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Mario Richter, *Apollinaire: Le renouvellement de l'écriture poétique du XX^e siècle*. Paris: Classiques Garnier, 2014. 362 pp. 64€ (cl). ISBN: 978-2-8124-2046-7; 39€ (pb) ISBN: 978-2-8124-2045-0 (cl).

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Mario Richter's 2014 publication is a translation of his 1990 *Apollinaire. Il rinnovamento della scrittura poetica all'inizio del Novecento*, until now only available in Italian, although a number of Richter's articles on the same or related topics have been published in French over the years. Richter's title emphasizes continual "renewal" in Apollinaire, a poet always ready to confront the changing present of the early twentieth century; even, it seems, when he was at war on the front lines. At the same time, Apollinaire is ever faithful to the past: Richter describes him as an Orpheus, faithful to his Eurydice (his personal/poetic past of memories and traditions) as well as a Don Juan (always engaged with a new modern) (p. 35). Apollinaire himself declared that he cherished both "l'Ordre" and "l'Aventure," and his ambivalence is well known to Apollinaire scholars. Richter's book takes a detailed look at a number of texts and contexts in which the poet's mediation of the past and the new took place.

The book's three sections progress chronologically, grouping close readings of two, five, and six poems respectively. (There is also an Appendix with articles on Apollinaire's pseudonym and specific aspects of his relations to Soffici and di Chirico.)

Part one treats the poet's fading use of symbolist melody in two poems from the 1913 volume *Alcools*. With sensitive close readings of "La chanson du mal-aimé," Richter demonstrates that even as that poem embraces modernity and new imagery, it does so within the confines of musicality and symbolism, deriving an absolute even from the poem's experience with the contingent (see p. 54, for example). On the other hand, "La Blanche neige," although it begins with angels ("Les anges les anges dans le ciel"), fully confronts the immediate and often disordered sensations and perceptions of the present. Of interest is Richter's point that "La Blanche neige" is like a child's rhyme, of which Apollinaire wrote in "La Maison des morts":

« Des enfants
De ce monde ou bien de l'autre
Chantaient de ces rondes
Aux paroles absurdes et lyriques
Qui sans doute sont les restes
Des plus anciens monuments poétiques
De l'humanité » (p. 62)

His reading shows that a simple daily reality is present in the poem but is finely woven into a celestial and mythic musicality (p. 65). This reading of the less frequently commented "La Blanche neige" makes an interesting counterpoint to the discussion of one of Apollinaire's most read poems, "La Chanson du mal-aimé."

Part two treats experimental, often ideogrammatic poems drawn from the opening section of the 1918 *Calligrammes: Poèmes de la paix et de la guerre*. The volume's opening poem, "Liens," claims that the senses

are dear to the poet while they are also his enemies: nonetheless he will write “pour vous exalter/ Ô sens ô sens chéris,” and as such, articulates a promise to write the immediate present of the modern world. Performing close readings of the multivalent images of the present and material world in this poem, Richter shows that the poet is in “une sorte de guerre du *je* contre lui-même” (83). His readings of “Les Collines,” “Lettre-Océan,” “Le musicien de Saint-Merry,” and “Un fantôme de nuées” each show a way of seeing this rich, but often sorrowful tension in the poet’s voice.

Part three examines a group of war poems. Separate chapters discuss five of the twenty-one poems of *Case d’Armons*, a small book that Apollinaire published while he was serving at the front in 1915, and that was later included in *Calligrammes* as the third section. In addition, an important chapter is devoted to “La Victoire,” a poem first published in 1917, and composed when Apollinaire had returned to Paris after becoming wounded at the front in March 1916. “Loin du pigeonier” and “Visée” are shaped poems, and Richter continues his line-by-line approach to reveal many possible readings of their visual shapes. Overall this section of the book shows a poet who investigates the unknown—even war—through poetry-making, maintaining faith in his creative power despite the violence of his surroundings.

The emphasis on close reading in each of the three sections of the book (thirteen chapters) makes it difficult even for a well-informed reader to synthesize the points made in the different chapters. The book appears to be a collection of articles, some of them with the style of a conference paper taking a single problem of explication as a starting point. (The chapter on “Les Collines” and the one on “Le Musicien de Saint-Merry” in particular open with a problem posed by a word or pair of words that had not yet been fully explicated in the community of Apollinaire scholars!) Transitions often consist of a simple announcement that now, we are moving on to the next example. Richter doesn’t help us out with a conclusion or conclusions to his sections, either. But the author brings great erudition to his explications of the various permutations of the poet’s fidelity to memory (thus, Orpheus) and his openness to present/future experience, no matter how disordered or surprising it might be.

