

also by Beverley Bie Brahic

POETRY

Against Gravity

TRANSLATIONS

Hélène Cixous, *Hyperdream*

Hélène Cixous, *Manhattan*

Hélène Cixous, *Dream I Tell You*

Hélène Cixous and Roni Horn, *Agua Viva (Rings of Lispector)*

Hélène Cixous, *The Day I Wasn't There*

Hélène Cixous, *Reveries of the Wild Woman*

Hélène Cixous, *Portrait of Jacques Derrida as a Young Jewish Saint*

Jacques Derrida, *Geneses, Genealogies, Genres and Genius*

OTHER

the eye goes after

(digital images by Susan Cantrick accompanying poems

by Beverley Bie Brahic)

Francis Ponge

Unfinished Ode to **Mud**

poems translated by
Beverley Bie Brahic

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Biographical Note

Francis Ponge was born in Montpellier in the south of France in 1899. His family belonged to the Protestant minority, a fact not insignificant to his development as a poet as he himself hints: 'My origins [are] very close to a certain restraint, reserve and almost austerity . . . very close to the Cathars, very close as well to the Romans of Cato's time . . . there is a kind of atavism there, a moral rigour.' He grew up in Nîmes and Avignon, then, at the age of ten, moved with his family to Caen, in Normandy, where he complained that Gothic spires were not to his taste: 'I preferred square or round towers.'

According to secondary school reports Ponge was 'an intelligent pupil who generally does quite well . . . were he more methodical he might get excellent marks'. He recalled that at the age of fourteen he began to read *Litttré*; this French dictionary from the middle of the nineteenth century was to inspire and serve as an etymological and historical reference for many of his poems.

In 1916 Ponge finished secondary school with the best mark in philosophy for his region; the topic was 'On the art of thinking for oneself'. That September he moved to Paris to try his luck at entering the *École normale supérieure*, France's prestigious institution for the study of the sciences and humanities, whose entrance examination requires one or two years of intensive preparation. Ponge passed the written exam in 1919, but failed the oral. During this period he also attended classes at the Sorbonne and studied law.

In 1920 Ponge submitted his first prose poems to Jules Romains, and began to discuss other literary projects. In the next two years, as Hitler began his rise to power in Germany, Mussolini in Italy and Stalin in Russia, he published his first text in a new review called *Le Mouton blanc* and started his long correspondence with Jean Paulhan of the *Nouvelle Revue Française*, which published a first group of his texts, 'Trois satires', in 1923. In 1925 he went to Italy, where he witnessed a number of Fascist demonstrations; this was also the year

that the first texts of *Le Parti pris des choses* were published. In 1931 he married Odette Chabanel; their daughter Armande was born in 1935. In the midst of the period's massive unemployment Ponge took a job at the Messageries Hachette, which he compared to penal servitude. His experience as an office worker eventually led to his communist and socialist sympathies, and to a number of texts. In 1936, as a union representative for the managerial staff of Hachette, he took an active part in a strike there in June, and in January of 1937 he joined the Communist Party (he left it in 1947). Later that year Hachette fired him. In 1938 the texts for *Le Parti pris des choses* were accepted by Gallimard. Because of the war and the German Occupation, however, the book did not appear until 1942.

Mobilised in September 1939, demobilised the following July, Ponge and his wife joined the exodus from Paris. They settled in Lyon, where Ponge became active in the Resistance. Employed by an insurance company and then as a journalist, he found time to publish poems in the principal reviews of the French Resistance and to meet other writers, including Louis Aragon, Paul Eluard and Albert Camus, one of the first readers of *Le Parti pris*, who pointed it out to Sartre. He also began to collaborate with painters such as Braque, Dubuffet, Fautrier and Picasso.

After the war Ponge became increasingly involved in the world of literature and art, travelling around Europe and the United States to read an ever-expanding body of work. He died in 1988.

from THE DEFENCE OF THINGS

Pluie

La pluie, dans la cour où je la regarde tomber, descend à des allures très diverses. Au centre c'est un fin rideau (ou réseau) discontinu, une chute implacable mais relativement lente de gouttes probablement assez légères, une précipitation sempiternelle sans vigueur, une fraction intense du météore pur. A peu de distance des murs de droite et de gauche tombent avec plus de bruit des gouttes plus lourdes, individuées. Ici elles semblent de la grosseur d'un grain de blé, là d'un pois, ailleurs presque d'une bille. Sur des tringles, sur les accoudoirs de la fenêtre la pluie court horizontalement tandis que sur la face inférieure des mêmes obstacles elle se suspend en berlingots convexes. Selon la surface entière d'un petit toit de zinc que le regard surplombe elle ruisselle en nappe très mince, moirée à cause de courants très variés par les imperceptibles ondulations et bosses de la couverture. De la gouttière attenante où elle coule avec la contention d'un ruisseau creux sans grande pente, elle choit tout à coup en un filet parfaitement vertical, assez grossièrement tressé, jusqu'au sol où elle se brise et rejaillit en aiguillettes brillantes.

Chacune de ses formes a une allure particulière: il y répond un bruit particulier. Le tout vit avec intensité comme un mécanisme compliqué, aussi précis que hasardeux, comme une horlogerie dont le ressort est la pesanteur d'une masse donnée de vapeur en précipitation.

La sonnerie au sol des filets verticaux, le glou-glou des gouttières, les minuscules coups de gong se multiplient et résonnent à la fois en un concert sans monotonie, non sans délicatesse.

