de même le poète, répétant les antiques commencements de la parole – de l’acte fondateur, la parole – diversifie la Présence en bâtissant son poème, pour retrouver la raison, la place dans l’Univers des réalités les plus humbles.¹⁵⁰

It should be noticed here that Bonnefoy does not subsume the linguistic to the physical comparator – the founding act of speech is echoed in the physical acts and constructions of the builder. The relation establishes a reflux of authenticity. The act of building as analogised in the writing of the poem is one which brings together and which, in so doing, differentiates, but within a unit that is self-evident, harmonious both with itself and its surroundings. It is within an embodiment of this ‘order’ that the writing subject experiences itself as presence. Describing ‘la parole’ as ‘l’acte fondateur’, Bonnefoy puts the poet into the position of a religious celebrant, repeating the sacred or symbolic gestures that institute sense and difference as thinkable in terms of a unity. This renewal of the emphasis on the word as foundational to reality as an object of human attention has the effect, however – consonant with the belief in an intimate ‘order’ – of making the ‘real’ even more so, in its multiplicity. Particularisation, diversification are melded with the opposing unity principle observable in the capitalised ‘Présence’, the built poem being that within which, or whereby, these apprehensions of the human subject become non-contradictory. The restrained exaltation of the poet thus leads him to look earthwards, towards the multitude of dissimilar things, as paradoxical guarantors of the *sui generis* power of language. But the emphasis is equally on the multiplicity of the multiple, the ‘humble’, in an effort to curb the full development of a logic inherent in the recognition of this power, and which Bonnefoy, in an unapologetically biblical mode, terms “la faute inhérente à la poésie”, of which a particular case is:

¹⁵⁰ ‘La poésie française et le principe d’identité’, op. cit. 269.

Cette forme glorieuse et si attrayante de la faute, la prétention de l'Idée à être sa propre preuve, la substantialité illusoire de la figure de rêve.¹⁵¹

This condemnation of the dream of poetic autonomy as an illusion carried in the specific difference of language could be taken to inaugurate the distance – albeit admiring – which Bonnefoy has maintained from the poetic work of Mallarmé¹⁵². But what he assigns to the 'dream' is built on the seemingly inescapable fact of the contingency of the signifier-signified relation, on a relatively bold development of the logic suggested by this supposed truism of modern linguistics. Thus to the dream of the autonomous poem, one might argue, corresponds the fantasy of the poem which has mastered its own rapport with the world in which the poetic subject is experienced as acting – the *non-lieu* thus avoiding the function of a prop for unadulterated narcissism in its ability to contain, if not reconcile, mutually exclusive imperatives.

Bonnefoy's 'théologie négative' thus progresses from a reflection on the problem of affirmation *per se*. The materiality of the sign is, within that reflection, something that can no longer be either simply proclaimed or analogised in a referential landscape. As we have noted, Bonnefoy has frequently spoken of the quality of the 'real' he associates with a certain vocabulary of first or 'simple' things – words thus with the property of infusing the utterance with an undeniable connection to what exceeds it, and establishing poetry in its connection with this register. It is worthwhile to observe how this 'materiality' is inseparable from the set of referential relations established within the text, as for example, in 'Dévotion'¹⁵³, a text – in its non-integration into any of Bonnefoy's

¹⁵¹ Ibid. 273.

¹⁵² This distance is a constant of Bonnefoy's prefaces to the Poésie-Gallimard and Folio editions of Mallarmé's work – that is, in what is probably the format of their widest reception within the contemporary French reading public. See Bonnefoy. 'La Poétique de Mallarmé', Preface to Mallarmé. *Igitur, Divagations, Un coup de dés*. Paris: Gallimard (Poésie), 1976: 7-40; 'La Clef de la dernière cassette', Preface to Mallarmé. *Poésies*. Paris: Gallimard (Poésie), 1992: VII-XXXVI; 'L'Unique et son interlocuteur', Preface to Mallarmé. *Correspondance. Lettres sur la poésie*. Paris: Gallimard (Folio), 1995: 7-29; 'L'or du futile', Preface to Mallarmé. *Vers de circonstance*. Paris: Gallimard (Poésie), 1996: 7-52.

¹⁵³ (1959) in *Poèmes*, op. cit. 155-59; in *L'Improbable*, op. cit. 135-37.

individual books of poetry – become almost a signature-text, which for one commentator “encompasses life in an unadorned naming.”¹⁵⁴ :

Aux orties et aux pierres.

Aux «mathématiques sévères». Aux trains mal éclairés de chaque soir. Aux rues de neige sous l'étoile sans limite.

J'allais, je me perdais. Et les mots trouvaient mal leur voie dans le terrible silence.

– Aux mots patients et sauveurs.

It is immediately apparent from this opening section that the *non-lieu* of the poem is as much a diachronic as a synchronic assembly. Its ‘truth’ integrates both axes of experience in the order and periodicity of a verbal formula. “There is, the same commentator remarks, rich breadth in this “anamnesis” as the poet calls it, this act of remembrance which quite naturally achieves the poise of a litany.”¹⁵⁵ The poetic *non-lieu* is frequently called upon in Bonnefoy to hold together the diversity of conscious experience, and is established in accordance with this diversity – the loose unity of the poem serving as the embodiment of a principle of unity which is not sustainable in a discourse of ‘objectivity’. The space in turn represents the purview of the poetic gaze, or the principle of consciousness, for which this collection of names constitutes a world in its ‘depth’ as an object of consciousness as well as in its ‘breadth’ as one of instantaneous purview. In that this consciousness is the space of their relation, the *non-lieu* of those referential relations’ passage into writing becomes the embodiment of an idea of transcendence. But within the linguistic realities of the *non-lieu*, such relations are underlaid with those latent in the associative fabric of the language itself. In a later essay on ‘La poétique de Nerval’ (1987), Bonnefoy writes:

«Tu veux un monde», fait dire Hölderlin, qui fut un ami de Hegel, à sa Diotima:
«C’est pourquoi tu as tout et tu n’as rien.» Mais la poésie, justement? Bien qu’elle

¹⁵⁴ Lawler, James R. “Aux mots patients et sauveurs”.’ *L’Esprit Créateur*, Vol. XXXVI, No 3, Fall 1996: 27-33.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid. 27.

aussi ait lieu dans les mots, et ne soit donc qu'une image, la poésie n'est-elle pas *la mémoire de ce mystère: un arbre auprès d'une source, le ciel au-dessus, des nuages?* Et même s'il est le seul à se souvenir ainsi, le poète n'est-il pas de ce simple fait la preuve de *la réalité de l'expérience première*, et du bien qu'elle procurait? J'[observe] qu'il y a *dans la matérialité du mot poétique*, dans sa substance sonore et sa réserve rythmique, *la possibilité d'autres relations*, avec les autres mots dans le vers, que celle que veut le concept. C'est le voile qu'est celui-ci qui en poésie se déchire. Ne va-t-on pas trouver, au-delà, de la présence à revivre?¹⁵⁶

The importance of this passage is in its linkage of a number of themes recurring in the poet's public reflection on poetry. It is not without significance that it does so in a context explicitly straddling French and German Romantic traditions. The citation from Hyperion, which had already appeared as the epigraph to *Hier régnant désert*¹⁵⁷, Bonnefoy's second major book of poetry, depicts the existential autonomy of the poet within the poetic form-act ('Tu veux un monde') – which we have tried to account for in terms of 'lieu / non-lieu' – as the guarantor of both the extreme marginality and the extreme validity of the words and the condition of the poet as they partake of the poetic self-conception – that of the one who has, precisely, both everything and nothing.

Bonnefoy can be read as setting up special claims for the poetic in the complex of relations between language, experience and memory. He makes the connection between a 'materiality' of the word and the 'vrai lieu', the poem as a site of 'truth', explicit. The poem, its condition as artefact acknowledged, is claimed, within a reality of its secondary position, to bear still something like a trace of an originary relation (that of the 'mystery' of the given world.) Crucially, the way in which the poem organises language means that the poet is possibly 'le seul à se souvenir ainsi'. Taking leverage from the generalised alienation in the discursive environment, the poet construes his discursive difference as sufficient operative corroboration of the lost 'reality' which haunts his relation to

¹⁵⁶ In *La Vérité de parole et autres essais*, op. cit. 45-70, 52 (emphasis added.)

