
H-France Review Vol. 17 (December 2017), No. 236

Vuong, Léa. *Pascal Quignard: Towards the Vanishing Point*. Cambridge, UK: Legenda, 2016. 126 pp. \$99 U.S. ISBN 978-1-909662-91-9.

Review by Jean-Louis Pautrot, Saint Louis University

French author Pascal Quignard, who was born in 1948 and has been writing since 1968, has received increasing attention from scholars in literature and readers internationally, especially since being awarded the *Prix Goncourt* in 2002. Léa Vuong's study is the first book-length essay devoted to the works of Quignard to appear in English, although not the first to appear in an Anglophone country. It is overall a well-written, well-documented analysis that manages to give a good glimpse into a voluminous literary production (Quignard's publications are now nearing eighty books), while reporting on several important, and less studied, aspects of Quignard's *oeuvre*. However two elements undermine its promised scope and persuasion: the brevity of the study, at a hundred pages, makes it difficult to develop a thorough and convincing discussion of the announced thesis; furthermore, the author's thesis being presented as the single overarching principle in Quignard's writing does not do entire justice to other, important aspects of this complex *oeuvre*.

Vuong's thesis is that "the ineluctability of death, or more precisely the journey towards a promised but unreachable vanishing point is at the heart of Quignard's writing" (p. 2). Much like the vanishing point in art orientates a painting's creation and reading, Vuong argues, there is a vanishing point in Quignard that commands both writing and reception. Vuong illustrates this with the example of the Paestum diver mural in Salerno, an image dear to Quignard, that shows a man in mid-air before disappearing in the water, "forever fixed in an unfinished descent" (p. 2), giving a visual equivalent of the *oeuvre*. The latter is "driven by an effort towards disappearance that affects all its aspects, from the representation of the writer to the texts he produces, including the characters they contain and the words that compose them" (p. 2).

Vuong bases the premises of her discussion on other scholarly studies that examine how the theme of disappearance is prevalent among French contemporary writers such as Patrick Modiano, Jean Echenoz, Emmanuel Carrère, and Quignard, all born after World War II. Vuong writes that "disappearance functions as a unifying trend" for this generation who did not see the conflict, "but are still affected by its aftermath" (p. 3). While one could argue that disappearance is also central in the works of older writers who lived through the war, such as Alain Robbe-Grillet, Claude Simon, Marguerite Duras and Georges Perec, and can be traced directly to the crushing French defeat, the Holocaust, and Hiroshima, it is undeniably present in Quignard's works. It can be attributed, first and foremost, to the fact that Quignard spent eight years of his early childhood, from 1951 to 1959, living and going to school in Le Havre, a port in Normandy where eighty percent of the harbour and downtown were razed by Allied air force bombings in September 1944. Childhood memories of devastation and ruin (as well as of the on-going reconstruction) are recurrent in his writings, and feed the notions, reminiscent of Paul Valéry's *La crise de l'esprit* (1919), that all civilizations are to disappear, and that the ideals of progress and humanity on which they are built are but delusional attempts to veil an ancient, natural core of predation and violence.

While haunted by disappearance like others of his generation, Quignard's own and distinctive contemporariness, Vuong argues, is evident in his books being organized "as a quest for [...] the "Jadis" [the erstwhile]—a term used to designate the unreachable site of origins towards which all texts are directed" (p. 3), older than the past, outside of History and of time itself. While his books are "populated with figures plucked from the past [...] to prehistory and beyond, towards the mythical and the legendary" (p. 3), it is this *Jadis* that constitutes the one overarching notion, the "vanishing point."

