

ADOLPHE HABERER

LA FORÊT OBSCURE.

POÉTIQUE & POÉSIE, ESSAIS & COMMENTAIRES.

Domaine anglais.

[‘The Dark Forest. Poetics and Poetry, Essays and Commentaries.
English Domain’]

Chez l’auteur à Chazay d’Azargues, 2021, 263 p.

ANDREEA ȘERBAN

West University of Timișoara

“Words mean more than what is set down on paper. It takes the human voice to infuse them with shades of deeper meaning.” (Angelou 1993: 98) Similar to Angelou’s character Marguerite, Adolphe Haberer must have turned these words into his credo, as his long career as professor of literature and critic has proven.

This second collection of scholarly articles, published in 2021, continues Adolphe Haberer’s endeavour started with the first volume (*La Lyre du larynx*, 1998), relying, as the author himself acknowledges in the “Introduction”, on yet another metaphor related to the voice – not only of the poet/ writer, but also of the reader and – I might add – of the scholar dissecting literary texts. The title metaphor, *La Forêt Obscure* [‘The Dark Forest’] was inspired by Seamus Heaney’s reading of Dante (via Osip Mandelstam) as a “lyric woodcutter singing in the dark wood of the larynx” (Heaney 1997: 133), Dante’s own *Inferno*, with the poet’s initial wandering through the dark forest, as well as by the author’s own readings of William Blake’s *Tyger* with its “forests of the night”, and Jacques Lacan’s “forest of desires”. In Haberer’s view, the voice is the mysterious ‘place’ where body and language become one, conveying our deepest emotions and desires.

The book’s twelve chapters – of which five are written completely in English, while the other seven mix the literary analysis carried out in French with quotations in English from the literary texts and criticism – bring together Adolphe Haberer’s latest work, previously published in various scholarly journals and volumes, highlighting the author’s deep love of poetry and keen interest in English literature. Just as the dark forest in the title metaphorically represents the poet’s/ narrator’s voice speaking up, or the reader’s own voice reading (out loud) and decoding the message, there is another red thread connecting all the chapters, namely the metaphor of the (literary) room, which becomes, in turn, a narrow, restrictive form for sonnets, a page ‘space’ where poetry is visually organized into meaningful stanzas or parts, an indoor space where characters live, interact with others, and which they desert, as well as, eventually, a space where the literature professor ‘digs’ for meaning and writes his own masterful interpretation of literary texts.

The first chapter, “Pour une sémiologie du sonnet” [For a semiotics of the sonnet], explores the sonnet as “the poem par excellence”, “a paraphrase of the soul” (p. 20, my transl.) and discusses various reflexive sonnets by William Wordsworth, John Keats, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Thomas Watts-Dunton and Elizabeth Barrett Browning. Haberer argues that the sonnet emphasizes form over meaning and, relying on works by Jacques Lacan and Dylan Thomas, underlines the importance of holes and gaps in-between words, which actually confer meaning to the language employed and to the intended message. According to Haberer, the sonnet is a form of “écriture à la limite”, where phallic enjoyment (Lacan’s “jouissance phallique”), enabled by the laws of language, meets the enjoyment of the forbidden, of the gap. It is this type of writing which, for Haberer, joins together – in a visual image best created by Virginia Woolf – the limits of a narrow room (i.e. the restrictions of the form), the musical language, the emblematic vase/container of sublimation, and emptiness (the silence of what cannot be written).

Chapter two, “La chambre étroite” [The narrow room], offers a historical evolution of the sonnet in relation to its strict form, which is inseparable from the notion of “narrow room”, coined by William Wordsworth in one of his sonnets about the sonnet form. Originating in Italy in the thirteenth century, the sonnet became very popular throughout Europe, with a peak period between 1530 and 1650, during which time about 200,000 sonnets were written. In England, although the popularity of the sonnet died out with John Milton, whom Wordsworth admired for his deft ability to “get the best out of the Italian sonnet” (p. 51, my transl.), this type of poetry reemerged with the Romantics, while Wordsworth himself turned out to be one of the most prolific English sonneteers. Haberer also traces here the scholarly attempts to organize Wordsworth’s sonnets into various categories, none of which is fully satisfactory, as they diverge from the organization the poet himself requested when publishing. Haberer concludes that a poem’s meaning is partly given by its position within a book, and that Wordsworth’s metaphors of the “narrow room” and, subsequently, of the “flowery garden” (his favourite leisure activity) relate to one’s accepting endings and limitations of both poetry and gardening.