¹⁵⁷ (1958)

language. This difference, and the ‘reality’ which founds it, inhere to the poetic through a ‘materiality’ of the poetic word as the principle of a different order of relations between words. The revelatory function of the poem is constructed against a domain of the ‘concept’ where (more distinctly than in other cases of the same opposition) this is identified with a language without consideration to its own ‘materiality’.

Non-poetic language, culminating in the ‘concept’, is what poetic language exists to alleviate, or rectify – the ‘veil’ of the language of the concept is the precondition of the ‘revelation’ of poetic language, with its materiality and its memory. These two central features of the poetic are most effectively condensed in the act of naming (‘arbre..., source..., ciel..., nuages’), an act which can attain an effect of candour or solemnity wherein ‘simplicity’ and an imaginary of ‘being’ sustain each other. The question of that which awaits at the outcome of the poetic experience remains open, but it is one which (again, in a manner typical of Bonnefoy’s rhetoric as an essayist¹⁵⁸) interrogatively suggests the terms of its own resolution – in a parallel act of naming (‘la présence à revivre’), and which, in the fullness of its promise, manages to make that question seem almost superfluous, its function one primarily of sustention.

Steven Wispur¹⁵⁹ has located in this feature of the poet’s work the crux what he describes as Bonnefoy’s attempt to establish a distance between the Saussurean theory of the sign and a ‘literary’ sign, one whose locus par excellence would be poetic writing as Bonnefoy continues to attempt to conceive of it. The question of ‘materiality’, as we have attempted to name it, corresponds in Wispur’s analysis to what he describes as Bonnefoy’s strategy of “metalinguistically designat[ing] [certain signs in his work] as symbols”¹⁶⁰, while pointing out the extent to which, in so doing, Bonnefoy is an inheritor of the idealist / Romantic view of the sign. As a statement of historical ‘theory’ this is no doubt true. While Wispur matches his observations on Bonnefoy with Tzvetan

¹⁵⁸ See his declarations in a 1991 interview reproduced in Bonnefoy. *La petite phrase et la longue phrase*. La TILV éditeur, 1994.

¹⁵⁹ Wispur, Steven. ‘Yves Bonnefoy’s three strikes against the sign.’ *The Romanic Review* 77 (1986): 155-65.

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid.* 164.

Todorov's account of the (German) Romantic theory of the symbol¹⁶¹, recent observations by Bonnefoy himself¹⁶² have reinforced the link between the poet and the limit represented by this period in the history of aesthetic thought, disclosing what borders on a certain sense of inheritance. What may require emphasis, however, is the change in the intellectual context, or what one could even call the mood, of this deep continuity. For Bonnefoy, the poetic functioning of language is heavily described and 'theorised' (speculated upon) – but this is done having conceded the substance of their 'arguments', as it were, to more sceptical divisions of theory¹⁶³. The possible poetic functioning of the sign, which the poet has observed and felt, is inseparable from a disposition brought to the question and the act of poetry by those for whom that question remains of value. There is no categorical intention to argue an innate necessity or motivation to signs and sign systems, but rather a refusal to fully relinquish the experience (proper to every writing, speaking subject) of their functioning in 'parole' as if such were actually, albeit fleetingly, the case. To contemporary tastes this can result in a poetic writing which is relatively emphatic, but such emphasis rarely occurs other than at a distance, whether that distance be a conditional mode, an explicit mediation by memory, or a recourse to the declarative which is at base equally a declaration of uncertainty, of distress.¹⁶⁴

To the extent, then, that one can speak of a materialising strategy in Bonnefoy it results in a suggestive, hypothetical sense of the material – one which is indissociable from the practice of the name which we have already discussed in respect of its communicative properties. A case in point is *Pierre Écrite*¹⁶⁵, in which a number of short pieces each titled 'Une Pierre' are distributed throughout the book as a whole (with a particular

¹⁶¹ Todorov, Tzvetan. *Théories du symbole*. Paris: Seuil, 1977.

¹⁶² Bonnefoy. *L'enseignement et l'exemple de Leopardi*. Bordeaux: William Blake & Co., 2000.

¹⁶³ Jackson's afterword to the Poésie-Gallimard edition of the bulk of Bonnefoy's 'récits en rêve' (Jackson, John E. 'Yves Bonnefoy et «la souche obscure des rêves»', afterword to Yves Bonnefoy. *Rue Traversière et autres récits en rêve*. Paris: Gallimard (Poésie), 1992: 205-230) is perhaps the most direct statement / analysis of Bonnefoy's conscious difference from the post-structuralist sensibility.

¹⁶⁴ A particularly powerful example of the assumption of the emphatic in Bonnefoy, its association with the ethic of the 'simple' in a speech-like writing, is a sequence such as the recent 'Que ce monde demeure!' in *Les Planches courbes*. Paris: Mercure de France, 2001: 25-32.

¹⁶⁵ (1965). A first publication under that title appeared in 1959, accompanied by 'ardoises taillées par Raoul Ubac', published by Maeght.

concentration occurring in the eponymous second section)¹⁶⁶. Distinguished by their centred format (the surrounding texts are left-aligned), these ‘stones’ lend themselves to a reading as intimate epitaphs – materialisations of the voice whose disappearance they simultaneously denote. Yet as poems embodying a reflection on pastness and death, their categorisation as ‘pierres écrites’ is a reaffirmation of the material durability of the written word – and in this case, a passage of utterance into materiality as text.

If we consider the *pierre écrite* of Bonnefoy in relation to the strategy of ‘symbolisation’ attributed to him by Winspur, it becomes clear, however, that the rapport with the written word implied is quite different from that in, for example, the ‘materiality’ of Segalen’s *Stèles*. Rather than configuring reality around the text the problem has become that of a maximal continuity with what exceeds the sign. Hence a fascination in Bonnefoy for those forms teetering on the brink of signifying. The idea of image and sign giving way at the same time, as in many of Bonnefoy’s meditations and ‘dream’ narratives¹⁶⁷, inevitably leads to the idea of an *au-delà du signe*, which is definitively, in hermeneutic terms, the space of ‘conviction’. It is a recurrent locus of the dionysian moment, in a muted, contemplative version, in Bonnefoy’s work. Richard Stamelman¹⁶⁸ speaks in this respect of Bonnefoy’s subversion of mimesis – that is, his focus on the dissipation of form. The faculty of sight exceeds the capacities of any made image, as does what ‘is’ those poetic attempts to con-sign ‘it’. Stamelman cites from *L’Entaille*, a piece which is typical of this transition in Bonnefoy between the promise and withdrawal of the signifying activity:

On trempe un doigt dans la gouache bleue, on le fait glisser sur les mots à peine tracés dans l’encre noire, et du mélange de l’encre et de la couleur monte, marée,

¹⁶⁶ A practice continued at a reduced frequency in later works, up to and including *Les Planches courbes*, op. cit.

¹⁶⁷ “[L]es traits déviaient sur la pierre au point même où aurait dû apparaître les formes régulières, les récurrences, qui sont la preuve d’une écriture. Et certaines de ces pierres étaient à l’évidence trop longues, ou trop profondes. Ce qui aurait pu être un premier instant de l’esprit se dissipait dans le chant désert des cigales, où il n’est pas d’autre événement que la feuille sèche qui tombe.

Je te disais, mon amie: «Ce qui est, est-ce seulement ce silence? Est-ce lui l’origine, est-il la fin?»

Bonnefoy. ‘L’aube d’avant le signe’ in *Récits en rêve*, op. cit. 200-03, 201.

¹⁶⁸ Stamelman, Richard. ‘The Crack in the Mirror: The Subversion of Image and Representation in the Poetry of Yves Bonnefoy’, *French Forum* 13 (January 1988): 69-88.

algues qui remuent dans l'eau trouble, ce qui n'est plus le signe, n'est plus l'image, - nos deux passions, nos deux leurres. On a ouvert les yeux, on avance, dans la lumière de l'aube.¹⁶⁹

The demise of form, the realisation of an imaginary quality of the poetic effort, is simultaneous with the named awareness of light itself – an absence of form which enables all form. That the sign and the image are given equal status in this falling away is relevant and telling. Stamelman comments:

It [the *entaille* (groove)] breaks the prisonhouse of poetic and artistic form; it interrupts a representation's confident but deceptive will-to-meaning, to perfect imitation [...]¹⁷⁰

It is indeed possible to wonder whether Bonnefoy does not turn formlessness into the ultimate locus of a poetic 'meaning' – the promise, the utopian horizon, the 'vrai' – whether he does not thus perpetuate in relation to the point where form gives way the logic against which he appears to rebel. Thus where, for example, a reflection on the contribution of the subject within a practice of the trace leads Claudel, Segalen, Pound, Michaux and others to write around the Chinese ideogramme – the miracle of flexibility which retains a conventionally signifying function – Bonnefoy, in his *Devant la Saint Victoire*¹⁷¹, passes over it in the space of a few words in the course of a description of those marks emergent in the works of certain draftsmen which finally eschew, despite their aparent evolution in that direction, the supposed semiotic containment of the linguistically-interpretable sign – occidental ideogrammes, as it were.