Vuong remarks that "exposure and concealment" are found in Quignard's biographical itinerary (p. 3), in which a successful career as a powerful literary editor was followed, in 1994, by a resignation from all functions and a subsequent, secluded and solitary life spent reading and writing, as he himself has summarized it. The opposition that Vuong describes between disappearance and the "act of appearing" seen as "the postures forced upon him by society" (p. 5) indeed shapes Quignard's definition of writing as departing from the social, firstly in the author's self representation, then as a theme in his writings (evidence of this that Vuong overlooks is the fact that all his novel plots narrate a departure from society and all his main characters socially "disappear"). Furthermore, Vuong points out, defining writing as an asocial activity opposes it to speech (p. 5), which is social interaction and communication. (Indeed, Quignard introduced early, in his *Petits traités* (1990), the notion that writing is a "silencing" of oral language, by which a text becomes a differed address to a potential, faceless reader, or to nobody in existence). Adding to this defection is the Mallarméan notion that language has inherent limitations such that it can never fully account for reality, that an unspeakable part remains, suggesting an unreachable ideal of communication beyond words. In Quignard's books, Vuong traces this aspect to the influence of Maurice Blanchot, arguing that it prompts "the annihilation of verbal language [...] that can never truly achieve communication, truth or knowledge," thus making it a "process of destruction" (p. 5). Quignard solves the quandary of using language while trying to destroy it, Vuong continues, by "trying to reverse the civilizing aspect of language and lead it back to the inhumanity [...] of origins" (p. 6) (a stylistic theory he has developed in *Rhétorique spéculative* [1995]). This leads Vuong to claim that Quignard's *oeuvre* "paradoxically draws its value from the relentless expression of its own disappearance" (p. 6).

Chapter one, "A Vanishing Act," reflects on how Quignard portrays himself as a solitary writer. Although aloof authors are common in French literature, Quignard gives a new dimension to the notion. Celebration of solitude, Vuong argues, is here "rooted in longing for an erasure of the self" (p. 6), and in a "critique of the subjectivity and selfhood, both seen as mere products of discourse" (p. 10), following Lacan (and, I would add, Benveniste). The "erasure" initially consists in a depreciation of the writer status by claiming, on Quignard's part, to be first and foremost a reader, indebted to and citing many other authors and artists, which leads to an "extreme form of intertextuality" (p. 13). Vuong views reading as adopting "an empty shell," since Quignard's reader figure is defined by absence (as represented, for example in *Le Lecteur* [1976]), and then characterizes the written work as "an empty vessel invaded and taken over by the presence of others" (p. 10). Through brief analyses of several works, such as *Lycophron et Zétés* (2010), *Albucius* (1990), *Les tablettes de buis d'Apronemia Avitia* (1984), *Carus* (1979), *Villa Amalia* (2006), and *Les solidarités mystérieuses* (2011), Vuong endeavors to show that Quignard's goal is to "erase the self as writer and author by using intertextuality as well as actual and active collaborations" with other artists (p. 14). Such collaborations, especially with visual artists like his friend Pierre Skira, "allow his writing to become a physical act devoted to the production of invisibility," because turning the text into a visual presence "leads to the representation of its absence" (p. 15). Vuong points out that solitude for Quignard is "immersed in the presence of others," be they other fellow artists or readers, as outlined in *Sur l'idée d'une communauté de solitaires* (2015). Countering the perceived tendency of critics to read Quignard's texts, with their numerous figures of reclusive artists and solitary characters, as a form of self-portrait or auto-fiction, Vuong views "autobiographical elements" as "included in texts that aim for the impersonal" (p. 16). Writing allows for achieving forms of disappearance not possible in reality (p. 19), and the representation of fictional disappearances is to be read as "a desire to return to a complete fusion and non-differentiation with the outer world" (p. 16). The novels, therefore, lean toward "the universal rather than the personal"

(p. 21). Quignard, she concludes, is not Narcissus, but Echo, invisible and calling out to what has been lost (p. 23).