Richter helpfully evokes the huge infraction to taste that Parisians at the turn of the century experienced. He explains that Apollinaire, born in 1880, “fait partie de la génération de poètes et d’artistes [...] qui, sans doute plus que toute autre, a dû subir les plus dures épreuves au détriment de son goût” (p. 12). When new technologies permitted the production of “des objets nouveaux et en série de plus en plus nombreux [...],” Art Nouveau decorative forms, based on nature, were called upon: “[...] l’embarras est si grand que l’on sent la nécessité de les embellir et, en tous cas, de les humaniser en les couvrant avec des ornements à l’aspect végétal ou anthropomorphe” (p. 12). And yet, the poet saw “taste” as a hindrance to art, writing: “L’art doit être hors du goût et les trois quarts de ceux qui aiment l’art ne se préoccupent que du goût, qu’il est difficile d’en sortir” (qtd by Richter, p. 11). The back cover wraps Apollinaire “dans sa totalité” into the myth of Orphism “où l’art habitué à ne s’habituer à rien.” Aesthetic norms are not the guide they used to be:

« Si on attribue à la poésie le rôle de révéler l’inconnu (que Baudelaire appelait aussi ‘vitalité universelle’ et peut-être ‘Beauté’), les concepts de beau et de laid ne sont plus propres à la définir. Dès lors la poésie s’évade des frontières de l’esthétique et du goût pour devenir un véritable moyen de connaissance » (p. 12).

This contextualizes the book’s commentary on “La Chanson du mal-aimé,” with an emphasis on the deep traces of the poet struggling to free himself from such taste, thus to accept the modern, and, as the title puts it clearly, to forget (but he can’t) the woman who has rejected him. And having read Richter’s commentary, we can better understand the importance of some seemingly casual passages about what is new in modern life. For instance in “Zone,” when Apollinaire writes: “Tu lis les prospectus les catalogues les affiches qui chantent tout haut/Voilà la poésie ce matin et pour la prose il y a les journaux” [1], it is not just casual bravado but a bold move towards the discovery of the unknown.

A bold move, yes, but for Richter, a risk that a new art or poetic language will resolve and transcend. To be sure, Richter explores many moments or passages where the poet seems to watch certainties disappear: his chapter on “Un fantôme de nuées,” for instance, discovers the loss of song and the undermining of Orpheus in this poem about acrobats performing in the street. But the chapter concludes: “Ce prodige formel du vide et de l’absence est bien, en définitive, la ‘profonde statue en rien’ mise en œuvre par les *Calligrammes*” (p. 161). The void becomes statuesque. His Apollinaire renounces taste but nevertheless keeps control over an art that can transform.

It would be for a later critic to ask about the feasibility of this “transformation.” For Timothy Mathews, the writeability of the senses and subjectivity is itself in question: he quotes Blanchot: “la littérature va vers elle-même, vers son essence qui est sa disparition.”[2] Yes, Blanchot’s notion of disappearance is appropriate for Mathews’s reading of an Apollinaire whose language occupies a gap between the poet’s self and the experience of modernity or indeed of the war that surrounds him. You can see the poignant sense of the distance that remains between the sensation and the word in Mathews’s analysis, for instance, of “Lettre-Océan,” which “leaves its reader in a mosaic-space of mobile words, an iridescent structure that makes its reference to the world unfamiliar, buried and sourceless in the traces left by watching, thinking and writing” (Mathews, p. 177).

In a different vein, Richter charts the multivalences and poignancies of “Lettre-Océan” but sees the triumph of creation in the sound “CRE” that appears twenty-four times in the second circular form of this calligram. It is an onomatopoeia for the (embarrassing) sound of the poet’s new shoes, thus an inclusion of what is low, mundane, and unpoetic. Yet at the same time its double meaning makes it a clear signal of the verb “créer”—thus, a confident assertion that the art of poetry will bring soothing aesthetic order to the perceptions of a chaotic world. Thus, states Richter: “Le pas créateur du poète, aussi peu gracieux qu’il soit [...] *trace un cercle*, en harmonie avec le temps solaire, réalise autrement dit *une roue*, le symbole de la création humaine par excellence [...]” (p. 132).

Richter carries over this emphasis on creative power to his reading of Apollinaire’s war poetry, claiming that although the reality of things seen on the front challenge him, poetry allowed him to triumph aesthetically: he is “sûr uniquement de son âme orphique qu’il savait avoir reçue de naissance, garantie de victoire sur le chaos, sur l’horreur que la ‘vitalité universelle’ révèle chaque jour” (p. 25). Noting that the war has deprived him of the strings of his harp (this through comparing him to David), he states that Apollinaire “réussit tout de même à tirer d’un instrument devenu pour lui inutilisable des effets inédits et profonds de *contrastes simultanés*” (p. 26). A creative process, for Richter, subsumes the knowledge of war’s reality.