Le dessin est à sa façon un emploi des signes. [...] Mais il y a cet écart, justement: qui montre qu'à ce début du trait où pourrait naître le signe quelqu'un a éprouvé le besoin de se refuser à la tentation de l'intelligible, a voulu attester de bien plus

¹⁶⁹ From 'Les raisins de Zeuxis' in *La Vie errante suivi de Remarques sur le dessin*. Paris: Gallimard (Poésie), 1997 55-66, 64.

¹⁷⁰ Stamelman, op. cit. 69.

dans son expérience du monde que de la différence de la pomme par rapport à la poire, de la main par opposition au poignet, au bras, à l'épaule.¹⁷²

On that brink of signifying, the interpreting eye oscillates before the apparent offering of meaning, the formulation of which remains the sole prerogative of the beholder. The quasi-ideogrammatical drawing is a space of the conviction of the beholder. Its goes comparably, if not exactly the same with that other space of conviction that is the poem, an object of reading that verges towards the contemplative, whose signs allow to escape from their accredited forms what conviction feels itself able to grasp so as to restate or retain it in a reading. In a reflection on 'l'écriture des pierres' – those recognisable forms produced in stone by simple geological chance – Roger Caillois remarks that:

[C]ette beauté spontanée [des pierres] précède et déborde la notion même de beauté. Elle en offre à la fois le gage et le support.

C'est que les pierres présentent quelque chose d'évidemment accompli, sans toutefois qu'il y entre ni invention ni talent ni industrie, *rien qui en ferait une œuvre au sens humain du mot, et encore moins une œuvre d'art*. L'œuvre vient ensuite; et l'art; avec, comme racines lointaines, comme modèles latents, ces suggestions obscures, mais irrésistibles.¹⁷³

This, to return to our initial term above, recognises a fundamental attraction of the word 'pierre' for Bonnefoy, the depth of its 'symbolic' potential – its ability to evoke an object both inside and radically outside culture. The word operates as a shifter between the elemental and the artificial, between created and accidental form, in that it exemplifies qualities of realness to which the artistic practice aspires, yet is integrated into this practice only in the act of naming. For Bonnefoy, the physical support that is 'stone' and the associative resonance of the object evoked are subsumed into the written word, with only the minimal presentational irregularity mentioned above to suggest something like a

¹⁷¹ The second section of his 'Remarques sur le dessin' in *La Vie errante suivi de Remarques sur le dessin*, op. cit. 175-86.

¹⁷² Ibid. 178-79.

¹⁷³ Caillois, Roger. *L'écriture des pierres*. Geneva: Skira, 1970: 6 (emphasis added.)

mimetic principle at work in the appeal to the pre-cultural. The poetics of this naming, despite Bonnefoy's gesture towards the figure of the 'builder' above, is practically opposite to that of Segalen's demonstrative materiality; the act of naming included in the elaboration of 'parole' relies solely on the quality of a word, its ability to exist both as writing and as an immaterial carrier of affect, outside all definition or resolution. Extrapolated to the level of the text, we find Bonnefoy consistent with his primary intuition in the matter:

[E]n fait je n'écris pas de poèmes, s'il faut entendre par ce mot un ouvrage bien délimité, autonome, et séparable d'autres du même genre que j'aurais terminé avant ou concevrais par la suite.¹⁷⁴

Thus what effect the appeal to the pre-cultural has, its aesthetic success (which may in fact be in appearing to withdraw the poem from the domain of the aesthetic), is the work of poetic speech and the ability of the sign to elicit an adhesion that has at the same time an element of hostility to the linguistic about it:

Et poésie, c'est ce que devient la parole quand on a su ne pas oublier qu'il existe un point, dans beaucoup de mots, où ceux-ci ont contact, tout de même, avec ce qu'ils ne peuvent pas dire.¹⁷⁵

'Poetry' is thus something that takes place in language, but only, as it were, under protest, or in its (provisionally linguistic) drive to be something else. Outside language – and, hence, undeniably *there*, or, simply, some thing. Poetic work is what remains within the linguistic practice of this teleology. It is interesting to contrast this with what Bonnefoy refers to, in the essay upon which the present reflection began, as "l'angoissante tautologie des langues, dont les mots ne disent qu'eux-mêmes, sans prise vraie sur les choses – qui peuvent donc se détacher d'eux, s'absenter. J'appellerai *mauvaise présence* ce mutisme latent du monde."¹⁷⁶ The poetic *non-lieu* is that space wherein presence loses

¹⁷⁴ 'Entretiens avec Bernard Falciola' (1972) in *Entretiens sur la poésie*, op. cit. 11-53, 19.

¹⁷⁵ 'La sente étroite vers tout' in *La Vie errante suivi de Remarques sur le dessin*, op. cit. 165-73, 169.

¹⁷⁶ 'La poésie française et le principe d'identité', op. cit. 249.

its qualifications; at which the distance signifier-signified is no longer apparent to the speaker, who, independently of the activity of poetry, is aware of all that, theoretically, disqualifies the pretention of an absolute apprehension. What does the poet oppose to this distressing knowledge, akin to that of the absurd for existentialism? Bonnefoy: “Je subis [through such ‘mauvaise présence’] l’idée de la mort. [...] Mais, heureusement, c’est alors que je trouve en moi cette liberté qui la nie.”¹⁷⁷ The poetic dimension of language is thus (again) assimilated to the dimension of human freedom: the freedom to experience language as speaking the world. The influence of Chestov on Bonnefoy in this respect has already been noted. This extreme demand placed on the linguistic qualities of the poetic sign is counterbalanced if not justified through an extreme idea of human freedom. ‘Vouloir l’impossible’, especially of language, becomes the very mark of the poetic. Chestov:

Chacun peut la connaître [la vérité] à part soi, mais, pour communiquer avec ses proches, il lui faut renoncer à la vérité et adopter un mensonge de convention.¹⁷⁸

The programmatic commitment of the poetic, in Bonnefoy’s writings, to an ability of the linguistic sign to voice the extra-linguistic world thus takes on a decisional – what in Part I we termed ‘ethical’ – rather than a linguistic profile. It implies the freedom to place the speaking subject at the centre of such a world, as the first instance of meaning therein. The ultimate form of this freedom is the assumption of the ‘Je’, which in turn ‘assumes’ that world to whose ‘presence’ it apposes a language. The poetic *non-lieu* retains the precarious and contingent quality of a linguistic elaboration, but it is this quality that characterises ethically the domain, or scale, of the specifically human.

Surrounded by the emblems and elements of this world within the body of the poem, Bonnefoy’s poetic temperament is one which, seeking the possibility of affirmation, discovers an articulation of consent. At the inception of his discourse on ‘vérité de parole’ is a reading of *Les Fleurs du Mal* as written in view and acceptance of the

¹⁷⁷ Ibid.

¹⁷⁸ Chestov, Léon. *Les commencements et les fins* (tr. Boris de Schloezer and Sylvie Luneau). Lausanne: L’Age d’Homme, 1987: 99.

founding absolute of death. An element of closure in the poetics, it fulfils the same role in poetic practice, reversing into another suspended moment – that of the newly-revalued here and now – the centering which, as has already been seen, is the constant point of convergence of Bonnefoy's reflections. Just as Daumal places a capital emphasis on the act of negation as a means of accession to totality, Bonnefoy can be read as offering moments of ethically-based adhesion to what is. It is a different approach to that of Daumal, revealing a different conception of 'truth', of the sense of a poetic effort, of the direction of the utopian dynamic in the work. 'Truth' is the central term of Bonnefoy's discourse on this question of affirmation within a human scale:

Vérité

Ainsi jusqu'à la mort, visages réunis,
Gestes gauches du cœur sur le corps retrouvé,
Et sur lequel tu meurs, absolue vérité,
Ce corps abandonné à tes mains affaiblies.