“Free verse; Du vers libre à l’écriture-jouissance” [Free verse; from free verse to writing as enjoyment], is a chapter that takes readers on a more theoretical journey from the French “vers libre” to the English “free verse”, by discussing works by Ezra Pound and T.S. Eliot, both followers of Poe; yet whereas the former was wary of free verse, the latter was vehemently against the passing of prose for verse. Haberer then looks at Walt Whitman as the first theoretician of free verse, who connected poetry and the poet’s body, rejecting all external laws, as well as at D.H. Lawrence (an eager defender of Whitman as “the only pioneer”, another Moses leading people to the land of “écriture-jouissance libre”, p. 79). Exploring Lacan’s three types of “jouissance” (of the Thing, of Being, of the Other), Haberer concludes – rather ironically – that absolute *jouissance*, merging the three above, is “à la fois interdite et inter-dite” (i.e. at the same time forbidden and said in-between, p. 85); that a poem can be such an absolute *jouissance* is not related to regular metrical forms, nor does it depend on the irregularities of free verse.

“A Defence of the Cliché”, the fourth chapter, stands out as an entertaining piece, covering the meanings of the term “cliché” in both French and English, with the author’s amused observation that in English it has suffered a degradation of meaning, always involving a value judgement, the speaker’s subjectivity (Lacan’s

“parlêtre”), and a speech act in an interlocutory situation. “[S]pring[ing] from a sense of disappointment or frustration” (p. 100), the “cliché effect” results in the hearer reducing the speaker to his/her words and in building a triumphant image of the self at the other’s expense. Analysing Louis MacNeice’s poem “Homage to clichés” from a Lacanian perspective, Haberer argues that, in literature, the cliché is related to modernity with its “aesthetics of novelty and originality” (p. 108). The cliché, therefore, “deserves to be rehabilitated” (p. 109), with people paying more attention to what is being said, so that they can actually hear “the speaking heart”.

The concept of intertextuality, as coined by Julia Kristeva in the late 1960s, but applied even earlier by T.S. Eliot and David Jones, is explored in the next chapter, “Intertextuality in Theory and Practice”, where the author points out that the many definitions and redefinitions of intertextuality are “a symptom of the vital importance of the issues at stake and of the impossibility of any final knowledge about them, as they concern [...] man, language and the real” (p. 122). He argues that the intertextual effect cannot be ended by erudition; it is meant “to defeat the notion of identifiable authorship” (p. 127), to “take us to the edge of something obscure and incomprehensible” (p. 129), and “to combine meaning and the exemption of meaning” (p. 131).

A whole chapter is dedicated to Louis MacNeice’s *Autumn Journal*, which examines the poem in relation to MacNeice’s brief experience of the Spanish Civil War. The poetic analysis of the poem’s meter, rhymes and accumulation-based syntax overlaps with the thematic analysis, covering aspects of the public and private areas of life, with readings in political, moral and documentary keys. Dealing with daily desires and fears, the poem is, in Haberer’s view, particularly concerned with the ending of things such as happy love, youth, illusions, war in Spain; in short, the ending of an era.

Chapter seven, “Orwell, MacSpaunday and Spain”, focuses on the gloomy 1930s and the five British writers who volunteered to fight in the Spanish Civil War: George Orwell and the collectively named MacSpaunday (Louis MacNeice, Stephen Spender, W.H. Auden, Cecil Day-Lewis), a derogatory label created by Roy Campbell, who imagined them as a group of like-minded poets with divergent sexual orientations. Although the five writers’ relations to socialism, Marxism, and communism were very different, they all played important parts in defending the republic, whether in verse or on the actual war front. As Haberer explains, of the five, Orwell seems to stand out as a failed and rather resentful poet, having learned the hard way that writers had better stay out of politics.

