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Poetic Becomings
Jérôme Game

Poetic Becomings

Studies in Contemporary French Literature
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[...] la réflexion occidentale a si longtemps hésité à penser l'être du langage: comme si elle avait pressenti le danger que ferait courir à l'évidence du ‘je suis’ l'expérience nue du langage. [...] La percée vers un langage d'où le sujet est exclu, la mise au jour d'une incompatibilité peut-être sans recours entre l'apparition du langage en son être et la conscience de soi en son identité, c'est aujourd'hui une expérience qui s'annonce en des points bien différents de la culture [...]”

— MICHEL FOUCAULT¹

Et peut-être la question de fond posée à la poésie actuelle est-elle celle de savoir ce qui peut soutenir un dépassement (une nouvelle forme de dépassement) du subjectif.

— CHRISTIAN PRIGENT²

What does poetry do to the subject? This question – a modern one par excellence – contains the power to overturn all classical poetic orders, with regard to aesthetics and epistemologies. With it, the poem is no longer determined by its subject or theme; instead, the poem becomes the symbolic plane upon which subjectivation (that is, the production of subjectivity) operates. Mixing the levels of poet-subject with those of reader-subject and diegetic subject, this question focuses on the impact of the poetic operation on issues of subjectivity in general. For this reason it has been the object of the hesitation mentioned by Foucault in the epigraph above. The consequences of an unregulated use of “l'être du langage” – a possible definition of poetry in the modern period – are indeed all too obvious: the subversion of the sense of a stable self-consciousness and subjectivity underwritten by

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the *cogito*. Both the *cogito* and poetry are made of the same stuff: language. Undermining the latter in its intensive – poetic – use would not fail to affect, step by step, the subject as a discursive, meaning-producing structure, especially in a culture as obsessed with the issue of subjectivity as the French, if we trust Deleuze’s and Guattari’s cruel comment: “Les Français sont comme des propriétaires terriens dont la rente est le *cogito*. Ils se sont toujours reterritorialisés sur la conscience.” Yet if Western thought has often dodged the task of addressing the being of language for fear of the consequences for the sense of self, modern French poetry has not. Since its inaugural gestures – Baudelaire’s aesthetics of the transient in *Le Peintre de la vie moderne*, Rimbaud’s *Lettres du Voyant*, or Mallarmé’s “disparition élocutoire du poète” – the issue of what poems do to subjectivity has been crucial to it. And if we are to believe Christian Prigent’s statement heading this chapter this question still informs contemporary poetry, the parenthesis – “(une nouvelle forme de dépassement)” – emphasizing the genealogical pressure on poetry to take on, as its most epochal task, the perpetuation of such overcoming, albeit with new means. It is as if this continuation, rather than taking care of some unfinished business once and for all, could never be exhausted, could only persist in its necessity and was forever to be re-enacted. As if beyond chronological coordinates the contemporary were in fact the latest reconfiguration of nineteenth-century modernity – and not a *post*-modernity.

Prigent is not the only one to doubt the pertinence of the postmodern paradigm. Philosopher Jacques Rancière rejects it too in favour of a larger and transhistorical episteme which he calls the “régime esthétique des arts”. In Rancière’s view the meaning of human social experience is always mediated against the background shaped by a division of the sensible

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3 *Qu’est-ce que la philosophie?* (Paris: Minuit, 1991), p. 100. Henceforth abbreviated as *QQP* in the main text, followed by the page number.


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(a “partage du sensible”). Such division is in principle contentious as it opposes claims about sensible reality and allocates legitimate authority to some rather than others, so granting power to various groups of people to the detriment of others. Starting in the late eighteenth century the aesthetic regime of the arts – within which we still find ourselves today – is the reign of language freed from fixed categories, be it generic or thematic. Its model is writing, literary and later on cinematographic. In it, aesthetics is always the locus of a struggle inasmuch as the forms and conditions of the division are never settled in advance by some ruling idea, as in the previous model, the representative regime of the arts (“régime représentatif des arts”\(^6\)). In the aesthetic regime art is no longer submitted to an external rule, it is no longer a way to represent prescribed modes of the sensible but a method of being sensitive to all things in general and in whatever way:

Le régime esthétique des arts est celui qui proprement identifie l’art du singulier et délie cet art de toute règle spécifique, de toute hiérarchie des sujets, des genres et des arts. Mais il le fait en faisant voler en éclats la barrière mimétique qui distinguait les manières de faire de l’art des autres manières de faire et séparait ses règles de l’ordre des occupations sociales. Il affirme l’absolue singularité de l’art et détruit en même temps tout critère pragmatique de cette singularité. Il fonde en même temps l’autonomie de l’art et l’identité de ses formes avec celles par lesquelles la vie se forme elle-même.\(^7\)

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In *La Parole Muette. Essai sur les significations de la littérature* Rancière examines this paradigm shift from a poetics of representation to one of expression:

> Ce changement de cosmologie peut s’exprimer strictement comme le renversement terme à terme des quatre principes qui structuraient le système représentatif. Au primat de la fiction s’oppose le primat du langage. A sa distribution en genres s’oppose le principe antigénérique de l’égalité de tous les sujets représentés. Au principe de convenance s’oppose l’indifférence du style à l’égard du sujet représenté. A l’idéal de la parole en acte s’oppose le modèle de l’écriture. Ce sont ces quatre principes qui définissent la poétique nouvelle.⁸

This transhistorical conceptual framework in turn rejects the notion of modernity as too teleological:

> Le régime esthétique des arts n’oppose pas l’ancien et le moderne. Il oppose plus profondément deux régimes d’historicité. […] L’idée de modernité est une notion équivoque qui voudrait trancher dans la configuration complexe du régime esthétique des arts, retenir les formes de rupture, les gestes iconoclastes, etc., en les séparant du contexte qui les autorise: la reproduction généralisée, l’interprétation, l’histoire, le musée, le patrimoine ... Elle voudrait qu’il y ait un sens unique alors que la temporalité propre du régime esthétique des arts est celle d’une co-présence de temporalités hétérogènes.⁹

What I would like to argue in this book is that, within the *longue durée* of the aesthetic regime, a key topos around which the sensible is divided and meaning produced in contemporary French poetry is the question of the subject. More precisely, the issue I will address is this: how does current poetry reinforce the historic poetic gesture of *mise en crise* of classical subjectivity (the substantial “Je/Moi” submitted to time) in favour of a dubious subjectivity, precarious and in process (subjectivation as trial of the pure present)? Or: how is contemporary poetry accomplishing the passage from subject to subjectivation, from subjective form to anonymous process? That is to say: how do poetic texts undermine subjective positions, and in

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favour of what? In forthcoming chapters I will tackle these questions by examining the works of Christian Prigent (b. 1945), Dominique Fourcade (b. 1938), Olivier Cadiot (b. 1956) and Hubert Lucot (b. 1935). But before, I will lay out in the subsequent sections the critical and theoretical debates that inform my study.

***

Over the last three decades the issue of subjectivity has increasingly shaped the study of French literature as the fading structuralist paradigm was giving way to the “return of the subject”,10 so much so that many a critic now sees in this issue the crucial determinant of both contemporary French poetry and its criticism. For instance Emmanuel Laugier, in the afterword to a recent volume titled *Singularités du sujet. Huit études sur la poésie contemporaine*, writes:

Il y a quelque chose dont on peut difficilement se déprendre aujourd’hui: il s’agit de la question du sujet et de la façon dont elle traverse la poésie contemporaine. Toutes les crises par lesquelles on a pu le faire passer, des “horribles travailleurs” qu’il habita à la “disparition allocutoire du poète”, ont en effet conduit des approches réflexives très diverses qui ne manquèrent pas de le réfléchir; de ses places, des forces de subjection qui rendirent un “je” encore pensable, à l’interstice où, entre moi et non-

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moi, le sujet se constitue comme “épaisseur d’un murmure anonyme”, en passant par les “décrochages” où il se mit à dériver et à se plisser, la question demeure celle d’un reste, sorte de doublure où voisinent les forces d’un dehors, “région non-dirigeante” dit Blanchot par laquelle le sujet s’objectivise autant qu’il inscrit en lui des dérivés d’affects inconnus [...].