L'odeur du sang sera ce bien que tu cherchais,
Bien frugal rayonnant une orangerie.
Le soleil tonnera, de sa vive agonie
Illuminant le lieu où tout fut dévoilé.¹⁷⁹

'Truth', generated in the acceptance of 'finitude', can thus also be understood as an affrontment of contingency within a practice of naming. This is an 'ethical' move whereby the 'absolue vérité' is placed in a position of secondarity to the 'corps retrouvé'. The idea of truth in Bonnefoy, culminating in the theme of the *vrai lieu* and in a version of truth as emerging in a creative relation to the absolutes of the given, is thus inseparable from the temperament that seeks adhesion, the rhetorical register of conviction. The reading in terms of a poetic or expressive 'truth' is promoted, within the poems

¹⁷⁹ *Poèmes*, op. cit. 83.

themselves, by those elements which present ‘truth’ as being in the gift of the poetic speaker, and hence of the poem, to create and express. The idea of the space maintained in poetry as a space of conviction/adhesion, inseparable from its being one of ‘truth’, implies a containment, a renunciation of the need to know more, even when, intellectually, much more could validly be said. The *vrai lieu* is the textual suspension of the horizon, an implementation of the lesson of the *arrière-pays*. “Beauty is truth, truth is beauty/ That is all ye know on earth and all ye need to know.” Keats’ pronouncement, which Bonnefoy was retranslating at the end of the 20th century¹⁸⁰, denotes the compartmentalisation of the subject in operation here. But the attribute of ‘truth’ recurs as early as *Douve* (1953) in the titles of a number of the most terse and direct of the texts (*Vrai Nom*, *Vrai Corps*, *Vérité*) as well as in the title of the final section, ‘*Vrai Lieu*’. Therein ‘vérité’ emerges the product of a poetic performance – as an intensity of will and focus in the act of naming:

Je te nommerai guerre et je prendrai
 Sur toi les libertés de la guerre et j’aurai
 Dans mes mains ton visage obscur et traversé,
 Dans mon cœur ce pays qu’illumine l’orage.¹⁸¹

Naming, the proffering of that which is literally within the gift of the poet, establishes the I and the thou, but it also appropriates as knowledge the being named. The volatility of the poetic ‘truth’ is suggested in the ‘illumination’ of the final line which pairs brevity and totality of illumination in a manner Bonnefoy has made his own. But it would be wrong to emphasise exclusively the moment most akin to that of traditional poetic inspiration. When we recall Bonnefoy’s explanations of the fictional character of the central proper name of the work – the inception of his practice of the ‘case vide’¹⁸² – it becomes possible to appreciate the tension which dominates designation. In his explicit will to invent a name the poet becomes akin to a demiurge, breathing life into the inert

¹⁸⁰ ‘À une urne grecque’ in *Keats et Leopardi. Quelques traductions nouvelles*. Paris: Mercure de France, 2000, 28-33.

¹⁸¹ ‘Vrai Nom’ in *Poèmes*, op. cit. 51.

¹⁸² Treated in Part I, section 5 above.

body of his invention and rendering it viable to participate in the most archaic, foundational, ‘natural’ of gestures – wherein the poet is as a result no longer entirely alone:

Et si grand soit le froid qui monte de ton être,
Si brûlant soit le gel de notre intimité,
Douve, je parle en toi; et je t’enserre
Dans l’acte de connaître et de nommer.¹⁸³

Naming in itself is a practice that foregrounds a ‘materiality’ of poetic language – the substance of the word being perhaps relevant to the conjunction of knowing and naming in the one act (which, in harnessing the two, itself attains another level of decisiveness than were one to be successive upon the other.) But the mutability of the rapport of the subject in language to the world outside is such, once a certain pitch of the elemental has been attained, that subjective need in language becomes identifiable or interchangeable with primary, objective need.

Que faut-il à ce cœur qui n’était que silence,
Sinon des mots qui soient le signe et l’oraison,

Et comme un peu de feu soudain la nuit,
Et la table entrevue d’une pauvre maison?¹⁸⁴

The simple commerce between names (example: oraison-maison in the final quotation above), building a likeness of meaning from one of form (the ‘comme’ formalises the link, but also declares openly, and refines, its linguistic dimension), is a feature which allows language itself to assume the qualities of what it names in an ascension of sense by association from the ‘material’ to the ‘linguistic’. The primary need of the ‘heart’ singled out, within silence, is for words (signs exceeded and brought to a certain limit of

¹⁸³ ‘Vrai Corps’ in *Poèmes*, op. cit. 55.

¹⁸⁴ ‘Vrai Lieu’, *ibid.* 85.

significance in the noun *oraison*.) This is put forward as evident by the poem in a rhetorical question laden with the ‘frugal comforts’, rhetorically stimulating adhesion to the idea of real need, and of lucidity as to what those real needs are. The poem is the site of this reflux. The *vrai lieu* is neither the ‘maison’ of the image nor the ‘oraison’ of idealised communication, but the ‘poème’ within which each is bolstered and infused with the other.

If there is a sense in Bonnefoy of writing being generally in a state of divorce from the world, there is then equally one of poetic writing as the attempt to move out of that state, to paradoxically re-integrate, via language, the world of whose existence experience convinces. The poetic *non-lieu* is the extra-ordinary, supplementary space – the dimension of writing – in which such a fully ‘human’ apprehension of reality is forged:

Qu’est-ce que la réalité? Nullement les objets, les lieux, ni même les existences, mais cette relation de sympathie réciproque qui les traverse parfois, et les illumine. Et qu’est-ce alors que la poésie sinon d’opposer aux preuves bien monotones du néant, et aux jeux résignés qu’il nous incite de poursuivre dans la gratuité de l’imaginaire, une économie de symboles et valeurs qu’on éprouvera suffisante pour que notre lieu ait un sens et notre vie une cause? ¹⁸⁵

The identification of ‘reality’ with this intermittent ‘relation’ among things corresponds strongly with the kind of writing practiced by Bonnefoy, which in linking things together, accords central significance to the link as what generates a poetic space, rather than to the definition of a form which would subsequently engender the relation. It is immediately possible to associate this with the open-weave of Bonnefoy’s irregular versification and more generally his cultivation of open-ended forms of writing. But the poet is evidently just as interested in capturing the quality of a ‘poetic’ affect, and in identifying the conditions in which such can come about with the poetic effort itself. He describes in so doing a state of the subject which is consonant with the following remarks, in his *Essay*

¹⁸⁵ ‘Sur l’origine et le sens’ (1978) in *Entretiens sur la poésie*, op. cit. 335-38, 337.

on man, by Ernst Cassirer on the subject of myth and a fundamental trait of the mythical experience:

To be sure, all attempts to intellectualise myth – to explain it as an allegorical expression of a theoretical or moral truth – have completely failed. They ignored the fundamental facts of mythical experience. The real substratum of myth is not a substratum of thought but of feeling. Myth and primitive religion are by no means entirely incoherent, they are not bereft of sense or reason. But their coherence depends much more upon unity of feeling than upon logical rules. [...] We are in the habit of dividing our life into the two spheres of practical and theoretical activity. In this division we are prone to forget that there is a lower stratum beneath them both [...] it is *sympathetic*.¹⁸⁶

The fourth of Bonnefoy's books of poetry, and that which completes his *Poèmes*¹⁸⁷, *Dans le leurre du seuil* (1975), itself concludes with the long poem 'L'épars, l'indivisible'. It is a poem, emblematic by its placement, its length and its tone, in which each act of naming is turned into an act of consent, each element co-opted into the attitude of a subject towards what it recognises as exceeding it, but which it retains the poetic faith of being able to grasp as a whole – with the convictional force of a succession of simple nouns:

Oui, par la nuit

Où le besoin de sens se presse longtemps [...]

¹⁸⁶ Cassirer. *An Essay on Man (An introduction to a philosophy of human culture)*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1944: 81-82 (emphasis in original.)