In chapter two, “From Language to Silence,” several of Quignard’s *contes* (tales) are analyzed as conveying “the disappearance of language.” Quignard’s use of tales appears rooted in authors of the Antiquity, in psychoanalytical studies, and in Benjamin’s essay “The Storyteller” (p. 27), and allows him to “pursue the process of dissolution present in the novels” (p. 6), which already “lean towards the universal rather than the subjective” (p. 27). Vuong examines Quignard’s odd theory of the tale as a non-subjective, prelinguistic, close to the unconscious and almost animal, form, and sees here the influence of Bruno Bettelheim, concluding that the tales aim “for a realm that sits outside of literature and language” (p. 28). Vuong studies what distinguishes the tale from the myth for Quignard, pointing out that tales allow for metamorphosis (a prevalent notion in Quignard recently). Metamorphosis’s purpose in the tales analyzed is “to make the characters [...] disappear” (p. 30). Vuong then proceeds to show that what Quignard meant by tales being “prelinguistic” also entails representing the disappearance of language, as illustrated with the tale included in *Le nom sur le bout de la langue* (1993). A recourse to Quignard’s essay on Louis René des Forêts *Le vœu de silence* (1985) prompts the conclusion that “literature is seen as a way to honour one’s vow [to stop speaking] whilst surviving within the realm of language” (p. 34). The tales then “include in their plot the deficiency of the spoken language, and they offer fictional and meta-fictional representations of the destruction of speech they stand for” (p. 35). Since several tales have been turned into musical pieces or ballets, Vuong explores Quignard’s collaborations with musicians and dancers, which help expose words’ “inherent inadequacies” by combining them with other means of expression (p. 40). Finally the dichotomy between *La haine de la musique* (1996), in which music is presented as tyrannical, noxious and lethal, and *Boutès* (2008) where it is described as vital and feminine but deadly, is used to suggest a link to the maternal (an element which is central in Quignard).

Chapter three, “Towards the Invisible” returns to Quignard’s relation with the visual, examining as well his writings on painting and his fictional visual artists. Vuong sees in his collaborations with artists a move to “abandon his own voice in favour of” other voices “to the point of oblivion” (p. 45). Yet the “paradoxical wish for its own vanishing” in a text has to be reconciled with the writer’s extensive production (p.46). Vuong proposes that Quignard resorts to obscurity and to images to effect such a reconciliation. Drawing on *Le lecteur* and again on tales, as well as on the 1992 narrative *La Frontière*, she enumerates a number of figurative or literal of obscurity, ending with *Terrasse à Rome* (2000), a novel that centers on the technique of engraving called “manière noire,” which also serves as a metaphor of Quignard’s own writing. Vuong concludes that, since Quignard’s style obviously means to “exceed the visible” (p. 58), and since the book is “a means to communicate death,” the black manner and the obscurity that it puts into play make the reader fall “into the abysmal space it looks towards,” that can “never been reached” (p. 59).

Chapter four, “The Lure of the *Jadis*,” turns to a core notion in Quignard’s thought, defined here as “unreachable point of origin” (p. 61), put in parallel with Lacan’s “real,” since both perpetually escape representation and intellectual grasp. Vuong thinks that the *Jadis* is defined at the expense of the past in Quignard’s books. The past is sabotaged at the expense of historical knowledge and truth, with the purpose of “luring the reader towards an unreachable point of origin” (p. 63). Indeed Quignard constantly devalues History (read as a dominant narrative serving as justification of modern values), and replaces it with what Vuong terms an archeology, “accessing underground vestiges rather than bringing them back to the surface” (p. 62). Unlike Foucault who endeavored to uncover hidden structures, his archeology means to create obscurity and “reveal an absence” (p. 65). Quignard thus aims to emphasize the advantages of obscurity over knowledge, something which is apparent, Vuong claims, in his desire for “de-erudition,” going back to a sort of animality (p. 73). Drawing on Kristeva and Bataille who wrote on prehistory, Vuong proposes that the quest for a primeval space amounts to a metamorphic logic, apparent in Quignard’s theory of the metaphor as developed in *Rhétorique spéculative*, a book that also puts Philosophy on trial. But the reliance on rhetoric, Vuong concludes, is deceptive: the writer can only fail to regain a

“savage nature of writing” (p. 74), and his readers are merely seduced (which seems to read here as “duped”). Since the *Jadis* “cannot be regained,” its predatory quest is self-destructive, and the inherent violence of the “savage” writer “is turned inward” (p. 75).