Around (following or reacting against) Barthes’s canonical position and what it figures of the epistemological cut that determined the critical paradigm of the twentieth century – “La littérature n’énonce jamais que l’absence du sujet” – , various theoretical positions unfold, at times match up, often confront each other. Recently Dominique Viart has clearly identified the crux of the debate:

Qu’est-ce qui, aujourd’hui, change la poésie? D’abord sans doute cette façon incertaine d’y déposer – voire d’y interroger, d’y rechercher ou d’y rencontrer – le sujet. Que celui-ci s’éprouve dans sa division n’est certes pas bien nouveau – Nerval, Rimbaud l’ont souligné. Mais que sa conscience intime fasse de l’altérité une expérience neuve, constitutive même, là où l’identité interroge ses propres fondements, nous intéresse aujourd’hui par la dimension plus volontiers concrète de cette altérité.

The concreteness in the experience of the subject’s intrinsic alterity, and responses to it (shy recognition or enthusiastic welcome, attenuation or intensification), seem indeed a pertinent criterion with which to classify the current variety of opinions. A first position is well represented by critic and poet Jean-Michel Maulpoix as he develops the notion of “sujet lyrique” “lancé au-dehors de soi à la recherche de son propre centre. Il ne peut s’en tenir à la simple ‘diction d’un émoi central’”. It is “aminci, égaré, titubant” that this lyrical subject “fraie dans l’écriture un chemin aléatoire conduisant vers l’atteinte improbable de sa propre figure.” Writing is here a “bougé poétique ou rhétorique [qui] signifie un rapport tremblé du sujet

15 Ibid.
à sa propre identité”. The poetic condition is one of structural perplexity because of the tension between (intellectual) lucidity about fragmentation and (sentimental or emotional) aspirations to closure: “il sait que la langue est un piège, que l’image est une tromperie, que le sujet est un leurre. Cela n’empêche pas que dans le langage il y ait ‘de l’image et du sujet’.” The subject’s consciousness of its own otherness seems to have been domesticated as yet another topos for the ego scriptor. Placed in the background of the ego’s experience, the split of the subject is inoffensive: it re-figures the borders of the same old movement, that of the self as interiority.

Another, non-artificial engagement with this issue is that of philosopher-poet Jean-Claude Pinson. In a series of subtle volumes on current poetics examined both historically and through the theoretical prism of German idealism, Pinson develops what he calls a “poéthique,” that is: a way to “habiter le monde en poète.” The poethical question is “celle qui considère que la poésie n’est pas que la poésie qui s’écrit (ou se ‘performe’), mais aussi ce qui d’elle existe et vaut hors d’elle-même.” Within this primary tension – the writing subject as always-already immersed in the world – Pinson proposes the notion of a non-subjective, impersonal lyricism: “le lyrisme n’est plus l’effusion d’une intimité subjective, mais la modulation d’une ambiance où l’individualité du poète se trouve dissoute jusqu’à la perte du sentiment de soi.” Attentive to recent developments in French poetry Pinson’s neo-lyricism still finds in Leopardi or Schiller the models for a new sensibility whereby the event is no longer “rapporté à aucune expérience particulière, mais revécu anonymement, dans l’impersonnalité d’un pur sentir.” Here the authenticity of the rapport au monde is central.

16 Ibid.
17 Ibid. By the same author see Du Lyrisme (Paris: José Corti, 2002).
18 See also D. Rabaté, J. de Sermet and Y. Vadé (eds), Modernités 8 – Le Sujet lyrique en question (Bordeaux: Presses Universitaires de Bordeaux, 1996).
as the poem testifies for the world: “[...] le poème est solidaire, comme dit Thoreau, de ce qui tente, au verso de la feuille, de s’écrire dans la vie.”

A third, decisively more radical approach to the question is that of Christian Prigent who tackles it with the insights of psychoanalysis, insisting in particular on the “dette au signifiant” and the “dictée de l’appareil pulsionnel” in order to evacuate the position spontaneously “lyrique” (la plénitude du sujet et l’expressivité sensible) and its reverse “formaliste” (les jeux de langage immunisés de la pression de la subjectivité) – which constitute the two faces of the coin which poetry makes a trade most often.

The poetic subject engulfed in this labour, somehow equidistant between lyricism and formalism, is

le sujet qui se décline à partir de l’expérience de l’innommable [...], le sujet qui se laisse ainsi happer par son propre “hors-de-lui” – ce sujet n’est pas un sujet tranquille et ce qu’il décline à voir avec ce qui le fait décliner vers sa propre étrangeté à soi-même et au monde.