¹⁸⁷ John T. Naughton discusses Bonnefoy's project of a collection of four book of poetic writing become one book, the analogy for which he points to in the writing itself as the house with four walls (see Naughton, John T. *The Poetics of Yves Bonnefoy*. The University of Chicago Press, 1984: 176-79), of which *Dans le leurre du seuil* would be the the long-despaired-of fourth ("Regarde/Le quatrième mur s'est descellé,/ Entre lui et la pile du côté nord/Il y a place pour la ronce/ Et les bêtes furtives de chaque nuit." *Poèmes* 277 cited in Naughton at 177.) If this is the case, a number of observations take us beyond that premature closure. The first being the figure/name of the 'ronce' – recurrent for example in 'Le mot ronce, dis-tu', cited in Part I – as a canonic example of the 'mot simple', thus of an eminent poetic virtue in Bonnefoy's reflection. The Segalenian closure apparent in the 'project' is thus always second to a re-entry into the language of experience in Bonnefoy's poetic practice. Yet it is interesting to note something of the order of a culmination of this logic, if not an absolute end to the dialectic, at what is retrospectively something like the half-way point in Bonnefoy's poetic oeuvre to date. It is also interesting to note the

Oui, par la porte qui vibre[...]
 Oui, par la cime éclairée
 Une heure encore[...]
 Oui, par les ronces
 Des cimes dans les pierres.[...]
 Oui, par ce feu,
 Par son reflet de feu sur l'eau paisible,
 Par notre lieu, qui va,
 Par le chemin de feu sous le fruit mûr. [...]
 Les mots comme le ciel,
 Infini
 Mais tout entier soudain dans la flaque brève.¹⁸⁸

One recognises again here the litany-like effect of *Dévotion*, the tandem of naming and holding together, articulated within an act of assent. The *vrai lieu* is the site of a certain assent accorded to what is encountered, whether this be presented as imaginary or real. The poetic achievement seems to lie in the transmission of the ineluctability of what is at the same time experienced as contingent. This process of assent (a 'recognition' – or production – of the 'vrai') culminates in a movement of adhesion, which is thinkable, again, in terms of the dionysian movement – that of the melting away of form as what establishes elements in their separation. This practice of adhesion in Bonnefoy's work is characteristically contemplative and even intellectual, rather than ecstatic, in its tone. It is just as explicitly a hermeneutic stance, a conscious act of reading and interpretation, as it is of first-degree experience. Thus, for example, 'Dedham, vu de Langham', a long poem from *Ce qui fut sans lumière*, is overtly a meditation on a landscape by Constable, with occasional apostrophes to that 'peintre' and explicit remarks on the technique and artistic vision discerned in the painting (not reproduced) by the poet¹⁸⁹. It extols what it sees the

directly opposed reading given by Starobinski to the bringing together of the four books, quoted in II.5, footnote 36 *supra*.

¹⁸⁸ 'L'épave, l'indivisible' in *Poèmes*, op. cit. 311-29.

¹⁸⁹ It is not the intention here to take on the question of the links between poetry and painting in Bonnefoy's work. Bonnefoy's reflections in 'Ut pictura poesis' (*L'Esprit Créateur*, Vol. XXXVI, No 3, Fall 1996: 9-26) could provide an accompaniment to present considerations – except that *Dedham vu de Langham* at all

painting as having been able both to fix and to suggest in the instant depicted with all its elements. The closing passage, an address to the painter, is cited in full:

Et quelquefois,
Dans le miroir brouillé de la dernière heure,
Elle [‘l’étoile de tes tableaux’] sait *dégager*, dit on, comme une main
Essuie la vitre où brille la pluie,
Quelques figures simples, quelques signes
Qui brillent au-delà des mots, indéchiffrables
Dans l’immobilité du souvenir.
Formes redessinées, recolorées
A l’horizon qui ferme le langage,
C’est comme si la foudre qui frappait
Suspendait, dans le même instant, presque éternel,
Son geste d’épée nue, et comme surprise
Redécouvrait le pays de l’enfance,
Parcourant ses chemins; et, pensive, touchait
Les objets oubliés, les vêtements
Dans de vieilles armoires, les deux ou trois
Jouets mystérieux de sa première
Allégresse divine. Elle, la mort,
Elle défait le temps qui va le monde,
Montre le mur qu’éclaire le couchant,
Et mène autour de la maison vers la tonnelle
Pour offrir, ô bonheur ici, dans l’heure brève,
Les fruits, les voix, les reflets, les rumeurs,
*Le vin léger dans rien que la lumière.*¹⁹⁰

times maintains its full prerogative as linguistic: mixing commentary, description, reminiscence, direct address.

¹⁹⁰ ‘Dedham, vu de Langham’ in *Ce qui fut sans lumière*, op. cit. 65-69, 68-69 (emphasis added.)

The lieu, the place depicted in the work of the painter (this closing passage is a general comment on ‘tes tableaux’ – the painting thus having given way to the figure of the artist), is literally the pre-text for the *non-lieu* of the paintings’ transformation into meaning in what reads very much like a restatement of the poetics of the commentator. In a text which includes many terms recurrent elsewhere in Bonnefoy’s verse, and does so with the same fluid gravity, the same almost elegaic style of the poetry of the *lieu*, he distils something like a spirit of that *lieu*... in the absence of the images which mediate / reveal this to him. Thus the painter’s work in its essence [*étoile*] is what enables the poet to speak of a horizon of his own medium as the object of his own art [dégager [...]] Quelques figures simples, quelques signes [...] A l’horizon qui ferme le langage, [...]], and to resolve into an intemporal state (not a tableau) what is effectively an experience of time [comme si la foudre [...] Suspendait [...] Son geste d’épée nue [...] Redécouvrait le pays de l’enfance [...]] The presence of death in the artwork as guarantor and parameter of the humanity which is, in this view, its paramount concern and value, is explicit in the poet’s response to the painted work here.

The poetic work is thus not at all an attempt at description or linguistic transposition of an admired primary work. It is not an ersatz of the *lieu(x)* depicted, but, to use the terminology adopted here, an example of poetic writing as establishing the *non-lieu*. What occurs in the *non-lieu* is a transformation of images, themselves experienced and celebrated as fabricated, in the symbolic terms which, in the accumulation of his work, Bonnefoy has as it were sedimented. Through this act of appropriation and transformation, the artistic achievement of the painting, latent, diffuse, inarticulate, becomes the creature of the poem, even as the poem appears to cede, in its positioning as commentary, the role of originator of its own sense. The poetic writing, in attributing a voice, or a language, to the pictorial work, annexes itself to the primary experience of the painter. Those qualities of immediacy and simplicity it aspires to and names, or alternatively alludes to, are also those that its condition as language make it most unlikely to attain. This exchange serves to illuminate the decision to assume language in the accomplishment of poetic work. The distancing effectuated by the accession to speech, typically assumed as a kind of foundational bane, creates in its turn a different order of

human demand. The pastoral myth of the place itself is one of an unmediated existence, a satisfied phenomenological desire. The painter's genius gives him an access to this which is still of a physical, sensual order – the painting, in an act of construction, because it gives something of this physical access to the viewer, is still within a logic of the *lieu*. In framing itself around this cultural object, however, the poetic text distinguishes clearly a domain of efficiency more fully its own. The *non-lieu* translates an act of seeing into a language which conjugates intellectuality and experience. It is the space in which those qualities of immediacy, wholeness, depth, recognised in the painted work, become explicit – thus objects of memory, reflection and construction in their turn, in a poetic diction (backed by a poetological rhetoric) of sense. The *non-lieu* maintains a paradoxical relation to the instant via which this sense emerges – an instant which to all intents it creates, yet one from which, couched this time explicitly as commentary, as address of the primary creator, it is excluded.

It is this relation that constitutes the independent dimension of the *non-lieu* and which would allow us to imagine that it has its own claim to a participation in the real. It is also that which opens Bonnefoy's poetry to a certain tragic intellectuality, a lyricism that has arrived extremely 'late'. The adhesion of the poet to the world of experience can thus merge with the obsessive return to the problem of foundation in a form where everything but the poetic affect appears under an alias:

Dieu qui n'es pas, pose ta main sur notre épaule,
Ébauche notre corps du poids de ton retour,
Achève de mêler à nos âmes ces astres,
Ces bois, ces cris d'oiseaux, ces ombres et ces jours.

Renonce-toi en nous comme un fruit se déchire,
Efface-nous en toi. Découvre-nous
Le sens mystérieux de ce qui n'est que simple
Et fût tombé sans feu dans des mots sans amour.¹⁹¹

¹⁹¹ 'La lumière, changée' in *Poèmes*, op. cit. 211.

