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The Dishonour of Poets

By Howard Slater

In the latest edition of *The Yale Anthology of French Poetry* the academic canon is extended once again. Howard Slater explores the incompatibility between poetry and the academy

Anthologies are blighted by a need to encapsulate, instruct and introduce. This nationalised tome is no exception. If it's 'a monumental work that will serve as a point of reference for contemporary French Studies for years to come' then we've got to breathe a sigh of relief that we've got day jobs and deplore scholarship. This is the problem of anthologies: there's not enough of what grabs you (the birthing drama of alienated consciousness), too much of what's supposed to impress you (soon-to-be-politicians and tenured academics) and omissions that you have to concede as not being within the parameters of the selection criteria (concrete, sound and code poetry). So, when the parameters are trumpeted as having been extended – the inclusion of poets from a French speaking diaspora, the growing presence of women writers, the inclusion of writers from other 'genres' and the inclusion of prose-poems – then you have to wonder, this late in the day, not only just how culturally conventional the academic poetry environment still is, but also how rooted this word 'poetry' is to a measurable textual practice.

Of course this has always been sensed and it's a primary reason why many people would condemn such a taught poetry and why others would attempt to write it on their own terms and publish it amongst themselves. This is what those poets that form the spine of the middle third of this anthology made happen. However, with the exception of Tristan Tzara, the selections here from the Surrealist Group (Breton, Desnos, Peret et al) are drawn from that aspect of their work that many consider the most tiresome – the lyrical love poem that resounds, ad infinitum, with the name of the muse. It is a shame that the selection parameters, rooted as they always are in the individual poet – the sensate subject of a taken-for-granted centrism – do not, here, extend to collaborative works such as Breton & Soupault's automatically anarchic *Magnetic Fields*. Here it's left to fringe Surrealists to provide the futurity of the 'hidden third': the telescopic emotional power of Antonin Artaud, Georges Bataille, Michel Leiris and Bernard Noël meets the now almost not so unknown Dora Marr, Joyce Mansour and Malcolm de Chazal.

This thematic focus on Surrealism in the anthology extends to the titling of one of the chronologically ordered sections; so that even when surrealism is becoming eclipsed, by, say, OULIPO, in the period 1946-66, we still have the header-parameter 'The Death Of André Breton' to contend with. Perhaps the reason for this is that Surrealism, being a cultural revolutionary movement, is flagged up for the cachet of its attack on worshipped mores, its bringing to poetry a nonconformity, an irrational reflux that attempted to make language into a logic of sensuousness. It is this aspect of Surrealism that the Situationists took on as a 'poetry of acts', an expanded field of poetry, a development of poetry away from the written page, away from the word and away from the subject as the locus of creativity. It could be said that this urge to be immersed in language, to be somehow behind the words in a temporary becoming and disarticulation of their meanings, to be outstripped yet somehow in control, is a tendency of poetry in general that was first whiffed in Lautréamont and Rimbaud and manifested by Surrealism as psychic automatism. It is as present in the work of Blaise Cendrars and Pierre Reverdy (retrospectively associated with cubism) as that of Ghérasim Luca, Annie Le Brun and Jacques Roubaud. With the former two there is that liberating use of the non-sequitur as it segues into a montage of intuitive links and haphazard socialisation that is seen later in the theoretical writings of Bataille, Lyotard, Irigaray and Cixous.

To some extent the expectation of sparks in this anthology dips-off in the latter stages as professional appearances seem to outweigh the minoritarian and discrete voices of small press poets. The solipsism of prize winners, the showy fare of formal invention and pastoral throwback just serves, here, to remake literature as an auto-reproductive cultural form, a loop without grain. So, the project of a liberation through literature becomes more muted. That the Lettrism of Isidore Isou and Gil Wolman is not included, that the sonorous and iconoclastic drive of Henri Chopin and Bernard Hiedsieck is cut out and curtailed by a hypostatised 'Surrealism' makes you nostalgic for the probably unrepresentative pages just passed. Maybe there's something to be said, then, for Mary Ann Caws's chronological approach in that you get a sense of undulation and folding, retroaction and overreaching. However with this anthology the singularity of passion and attitude that can't be taught seems to have been replaced by an analgesic of politeness that's on the syllabus. That said, if poetry is an articulation of 'intensive durations', then the poetry of controlled aggression is here represented by such as Abdellatif Laâbi, Léon-Gontran Damas and Danielle Collobert. Painful but autotraumatizing; experience troubledly formalised.

Not knowing the full range of what's presently on offer it's hard to draw many conclusions from this anthology, but there's some pointers to be had not only from the academic environment (anger-filter) that birthed this anthology but from the way that textual practice has, albeit belatedly, burst its genre confines (the inclusion of Picasso and Houellebecq is more of a selling point than an attempt at transversality when there's Pierre Guyotat's *Eden Eden Eden* and Raymond Roussel being left to one side). Poetry can still be a subversion of language and received meaning, a political force; it can still be a fleeting solidity, a prop to becoming and a context for conjecture, but it doesn't always take the form of recognisable language and it sometimes has to involute into buccal sound, rapped theory and verbose graffiti. With this in mind you cannot take this anthology too seriously because, hindered by the commodity forms of 'national', 'poetry', 'anthology' and 'Yale', it cannot capture some of that which has been fleeing for pleasure: Jacques Brel ->Francois Dufrêne ->Luc Ferrari. Like Proust and his railway timetables, like Debord and his street maps, some poetry has left books behind. a

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