In a resolutely Rimbaldian gesture, though in a Lacanian light, Prigent proposes a “je écrivant” that

rejoue, minuscule, extrojectée et en partie dés- affectée, l’expérience de la perte du monde; dans ce re-jeu dosé, je la déjoue, la refait (comme on dit en argot) et, dans une certaine mesure, s’en guérit. Voire en jouit.

25 Ibid., pp. 7–8.
26 Ibid., p. 23.
27 Ibid., p. 24.
Let us also mention Jean-Marie Gleize who considers the issue of subjectivity as the symptom of poetry’s uncertain generic status. According to Gleize the time of poetry is irrevocably past and gone, and thus “ce qui est pertinent c’est la question de savoir si l’on tient à faire œuvre de poésie, de poète, d’artisan en poèmes, ou si l’on a d’autres projets.” These other projects or new literary enterprises form what Gleize calls “post-poésie”, that is, a refusal of any return to or reactivation of past models (postures which he calls “re-poèsie” or “néo-poésie” and of which Maulpoix’s neo-lyricism is the best example). Less than a dehistoricization of poetry (or even a poetics of dehistoricization), what Gleize’s notion of post-poetry is really calling for is a firm rejection of any teleological representation of poetry by itself. At the same time it is mainly a paradoxical, a-generic genre summing up previous paradigms – namely Barthes’s *textualité* and Derrida’s *écriture* – in the field of poetic writing. Post-poetry can thus be defined as a historical position determined by the literality of the text rather than its authority, forming a space requiring “l’implicitation du sujet, ou sa neutralisation, ou son déplacement, ou son décentrement, ou son dépaysement, ou sa défection, ou son détachement, ou sa déconnexion [...].”

There are of course many other authors who have reflected, more or less directly, on the poetic subject – from Claude Esteban to Michel Deguy or Henri Meschonnic. Avoiding an exhaustive inventory, the positions

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30 “[j’]”.

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rapidly sketched above are sufficient to establish the existence of a heterogeneity of thought on that issue, around the acceptance — resolute for some (Prigent and Gleize), ambiguous (Maulpoix) or existential for others (Pinson) — of the subject’s intrinsic hollowness.

What is more, these theoretical positions stand out against a deeply diverse poetic background, the description of which is dissensual. In a sweeping panorama Jean-Michel Maulpoix tries to classify recent French poetry by decades around typical gestures synthesized in as many verbs: the 1950s would thus be devoted to an “habiter” (Yves Bonnefoy, André du Bouchet, Philippe Jaccottet, Jacques Dupin, Lorand Gaspar), the 1960s to a “figurer” (Michel Deguy, Denis Roche, Marcelin Pleynet, Bernard Noël, Claude Esteban, Jacques Roubaud), the 1970s to a “décanter” (Emmanuel Hocquard, Claude Royet-Journoud, Anne-Marie Albiach, Jean Daive, Christian Prigent) and the 1980s to an “articuler” (Benoît Conort, Jean-Claude Pinson, Jacques Réda, Lionel Ray).32 It seems this section of scholarship, heavily influenced by literary history, finds it hard to consider the mixed nature of current French poetry without reactivating the Jakobsonian criterion developed by Hugo Friedrich characterizing post-Mallarmean poetry by a high level of abstraction (notably around the poet’s retreat into the absolute of language to the detriment of reference and a relation to the real33). Thus Maulpoix uses the modern criterion par excellence — the aesthetic relation to language itself rather than to the world or the real — as a discriminating factor with which to cut in two opposed sub-sets the field he has just described:

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Une ligne de partage importante paraît distinguer les poètes contemporains dans leur confiance plus ou moins forte dans les pouvoirs du verbe poétique. D’un côté [...] il y a ceux [...] qui affirment leur croyance dans les pouvoirs de la poésie et qui célèbrent à travers elle une cohérence du monde, de l’être et du langage [here Maulpoix organizes the genealogy around Aragon, Char or St.John Perse]. De l’autre, il y a ceux [...] qui écrivent “contre” [this time around the tutelary figures of Artaud, Bataille ou Michaux].