This lyrical form is almost a theory of (a modern) lyricism in itself – the projection onto a ‘non-existent’ unity which, in an act of communication, achieves a generalised fusion: of the individual and the collective in the universal; the apotheosis of the banal through the constant renewal of our apprehension of the world in ‘simple’ terms. This lyrical moment involves a ‘change in the light’ – a sudden opening of the spectacle of existence to a sense of the speaker’s place within it, and a transcendence of that position. All of which is dependent on a silent and sudden change of the conditions in which seeing occurs¹⁹² and articulated in a form and according to categories which are deconstructed on the semantic and thematic levels even they are adhered to on that of the imagined unity of the poetic.

That this reflexivity never authorises a wholly formalist discourse on the poetic space in Bonnefoy’s work should thus be clear. His emphasis on assent and conviction indicates a sympathy which remains possible not only before the world but before words also – those of others and those that present themselves as becoming the writer’s own in the act of writing. Only he indicates it from a position in which it is no longer a habitual condition of the mind but the momentary experience of an eminently ‘human’ state, in which lucidity goes so far as to admit a memory of the light of its own pre-history. The emotion felt in that absence, the absence that is manifested in the infinitely variable affirmation of the poem, is perhaps the most frequent ‘émotion centrale’ for Bonnefoy, to use Daumal’s formulation from *Poésie noire et poésie blanche*. In another poem from *Ce qui fut sans lumière*, ‘Le pays du sommet des arbres’, this consciousness of absence forms part of a scenario of meaning regained – a scenario which is also a meditation in mythical time on the capacity for conciliation contained in words, the gift of which they still make possible. The poem is cited here in its entirety:

¹⁹² The ‘scopic’ tendencies of Bonnefoy’s navigation between form and formlessness, which go to constitute the body of his poetic reflection in terms of the *lieu*, could be contrasted with those of Dupin, his close contemporary, in whose work the disappearing point, the exit from form and from organised seeing, play a more dominant role: as, for example, in these lines which articulate an idea of *parole* per se as what subsists after form has disappeared: “Ouverte en peu de mots [...] Une embrasure, pas même une fenêtre/

I

L'enfant semblait errer au sommet de l'arbre,
On ne comprenait pas son corps, enveloppé
D'un feu, d'une fumée, que la lumière
Trouait d'un coup, parfois, comme une rame.

Il montait, descendait un peu, il s'arrêtait,
Il s'éloignait entre les pyramides
Du pays du sommet des arbres, qui sont rouges
Par leur flanc qui retient le soleil encore.

L'enfant allait chantant, rêvant sa vie.
Était-il seul dans son jardin de palmes?
On dit que le soleil s'attarde parfois
Pour une nuit, au port d'un rêve simple.

On dit aussi que le soleil est une barque
Qui passe chaque soir la cime du ciel.
Les morts sont à l'avant, qui voient le monde
Se redoubler sans fin d'autres étoiles.

II

L'enfant redescendit plus tard, de branche en branche
Dans ce qui nous parut un ciel étoilé.
Rien ne distinguait plus dans ce silence
La cime bleue des arbres et des mondes.

Pour maintenir à bout de bras/ Cette contrée de nuit où le chemin se perd/ À bout de forces une parole nue.”
Jacques Dupin. *L'Embrasure précédé de Gravier*, op. cit. 118.

Il chantait, il riait, il était nu,
Son corps était d'avant que l'homme, la femme
Ne se fassent distincts pour retrouver
Criant, dans une joie, une espérance.

Il était le chant même. Qui s'interrompt
Parfois, le pied cherchant l'appui qui manque,
Puis qui reprend et, dirait-on, se parle, telles deux voix
À l'avant d'une barque qui s'éloigne.

On dit que la lumière est un enfant
Qui joue, qui ne veut rien, qui rêve ou chante.
Si elle vient à nous c'est par jeu encore,
Touchant le sol d'un pied distrait, qui serait l'aube.¹⁹³

Chant ("Il était le chant même") is that accession to speech which lives in the mode of what is evident a world of nevertheless impossible intrication and complication. It is also a body which does not wish to forget that virtuality that is its original unity. It is not a question of denying all that which, in language, is not assimilable to 'chant' – that which is of the order of the contingent, the divided, the estranged from a vision of unity. The poem is not the image of the child at its centre, but the work of language awakened by that which "on ne comprenait pas", the 'on dit' which is at the heart of the continuity of language – any language – and which is both the stuff and the antithesis of the poet in a speaking world.

In the poem, the words of that speaking world take on another consistency. The condensatory powers of a single word through its entry into poetic speech, its *mise en parole* – an example here being the buttress term 'aube' with which Bonnefoy closes the poem – show that naming poetically is not thinkable outside the movement of speech and the architecture of the constructed whole. The poet's rapport with the 'nom', even as he

¹⁹³ *Ce qui fut sans lumière*, op. cit. 91-92.

explicitly invokes the category of truth, is one which refuses to settle privilege ideally on any particular one, or on any particular formulation. The ‘suddenness’ of an appropriate naming implies its impermanence in the mind of the name-giver. Words have not ceased to hold out the hope of a clearer, more unified vision, but they have ceased to allow that hope to schematise itself as the quasi-biblical revenge of language upon the world. The poetic *non-lieu*, momentarily transfigured as a *vrai lieu*, contains a linguistic spectacle of ‘truth’ as the ongoing promise of truth.

Conclusion. Within disenchantment.

Nous sommes le non-lieu et le non-objet d'une gravitation de signes insensés.¹

Éclatent les vœux de négation!²

The strategy of establishing and maintaining connections between terms in the elaboration of a critical discourse can seem to imply the ('realist' fiction of a) discrete character of 'entities' identifiable thereby within the complex reality such a discourse attempts to confront. Throughout this work, reference has been to the poetic, the utopian, to poetry, to utopia, to speech as a kind of backward projection of writing. The repetition of such reference can undermine the aspectual quality of all such identifications once replaced in a fuller context – aspectual, emergent, inserted within a broader 'fabric' of observable (textual) reality which both offsets and negates them. This aspectual quality can, in particular, be seen as central to the fate of the concept and practice of 'utopia' itself.

Similarly, the conjunction of the utopian spaces considered, in the 'espace logico-épistomologique', should not be thought to constitute a claim to an exhaustive spatially-ordered division of 'reality' for the poetic. In addition to the questionable logic of an attempt to mark limits to an 'institution' which appears as such in the main through its name, the self-contradiction to any claim to have given a complete account of the poetic in a secondary discourse should be obvious: the alleged 'utopian' principle of the 'poetic' is what will immediately contradict any such claim in moving beyond or against it.

Though the spaces approached via the term of utopia are all eminently practical aspects of poetic work, the recourse to a discourse of the utopian may similarly have appeared to suggest that the model being developed is an essentially metaphorical one. But the principle to which it was sought to appeal is in the end not especially metaphorical.

¹ Dupin, Jacques. *Dehors*. Paris: Gallimard, 1975: 37.

² Segalen, *Thibet*, Sequence LV, op. cit. 638.

Reference has been made in passing to various epistemological canons which are commonly drawn upon in the construction and construing of poetic and other literary work – phenomenological, ethical, psychoanalytic etc. – but generally insofar as these related to the ‘utopian dynamic’ of the ‘poetic’ effort, rather than in a direct appeal to their legitimacy, or their power to legitimise the affirmations made. In subsuming such references to the framework provided by utopia and the language of the utopian dynamic, in which the utopian becomes the principle – within a given order – of all that transcends / transgresses that order even as it participates therein, the principle towards which all analysis tended, more or less obscurely, successfully or unsuccessfully, was in the end substantive rather than malleably theoretical: the principle that the ‘poetic’, as it has been attempted to isolate it, represents, within writing, a difference of *degree* which emerges as such through an aspiration to a difference of *quality* or *essence*. Moreover, the ‘poetic’ denotes a practice which attempts to take cognisance of this principle, and to integrate it into the work that the writing subject continues to do in the mode of / towards the ‘poetic’.

In conclusion, it will be attempted to re-situate an understanding of the utopian, as it facilitates a reading of the poetic, within the broader context it contradicts, as it were. In the Introduction reference was made to a standard opposition with ‘ideology’ [dialectic of power] – here the pairing will be with ‘disenchantment’ [dialectic of belief], a contemporary dialectical partner, it has seemed to this reader, of utopia in its non-stigmatised occurrences.