But many readers have been aware of the uncomfortable moments in *Calligrammes* when the poet states the beauty of a battle scene, and they are rightly curious as to how to square certain passages (“Ah Dieu que la guerre est jolie”) with a poet whose perceptions and humanity they also trust. (Note, though, that this line is spoken at the beginning of a poem that goes on to bring a complex irony to it. Annette Becker has called this line the most misunderstood since the poet’s death.[3]) Raymond Jean has stated that Apollinaire “suppresses” history in these moments, reflecting his connections to Italian futurism in so doing.[4] Timothy Mathews responds carefully. On the one hand he seconds the value of Jean’s claim that because the poet does not dismantle ideology (patriotism), he effectively acquiesces to it. Apollinaire’s “À L’Italie” does this, “with its exhortations to further aggression and increased nationalist fervour” (Mathews, p. 221). Mathews also owns that the poet’s “war writing attempts to ‘transcend’ alienation by transforming images of destruction, image itself, into the material of creative construction. [...] We ignore Jean’s argument at the risk of abdicating our own right as readers to pursue dialogue even in the context of its suppression...” (Mathews, p. 221). But on the other hand, Mathews notes the evolution in Apollinaire’s allegiance to futurism and its acceptance of militaristic enthusiasm (Richter frequently takes care to contradict the “myth” of Apollinaire as futurist, as well). And, most

importantly, Mathews notices Apollinaire's doubt and the cracks in his epistemology, his language, and his confidence:

"The poet Apollinaire sees reflected in his desires has no greater ambition than to imagine *with* the world and *in* the world; he maintains an identity that lives, that continues, that is moved in the space where perception internalises, but is left powerless faced with events and memories that remain 'other' [...]" (Mathews, p. 231).

Another question to arise more recently in Apollinaire studies is that of gendered elements in the war poetry. Richter considers the conflation of erotic imagery and war (as on p. 232), but raises no questions as to the gendered implications of this feature of Apollinaire's poetics of war. For work on this topic, one can turn to Susan Harrow, who has, with fascinating insight, related the many expressions of erotic desire in *Calligrammes* to the male subject position in war, a subject position that is in its turn threatened by the apparatus of military conflict.[5]

Richter ends his book with a reading of "La Victoire," one of the last poems of *Calligrammes* and certainly, as Richter says, a poem that (along with "La jolie rousse," the final poem) offers the poet's summation of what he has hoped to achieve. The poem's final lines draw a parallel between the ongoing war and the vitality of new poetic language:

« La Victoire avant tout sera
De bien voir au loin
De tout voir
De près
Et que tout ait un nom nouveau »

Richter's reading of "La Victoire" is a valuable and illuminating account of Apollinaire's struggle to position himself in the Paris where a new, younger avant-garde was emerging when he returned to that scene after his experience at the front. The lines above clearly play on the obvious meaning of the word *Victoire*, which, given the capitalization of the word and the date of the poem, is the hoped-for victory of France in the war. Is he rewriting the idea of Victory as a revolution in vision and in language? That is not the question that concerns Richter, who considers the word "Victoire" nearly exclusively as pertaining to the success of a new language. Thus this final chapter, which we need to take as a sort of conclusion, is a compelling, detailed reading of the text's many poetic dimensions viewed in terms of aesthetic struggles, reasserting the author's leaning towards the capacities of poetic language to renew our vision: despite any uncertainties Apollinaire may announce, "La Victoire" contains a "raison lyrique" that might "recréer le monde et la vie" (pp.293, 292). Richter's careful readings definitely serve to elucidate that "raison lyrique."

NOTES

[1] Guillaume Apollinaire, *Alcools* (Paris: Gallimard, 1920), p. 7.

[2] The quote is from Maurice Blanchot, *Le livre à venir*. Mathews quotes this on p. 197. Timothy Mathews, *Reading Apollinaire: Theories of poetic language* (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 1987).

[3] Annette Becker, *Apollinaire: Une biographie de guerre* (Paris: Tallandier, 2009). See pp. 95-96. Becker goes on to discuss the problem of this perception of beauty, adding valuable insight by quoting from André Masson, Teilhard de Chardin, and Blaise Cendrars, other combatants who thought probingly about the fascination of violence.

[4] Raymond Jean, *La poésie du désir: Nerval, Lautréamont, Apollinaire, Eluard* (Paris: Seuil, 1974).

[5] Susan Harrow. *The Material, the Real, and the Fractured Self: Subjectivity and Representation from Rimbaud to Réda* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004). See particularly pp. 103-7.

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