There are some poets says Maulpoix “pour qui l’exercice du langage constitue en soi une expérience essentielle de l’existence, et d’autres pour qui la ‘vérité de parole’ doit être recherchée avec une infinie prudence”. This division is also, more or less, the one used by Daniel Leuwers in his Introduction à la poésie moderne et contemporaine:

Si l’on accepte de reprendre la distinction faite par Ferdinand de Saussure entre “signifiant” et “signifié”, on pourrait avancer que la poésie française contemporaine connaît un clivage – plus ou moins prononcé – entre “poètes du signifiant” et “poètes du signifiés”. Les premiers seraient plus attentifs aux mots et à leur matérialité, les second aux significations qu’ils véhiculent.

34 http://www.maulpoix.net/Diversite.html.
A strict, binary opposition would then exist between two schools: literal poetry, materialist and intransitive on the one hand, and subjective poetry, neo-lyrical and transitive on the other (Dominique Viart speaks for instance of “antipodes” to compare them37). Following a simplification proper to polemics, the first school, in the wake of what we could call the linguistic turn of French poetics around the Ponge/Roche textualist moment in the 1960s, would have stolen the speech of the subject (or vice versa), in favour of a pure and disembodied sign; and the second school would not have given a precise account of the Rimbaldo-Mallarmean cut. While some would like to restitute speech to the subject to make it sing and people the world in a relation to the Other (Maulpoix), the better to recognize themselves and avoid the alleged nihilist, morbid or boring silence of formal experimentation as end in itself, others would seek to deconstruct the subject and go round in circles in the solipsism of a sign immanent only to itself, like goldfish in a bowl. There is, in this structuring of the field, something dissatisfying; it is too static and reductive. 38

In a recent essay with an evocative title, Caisse à outils. Un Panorama de


la poésie française aujourd’hui, poet and critic Jean-Michel Espitallier chooses a more pragmatic and thus fruitful approach, first describing the very wide spectrum of the field, then emphasizing the generic diversification of poetry: “La poésie paraît donc être sortie de l’espace strictement littéraire et, corollairement, du ‘graphocentrisme’ pluriséculaire du livre comme étalon de l’espace d’écriture, lequel, depuis près d’un siècle, se dilate vers d’autres supports. Elle travaille aux frontières.” This position is reminiscent of that developed a few years earlier by Jean-Marie Gleize in his important book À noir. Poésie et littéralité:

Il fallait rappeler ces quelques faits: la poésie que nous disons “contemporaine” est [...] désormais sans définition, ou si l’on préfère, ouverte à une infinité de définitions possibles, ce qui rend évidemment difficile d’en parler, d’en parler généralement, en tant que “la” poésie. “La poésie” n’existe pas, n’existe plus, ce qui ne signifie pas, bien sûr, le tarissement de la pratique poétique, mais simplement que la poésie vit son état de crise, sans doute de son état de crise, un état critique et autocritique permanent qui est certainement sa seule définition possible aujourd’hui, qu’on s’en réjouisse et qu’on la veuille porter à son maximum d’intensité dévastatrice (comme l’a fait en son temps Rimbaud, comme l’ont fait de nos jours Francis Ponge et Denis Roche), ou qu’on le déplore en tentant de restituer à la poésie quelque chose de son intégrité ancienne, de ses anciens pouvoirs.

These positions of refusal – refusal to choose one paradigm over another as historically necessary, refusal to reduce the thriving diversity of current

40 Ibid., p. 48. See also the dossier “La Nouvelle Poésie française” coordinated by Espitallier in Le Magazine Littéraire 396 (March 2001).
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poetry to the artificial homogeneity of an abstract taxonomy – are often positively affirmed today. For the purpose of this book – the question of what poetry does to the subject – they offer the advantage of not prejudging the field as they insist on its state of structural re-definition. This is especially important in the study of works coming after the structuralist moment and its poetic avatars, after la fin des avant-gardes, but also after what Olivier Cadiot has called “la fin de la fin des avant-gardes”: works which reflect on their own historicity – the end of the end – so as to liberate themselves from the baggage of historical determinism. To be after “the end of the end” is, in this sense, a paradoxical belatedness since the chronological succession of schools and groups, those paradigmatic, and often over-rigid representations of poetic creativity, is assumed to be terminated. The (otherwise legitimate) historiographical debate around the 1980s/90s as decades of the return of a neo-lyrical tradition allegedly repressed by the avant-gardist 1960s/70s is thus somehow bypassed or cut short in favour of an old (Rimballdian) question asked anew, asked (for) today: how does the structural inadequacy between I and the world, I and language, and within the I itself, persist in our neither modernist nor postmodern but a-chronological epoch? It is