Does utopia stand for the same thing in each of these couples? In an attempt to deal with this question, we postulate the following: given that ‘disenchantment’ is a term developed in respect of a macro-historical period, as a result treated as more of the order of world-historical ‘reality’ and thus less negatively connoted than ‘ideology’, ‘utopian’ is that corrective, that antithesis to ‘ideology’, distinct from ‘ideology’, which is not simply disenchantment – which thus seeks to transcend the problem of being confronted with disenchantment without rushing into the arms of another alienation of the subject, typically ‘ideology’ of one kind or another as an ersatz for conventional religious belief.

To clarify what is meant by this, a valuable reference is the work of Marcel Gauchet, who, defining the religious as a “mode d’institution du social” and community as “une manière «d’être soi» en dehors de la question du sujet” couches the problem of disenchantment as one at the core of every newly-isolated individuality, whose horizons are the imposition and the disappearance of the subject. “ [D]ès qu’on sort du système de l’altérité absolue du fondement, le problème de l’assomption de soi apparaît au grand jour sous sa double polarité: besoin de la justification de soi, tentation de se dissoudre en tant que soi.”³

These polarities, induced by the ‘pourquoi moi?’ – which Gauchet argues to be the grounding, unanswerable question of the disenchanted subject – and his characterisation of the problem of disenchantment in terms of these two possible catastrophes of the subject, support our postulation of a possible median role for the utopian, its standing for a possible principle of continuation for the subject in the face of the different stases represented under the names of disenchantment and ideology. As does Claudio Magris’s recent characterisation of utopia as the leavening element of an assumed, accepted, lived disenchantment – which in turn acts to save utopia from its unalloyed self:

Le désenchantement, c’est la conscience qu’il n’y aura pas de parousie, que nos yeux ne verront pas le Messie, que l’an prochain nous ne serons pas dans Jérusalem, que les dieux sont en exil.[...] *Le désenchantement, qui corrige l’utopie, renforce son élément fondamental, l’espérance.* [...] L’espérance ne naît pas d’une vision du monde rassurante et optimiste, mais du supplice de l’existence vécue et endurée sans voile qui crée une imprescriptible nécessité de rédemption.⁴

³ Gauchet, Marcel. *Le désenchantement du monde*. Paris: Gallimard, 1985: 302.

⁴ Magris, Claudio. *Utopie et désenchantement* (tr. Jean and Marie-Noëlle Pastureau). Paris: Gallimard, 2001. 17-18. That the work of Leopardi should also have served Bonnefoy (*L’enseignement et l’exemple de Leopardi*, op. cit.) as well as Magris (who begins his essay with a discussion of that poet) as the basis for recent reflections of a comparable tenor confronts us with the cardinal nature of these problems, and the poverty of a simple discourse of rupture and innovation as ‘the way forward’.

There no doubt remains something terminological in the establishment and maintenance of such distinctions. Utopia, as was remarked in the introduction, is, like poetry, a polemical concept. But while there appears to be disunity over the terms to be used to describe a current state of consciousness, a crisis in the justification of 'poetic' work, there appears less on the actual cultural diagnosis of the kind of prospect (or 'hope') with which poetry can continue to work. Poetic thought, we have seen, has long been involved in the pursuit of a certain number of structures of experience in conditions which hold out little reassurance as to the well-founded nature of such pursuit. The improbability of the imagined outcome has never been as great a problem as the maintenance of the actual thinkability of an outcome – the maintenance of a discourse whereby the process of working in its direction does not collapse into total insignificance. In his writings on *l'énergie du désespoir*, Michel Deguy could be read as thinking counter to Magris's adoption of utopia in relation to disenchantment. For Deguy a recentering around the loss of hope, the loss of the principle of hope, is what it has become necessary to think, avoiding thereby a no-longer-sustainable recourse to what he understands by the utopian:

Quand la perte de tout espoir survient, la question est en quoi transformer cette perte. La séquence serait: celle de la perte; de l'abandon de l'utopie comme avatar de l'espoir, et alors de la transformation de la perte en un rebond vers un impossible d'un autre type. [...] Il faut tout recommencer, sauf l'espoir. En revenir, en déchanter. Il faut inventer maintenant des arts poétiques sans idéologie, sans utopies adolescentes, mieux ajustés à ce que peut (doit?) faire la poésie. [...] Sans doute l'énigme est-elle toujours celle de la fraternité et de la réciprocité («hypocrite lecteur»). Mais c'est maintenant l'énergie du désespoir qu'il faut échanger en paradoxes, en impossibilités, en sobriété joueuse. La poésie ne sera ni formaliste, ni creuse à force de vouloir tout contenir.⁵

The terminological opposition is indeed there, but what it is important to notice is that this position, adopting a posture or rhetoric of the 'post/anti-utopian', is of course 'utopian' itself in its fundamental characteristics, that is, beyond a rhetorical employment

⁵ Deguy, Michel. *L'énergie du désespoir*. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1998: 47.

of that term. With vocabularies in direct opposition, Deguy and Magris appear to be coming around to the same cultural and ethical diagnosis – with the former betraying his parallel activities as a poet by being perhaps the more robustly ‘utopian’ of the two. A renewed poetic writing for Deguy would become that dream of neutrality / universality – a signifying practice which would be neither ‘ideological’ nor ‘utopian’ but nevertheless capable of discerning the proper course of action, which would erect new impossibilities to be approached with its ‘vouloir tout contenir’, having first banished hope from its mental register. Such is indeed a lot to hope for. It is possible, at the same time, to read therein a confirmation of the idea that the weariness with monolithic utopian discourses finds expression via a return to ideas of practice – a practice which in this case, as in others, is the work of poetic writing. One which does not deny itself the possibility, renewed, of a self-conception in terms of movement, dynamics, the activity of the mind or of the subject – in a properly ‘utopian’ perspective. In recognising the fluidity of the concept of utopia in respect of the poetic, one which mirrors its object as a principle emergent by opposition, differentiation, we are in a position to read it as a principle of vitality rather than petrification – as enabling rather than constricting the creative work to be done.

What, then, does the assumption of disenchantment mean in respect of the poetic? Harold Bloom, in his theory of influence, establishes a horizon of the death of poetry through ‘entropy’⁶. It is the same theory Segalen developed of culture itself towards the beginning of the century. On a less grand scale than either, it could be advanced that this question is one writing poses continuously to all those who live by the utopian dynamic, never more than at the present time. In each of our poets can be witnessed something approaching a loss of steam – the exhaustion of the line of impetus propelling the earlier works of foundation. Theories of post-modernism inform us of the same processes at work in contemporary culture and society at large. Saturation and vitality instinctively appear as opposites. The very logic of differentiation, emancipation, openness upon which the utopian dynamic reposes seems tired inside the multitude of consumerist messages

⁶ *The Anxiety of Influence*, op. cit. 10.

utilising much the same vocabulary and appealing, much more immediately, to the same desires and energies.

Disenchantment represents the negative pole of poetic 'work' – the purity of the given, without any positional tension of the subject in its respect. In this way, the utopian, an economy of 'hope', comes to represent the supplementarity of the subject in respect of the real – that with which it cannot argue, but to which it can never be reduced. Such a difference can be observed to be operative in the work of all three of the writers we have discussed. Segalen's world is instituted around the principle of decline: his utopian gesture (in this it appears clearly that the utopian always implies an ironic intelligence at work) is to simultaneously maintain the other in its construction as other while annexing it as a means to the literary manifestation of self. Daumal's departing point of all-out negation is rationalised by him as the search for affirmation. The impossibility which characterises (even impedes) his rapport with the poetic is the negative reflection (the assumption as disenchantment) of a particularly forceful utopian vision. Bonnefoy is exemplary of a contemporary dialectic of disenchantment and utopia (on occasions to the extent of appearing to approach an ideological position for the 'poetic' – that is, obscuring its leavening function, its 'minor' quality (Deleuze) in favour of a return to mytho-poetic holism, and an almost 'major' tone.)

If, historically, disenchantment represents the idea of an inexorable erosion of religious belief, would it be over-bold to advance the idea that the domain of the 'poetic' is that which, in the era of disenchantment, has been confronted the longest with the problem of an answer to this disenchantment, the problem of the renewal / loss of its 'utopia' as a human (as distinct from a divine) practice? Although it would be wrong to attempt to de-emphasise the breadth of disenchantment as a cultural phenomenon, the dialectic of the 'poetic' with its 'utopia' emerges already in a strong version within romanticism⁷ before the modification of its logic associated with Baudelaire and often taken to have initiated 'modernity' for the poetic at least.