Chapter five, “Incendiary Writing,” turns at last to evidencing some of the destructive techniques that Quignard would use to destroy writing and language. Vuong discusses two that she proposes Quignard borrowed from Blanchot: fragmentation and fire. Quignard has written an essay on the use of the fragment in modern literature, *Une gêne technique à l'égard des fragments* (1986), which also serves to explain why he himself resorts to a form that he disliked initially. Vuong’s conclusion is that “the writer does not appear as a predatory hunter here, but rather as [the fragment’s] entrapped victim” (p. 80), the only way out being self-destruction. Vuong then turns to Blanchot and his essay on Kafka *La part du feu* in order to examine a similar destructive and negative nature of writing as creative force. Observing that Quignard is fascinated with fire (he claims to have burnt all his musical and visual creations in 1968), she then remarks, in what is the most interesting part of her discussion, that Quignard’s notion of fire seem to owe not only to Blanchot but also to the notion of sacralized destruction found in Kabalistic literature, namely in the writings of rabbi Nachman of Breslov, who advocated a disappearance that could not be extinguished by burning his own books (p. 84–85). The end of the chapter analyzes the figure on the child, also prevalent in Quignard, and shows that, far from bringing “hope” that would be a remedy to “despair” (p. 7), the child figure is but a screen that “allows the void it replaces to shine through” (p. 93).

The conclusion restates how the gesture in Quignard’s works is transitory, like the Paestum diver, “caught between affirmation and renunciation, freedom and despair, and between presence and absence” (p. 7). It also examines the relative lack of interest for this oeuvre in Anglophone countries, when it is read and praised in numerous other countries in Europe, South America and Asia. It also wonders whether Quignard’s readiness to take part in critical discourses and events on his own works (something which can also be read as another form of collaboration) facilitates the critic’s task.

Vuong’s study is not to be neglected and it can provide a good entrance point for readers of English into this demanding but also rewarding *oeuvre*. Many of the points that she makes are solid (a number of them have been documented before), and she highlights some influences by authors and texts that had not come to critics’ attention before. She also manages to study, if only briefly, a good number of Quignard’s books.

It is to be regretted, though, that Vuong did not devote time to study a few texts in detail, so as to evidence her thesis that Quignard aims at destroying writing and language and that “savage writing” is but an enterprise in annihilation. Had she done so, she may have realized that, although influenced by Blanchot and Bataille among others, Quignard frequently disagrees with them; that *Rhétorique spéculative*, for example, outlines a theory and practice of metaphor and the “savage nature” of writing as relaying something of the tone of voice, energy and body of the writer, thereby making the endeavor more productive than a doomed attempt. Similarly, a close look at Quignard’s use of the fragment may have shown that he does not often use it as a destructive tactic, but conceives a fragmented text as a sort of net that lets the *Jadis* (and the real, which is different) be sensed (this is documented in several studies). Indeed, the *Jadis* in Quignard does not seem to function as unreachable Ur-past as much as a timeless energy affecting the present by constantly giving birth to it. Likewise, the gesture towards destruction that Vuong argues is at the core of Quignard’s literary enterprise is contradicted by countless instances of beginnings and emergence. Furthermore, language may not be as impotent here as Vuong makes it: if it cannot convey truth and knowledge directly, it can speak indirectly. So does the book, establishing a “complicity” between author and reader (*Vie secrète*). Social “disappearance” does not always result in self-destruction, but creates a space for meditation and contemplation, for bliss (see *Les Paradisiaques* [2004]), for getting in touch with the “self” (distinct here, as in psychoanalysis, from the ego and superego), that anonymous, animal part at the core of every human. In fact, it may have been more productive, instead of insisting on “disappearance” only, to frame the topic as a dialectics between presence and absence (something that some scholars have recently begun to study). Tempering Vuong’s statement that “this

body of work does not amount to an *oeuvre*” because it cannot achieve presence (p. 85), I have argued elsewhere that there is an obvious “presence effect” that is not to be neglected, created by ebbings, echoes, rhythms, symmetries, resonances and extensions of books into one another, a sort of internal memory, but that this disembodied presence mainly serves to make the absence of the *Jadis* and of the “being” felt.

Finally, on a technical level, it must be mentioned that Vuong does not always acknowledge previous critical studies on Quignard while obviously espousing their conclusions; some of the materials she cites by Quignard or scholars is sometimes embarrassingly taken out of context; translations of citations in French are not always accurate; some errors also appear here and there: the character from *Terrasse à Rome* is Vanlacre, not Valancre (p. 56), and neither *Vie secrète* by Quignard (p. 16) nor *Dora Bruder* by Modiano (p. 3) are novels.

Jean-Louis Pautrot
Saint Louis University
jeanlouis.pautrot@slu.edu

Copyright © 2017 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for edistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of *H-France Review* nor republication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on *H-France Review* are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies.

ISSN 1553-9172