42 See the dossier “La relève des avant-gardes” in Le Magazine littéraire 392 (November 2000), pp. 18–57.
44 Lucot, Fourcade and Prigent all published their first texts in the 1960s; Cadiot, ten to twenty years their junior, first published in the 1980s. That they all appear with the same publisher, P.O.L, is both telling (in that their common poetic materialism does partake of a wider movement whose scale is well represented by a Parisian publishing house) and irrelevant (insofar as each of their works is idiosyncratic enough to resist any sociological reduction).
45 L. Ruffel has offered a convincing theorization of this moment in Le Dénoeument (Lagrasse: Verdier, 2005).
46 For an historicist conception of the contemporary as future past see D. Viart who tries to “mettre en évidence le tournant majeur des années 80 comme celui d’une ré-appropriation du littéraire, par où la ‘modernité’ ne se donne plus comme discours d’avenir mais conscience critique d’un héritage historique et culturel”, “Ecrire au présent: l’esthétique contemporaine”, in M. Touret and F. Dugast-Portes (eds), Le temps des lettres. Quelles périodisations pour l’histoire de la littérature française du xxe siècle? (Rennes: Presses universitaires de Rennes, 2001), pp. 317–336; and in the
therefore neither materialists versus lyric poets nor the 1980s versus the 1970s revival that I want to work with here. Even if such a structure could make sense at a very broad level it is not essential nor even operative in texts, which is the level prioritized by this book. Texts carry their historicity in themselves; they negotiate past and present directly and without the need of an über-historic consciousness or meta-narrative. To cover them up with one would only burden the interpretation with a useless weight and cramp effects of meaning which could be produced by it. Rather than offering a systematic taxonomy of the entire field that would foreclose my readings, I have thus preferred to answer the questions I have set out for myself via the examination of works published since the 1980s and ranging from verse to prose. I have chosen them not because they would be representative of some underlying structure of the field but because each one, in its own idiosyncratic manner, asks questions of the subject. Yet my study does not pretend to reduce these polymorphous works to that issue only, as if they were the mere illustration of it or would exhaust themselves in it. They resist this problematic – as well as my reading – and always remain larger than it.

I will concentrate on just a handful of books per author and will endeavour not to extrapolate the qualities I see in one author’s work in order to project them onto the rest of the field. I am aware that the texts I am studying might have been influenced by others and did not just pop up spontaneously. My object, however, is not the constitution of a possible poetic movement nor the genesis of the network of influences that determines a literary field like an ecosystem. Rather, I am aiming to show how these works, each in its singularity, produce new and rich definitions of the subject and so take part in the dynamism of the poetry written in France today. All the same, it is always tricky to deal with ensembles, lists and sub-sets: how are they constituted? Or rather: how to avoid any pre-conceptions concerning the background against which they appear? “Ce qui est impossible, ce n’est pas le voisinage des choses”, says Foucault as he comments on Borges’s famous Chinese encyclopedic listing of animals in the preface to *Les Mots et les choses*, “c’est le site lui-même où elles pourraient voisiner.”48 Such an originary and foundational site, such an ensemble of all ensembles that would be called “contemporary French poetry”, does not really exist, so it can certainly not be said to pre-exist any critical operation. It is always to be thought anew because it is always moving, changing. I will be examining a variety of concrete instances – texts – taking place within this general and abstract movement of movements called “contemporary French poetry”, but nonetheless irreducible to it.

Furthermore, if I have chosen to study works that differ in their stylistic dispositifs it is to preempt the artificial nature of any grouping that can but fail to encapsulate the whole of today’s heterogeneous production. Yet paradoxically the generic diversity apparent in my selection – verse, prose, various mixes of the two, and cut-up writing – might in fact be representative of how current French poetry has carried on the modern blurring of the Aristotelian taxonomy: poetry may now be written in metered verse as well as in prose, that is to say in sentences, paragraphs, chapters.49

49 In their study *Traité du rythme. Des vers et des proses* (Paris: Dunod, 1998) G. Dessons and H. Meschonnic argue that Aristotle’s dichotomy is only apparently “fondatrice,