⁷ See for example Paul Bénichou's *Le Sacre de l'écrivain (1750-1830)*. Paris: Gallimard, 1996.

That the ‘critical’ dimension of this ‘disenchanted’ version of utopia is most closely associated with the name of Walter Benjamin only reinforces its salience for a reflection on French poetry – Benjamin’s own reflections centering on that period identified with the emergence of modern French poetry, and in particular on the figure and work of Baudelaire, its attested progenitor. Within what could be baptised the ‘Baudelaire-Benjamin’ strain of utopia – the intermittent quality of ‘utopia’ being intimately bound up with a particular social space [modern city] and the qualities of a period [modern/ post-modern profusion] – the utopian moment is one of distancing within participation; focusing around the dynamic potential of the moment of epiphany within an urban topos⁸, of which the *poème en prose* is thought to be the historical expression. Nancy’s position in *La ville au loin*⁹ complements and develops this alternative line in utopia, rooted in an urban phenomenology, with the principle of unity becoming the experiencing subject rather than any given or imaginable space. This necessary ‘proximity’ of the ‘utopian’ to the imagining subject had already been articulated by Mikel Dufrenne in a manner consistent with the foundational aspects of the poets we have been reading, one retaining an option on the durability of such foundation:

L’utopie ne se situe pas dans un non-lieu, pas plus que dans un non-temps. Son lieu n’est un non-lieu que par rapport aux lieux circonscrits et neutralisés par le savoir, comme les lieux anonymes où rien ne se passe que du prévisible, et où se poursuivent des expériences répétables. Ce n’est pas non plus un autre lieu, l’autre du lieu, comme un Eden perdu ou promis. *C’est le lieu même que nous habitons*, que le désir veut aménager pour une autre vie sans pourtant le fuir.¹⁰

Dufrenne in this argumentation is close to the poetic discourse on the *habiter*, and hence, we have seen, to a topos of foundation. Nancy’s mobile subject, as we have noted,

⁸ The city – that is, the absence of *clinamen* within the multitudes (‘le flot mouvant des multitudes’, to recall a line of Baudelaire’s echoed by Bonnefoy in his most recent series of public lectures – Bibliothèque Nationale de France, November 26, 28 and 29, 2001.)

⁹ Op. cit. Discussed in Part II, section 2.

¹⁰ Dufrenne, Mikel. *Art et politique*. Paris: Union Générale d’Édition, 1974: 174 (emphasis added.) This point is akin to that emphasised in the very last writings of Ernst Bloch – see ‘Zur Nähe als dem eigentlichen Ort der Utopie’ in Bloch. *Tendenz, Latenz, Utopie* (Ergänzungsband zur Gesamtausgabe). Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1978: 414-17.

acknowledges that the certainties even of the immediate – the “*lieu même où nous habitons*” – can no longer be taken for granted, while Benjamin’s stance, which has been characterised as that of a ‘*guetteur de rêves*’¹¹, would take the utopian, once integrated in the here and now of the subject, one stage further: ‘de-territorialising’ the ‘territorial’ overtones of Dufrenne’s ‘*aménager*’, but doing so in a conscious and critical manner. For example, to Aragon’s *Paysan de Paris*, Benjamin opposes a ‘constellation du réveil’¹² – a thematics of an awakening through a transforming distance maintained : “Autant [Benjamin] réaffirmait le caractère inaliénable des images de rêve, autant il énonçait l’exigence de leur métamorphose, c’est-à-dire de trouver *l’issue par où s’extraire* de cet élément mythique, *s’arracher* à ce matériel onirique.”¹³ This ‘utopian’ consciousness of which it is question here integrates the utopian dynamic as an awareness of its own impermanence; a supervening imperative of distance from its own adhesions and insights. It becomes a question not of maintaining but of renewing these constantly, without any great illusions as to an ultimate outcome. It becomes a search for intimations of unity within what, in describing the contemporary period, has been called “*il carattere ornamentale ed eterotopico dell’estetico di oggi.*” (Vattimo)¹⁴ That philosopher argues for the importance of the ‘Heideggerian’ ‘event’ as a way of thinking one’s way through this. The layman’s event, something thought within a circumscription of time and place which is itself understood to be of a transitory, constructed order, seems to this writer to already articulate the essence of the thinking of a way of ‘going on’ here. The event, in other words, consolidates the priority of process over outcome. It implies a consciousness ordered around the permanence of what Deguy articulates in the simplest of questions, ‘*que faire maintenant?*’:

Dans la cité radieuse, une fois construite, *tout reste à faire comme avant*. Tout est duplice, comme avant. La différence entre une chose et elle-même, entre «bon» et «mauvais», traverse toute chose, y compris le bon et le mauvais. Il n’y a pas le

¹¹ Abensour, Miguel. ‘Walter Benjamin. Le guetteur de rêves’ in *L’Utopie de Thomas More à Walter Benjamin*. Paris: Sens & Tonka, 2000: 107-211.

¹² Ibid. 114.

¹³ Ibid. 201 (emphasis added.)

¹⁴ Vattimo, Gianni. ‘Dall’utopia all’eteropia’, *La società trasparente*. Garzanti: Milan, 1989: 84-100: 100 (emphasis added.)

même d'un côté et l'altérité de l'autre, enfin chassée. [...] Ainsi, *que faire maintenant est la grosse question*.¹⁵

This is a vital line of practice and reflection pursued in French poetry today – one which, replacing utopia within disenchantment, may be articulated in terms of an essential fragility, elusiveness, openness of the activity of discerning the 'poetic'. In contrast with Deguy's characterisation, utopia, thought within the context of disenchantment – as an engagement therewith and not in opposition thereto – becomes precisely that 'énergie du désespoir' whereby writing, and those who write, can continue to 'go on' in the rejection of any definitive illusionment.

If utopia provides a way of thinking about the poetic, it seems possible to maintain that the converse – a reawakening and enrichment of our apprehension of the utopian through its contact with the poetic – may be hoped for. As such, this version of the poetic rather than one more explicative key to a 'poetry' which is not amenable to authoritative 'explanations', might arguably in the end have more to tell us about what the characteristics of a present-day utopian thought might be – could become in its turn a key, or the principle of a canon, which would render accessible to a reader a way of thinking utopia adequate to the conditions of the present time.

That suggestion should not lead one to avoid asking what, if any, is the real, as opposed to the declared or claimed radicality of these positions. It could be argued that most forms of social *cohesion* are actually brought about by the practice and homeostasis of differentiation – so that rupture and supplementarity are in fact central, grounding considerations in the maintenance of identity. The conflict between radical and conservative meanings attributable to the utopian enterprise¹⁶ is entirely characteristic of the utopian moment, and its condition – bounded, after all, within 'literature'. This is a quality which could be negotiated in terms of 'irony' in the sense developed by Rorty¹⁷

¹⁵ Deguy. *L'énergie du désespoir* op. cit. 18, 20 (emphasis added.)

¹⁶ A commonly ignored dimension (distinct from the denunciation which treats 'utopian' and 'totalitarian' as synonyms), to which Jean Servier in his *Histoire de l'utopie*, op. cit., is one of the few writers to refer.

¹⁷ See Rorty. *Contingency, irony, and solidarity*, op. cit.

and his ‘post-modern bourgeois liberalism’ (terme revendiqué), where a reflection on the linguistic underpinnings of identity leads to an accepted discontinuity between operative field and whole.

But to posit such, unaltered, in the case of the poetry we have chosen to describe – that which consistently rejects a purely textualist approach – places the actual utopian dynamic of such poetry in direct contradiction with a major structural characteristic of utopia: its occupation of a space between reality and unreality. One way of resolving this contradiction, or of imagining how it might be that its continued existence does not as yet present an absolute bar to the pursuit of poetic activity, is to recall the ‘utopian’ principle set out in conclusion above, that which knowingly substitutes essence/quality for degree, and to imagine the field of poetic endeavour as a *sui generis* division of human activity that knowingly takes itself for the whole. This it would do, not only in the sociological sense of a social sub-group whose activities pursue an apparently autonomous logic, but also on the level of its self-conception (conscious, or repressed with varying degrees of success) as constituted by an illimitation of its purview, by its accommodation of the persistent human drive towards a unified apprehension of the fact of being alive.

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