“Ted Hughes et la cruauté du réel” [Ted Hughes and the cruelty/rawness of the real] does a close reading of “The Howling of Wolves”, which Haberer discusses in the context of its creation as a poem about the burden of reality, madness and death. Commenting on free verse as providing imaginary immediacy, on the repetitions of words and structures, on the parallel syntax and the poem’s layout on the page, Haberer offers readers an in-depth analysis of the sounds and the implicatures of the text’s silences and unvoiced emotions, which, in turn, ‘speak’ about the subject’s “jouissance du réel”, a reality that is simultaneously cruel and raw and a linguistic enjoyment for the reader.

The ninth chapter, “Du littoral au littéral” [From littoral to literal], is an analysis of Louis MacNeice’s more obscure poem “Littoral”, which combines elements of regularity and continuity with elements of irregularity and disruption. In Haberer’s view, the horizontal sequence of sounds produces two seemingly contradictory effects: (re)centering and closing versus decentralizing and gaping;

the gap effect is heightened by the poem's last verse ("Each child his own seashore", pp. 196, 200-201), a metaphor which creates meaning from meaninglessness. Returning to Lacan's notions of the unconscious and *jouissance*, Haberer concludes that poetry in general is an interrogation of a forbidden *jouissance*, whereas in relation to MacNeice's "Littoral" (a metaphorical border place of the unconscious), the play-on-words (littoral/ literal) – i.e. language – confirms how the letter differentiating between similar words should be uttered, thus leading to *jouissance* as if in a cancellation of death itself.

"Robert Lowell au passage de l'histoire" [Robert Lowell at the crossroads of history] is a chapter that looks at Lowell's background, his obsessive interest in episodes of historical violence, and at his poem "For the Union Dead" about Colonel Shaw and his regiment of African-Americans. Uncannily linking past and present, the poem moves readers – in Haberer's perspective – through "the ricochet effect of the voice reflected by the wall of the impossible reality" (p. 229, my transl.). Thematically, Lowell's poem highlights the submission and alienation of modern city-dwellers, the effects of American imperialism, the end of a civilization that has lost the values it was founded on.

"A Personal MacNeice A-Z" is – as its title suggests – the most personal piece in the volume, constantly underlining (in alphabetical order) Haberer's connection to Irish poet Louis MacNeice, through a descriptive and anecdotal listing of poem titles and other works analysed by the French scholar (e.g. *Autumn Journal*, *The Burning Perch*, "Bagpipe Music", "Littoral", *The Strings Are False*), conferences (on clichés), courses and places or institutions (e.g. CNED, CCI, The Queen's College at Oxford) hosting Haberer's work on MacNeice, as well as people who impacted MacNeice's life and career (for instance, W.H. Auden, T.S. Eliot, Hedli Anderson, Charles Katzman, W.B. Yeats) or Haberer's (e.g. E.R. Dodds, John Fuller, Jacqueline Genet, Jean-Georges Ritz).

The last chapter, "Virginia Woolf's Non-Hero", discusses Woolf's first break with traditional forms of fiction by looking at her novel *Jacob's Room* (1922) and the elusiveness of its protagonist. Although critics have tended to read the narrative as a war novel, Haberer sees it as "an elegiac novel, related to Woolf's family romance" (p. 260), and dedicated to her brother Thoby Stephen. Similarly to Percival from Woolf's more famous *The Waves*, Jacob has nothing admirable about him; he is nothing but a "blurred image" (p. 258), always silent, 'uncatchable', until "he simply becomes radically absent, leaving his room empty" (p. 261).

In short, *La Forêt obscure* is a cultured collection of literary analyses set against well-defined cultural and historical backgrounds, which take the educated reader through a metaphorical enfilade of writers, texts and contexts, displaying its author's sound research and keen eye for detail. At the same time, the blending of English and French in the scholarly discourse keeps the reader alert for (un)expected code changes, making a delightfully engaging read for both students and teachers of English literature.

References

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