Lorsque le ressort s'est détendu, certains rouages quelque temps continuent à fonctionner, de plus en plus ralentis, puis toute la machinerie s'arrête. Alors si le soleil reparait tout s'efface bientôt, le brillant appareil s'évapore: il a plu.

Rain

The rain, in the courtyard where I watch it fall, comes down at very different speeds. In the centre, it is a fine discontinuous curtain (or mesh), falling implacably but relatively slowly, a drizzle, a never-ending languid precipitation, an intense dose of pure meteor. Not far from the right and left walls heavier drops fall more noisily, separately. Here they seem to be about the size of a grain of wheat, there of a pea, elsewhere nearly a marble. On the moulding, on the window ledges, the rain runs horizontally while on the undersides of these same obstacles it is suspended, plump as a humbug. It streams across the entire surface of a little zinc roof the peephole looks down on, in a thin moiré sheet due to the different currents set in motion by the imperceptible undulations and bumps in the roofing. From the adjoining gutter, where it runs with the restraint of a brook in a nearly level bed, it suddenly plunges in a perfectly vertical, coarsely braided stream to the ground, where it splatters and springs up again flashing like needles.

Each of its forms has a particular speed; each responds with a particular sound. The whole lives as intensely as a complicated mechanism, as precise as it is chancy, a clockwork whose spring is the weight of a given mass of precipitate vapour.

The chiming of the vertical streams on the ground, the gurgling of the gutters, the tiny gong beats multiply and resound all at once in a concert without monotony, not without delicacy.

When the spring is unwound, certain gears continue to function for a while, gradually slowing down, until the whole mechanism grinds to a halt. Then, if the sun comes out, everything is erased, the brilliant apparatus evaporates: it has rained.

La Fin de l'automne

Tout l'automne à la fin n'est plus qu'une tisane froide. Les feuilles mortes de toutes essences macèrent dans la pluie. Pas de fermentation, de création d'alcool; il faut attendre jusqu'au printemps l'effet d'une application de compresses sur une jambe de bois.

Le dépouillement se fait en désordre. Toutes les portes de la salle de scrutin s'ouvrent et se ferment, claquant violemment. Au panier, au panier! La Nature déchire ses manuscrits, démolit sa bibliothèque, gaule rageusement ses derniers fruits.

Puis elle se lève brusquement de sa table de travail. Sa stature aussitôt paraît immense. Décoiffée, elle a la tête dans la brume. Les bras ballants, elle aspire avec délices le vent glacé qui lui rafraîchit les idées. Les jours sont courts, la nuit tombe vite, le comique perd ses droits.

La terre dans les airs parmi les autres astres reprend son air sérieux. Sa partie éclairée est plus étroite, infiltrée de vallées d'ombres. Ses chaussures, comme celles d'un vagabond, s'imprègnent d'eau et font de la musique.

Dans cette grenouillerie, cette amphibiguïté salubre, tout reprend forces, saute de pierre en pierre et change de pré. Les ruisseaux se multiplient.

Voilà ce qui s'appelle un beau nettoyage, et qui ne respecte pas les conventions! Habillé comme nu, trempé jusqu'aux os.

Et puis cela dure, ne sèche pas tout de suite. Trois mois de réflexion salutaire dans cet état; sans réaction vasculaire, sans peignoir ni gant de crin. Mais sa forte constitution y résiste.

Aussi, lorsque les petits bourgeons recommencent à pointer, savent-ils ce qu'ils font et de quoi il retourne, – et s'ils se montrent avec précaution, gourds et rougeauds, c'est de connaissance de cause.

Mais là commence une autre histoire, qui dépend peut-être mais n'a pas l'odeur de la règle noire qui va me servir à tirer mon trait sous celle-ci.

The End of Autumn

In the end autumn is nothing but cold tea. All kinds of dead leaves macerate in the rain. No fermentation or distillation of alcohol: only spring will show the effect of compresses applied to a wooden leg.

The last returns are a mess. All the doors of the polling booths bang open and shut. Into the bin! Into the bin! Nature shreds her manuscripts, demolishes her library, furiously knocks down her final fruits.

Then she pushes herself up from her desk. At once she appears immense. Hair undone, head in the mist. Her arms hanging loose, delightfully she inhales the icy, thought-refreshing wind. Days are short, night falls quickly, comedy is uncalled for.

Up in the air among the other stars, the earth looks serious again. Its lit-up part is narrower, infiltrated with valleys of shadow. Its shoes, like those of a tramp, soak up water and make music.

In this frog pond, this salubrious amphibiguïty, everything grows strong again, leaps from stone to stone and changes bog. Freshets multiply.

This is what you call a good clean-up, disrespectful of convention! Dressed in nothing, drenched to the bone.

And it goes on, and on, takes ages to dry out. Three months of salutary reflection in this state; without vascular incident, with neither peignoir nor horsehair mitt. Her strong constitution is up to it.

Then, when the little buds start to point again, they know what they are up to, what it's all about – and if they peek out with precaution, swollen and ruddy, it is on good grounds.

But thereby hangs another tale, which may depend on but hasn't the same smell as the black ruler I'm going to use to draw the line under this one.

Les Mûres

Aux buissons typographiques constitués par le poème sur une route qui ne mène hors des choses ni à l'esprit, certains fruits sont formés d'une agglomération de sphères qu'une goutte d'encre remplit.

★

Noirs, roses et kakis ensemble sur la grappe, ils offrent plutôt le spectacle d'une famille rogue à ses âges divers, qu'une tentation très vive à la cueillette.

Vue la disproportion des pépins à la pulpe les oiseaux les apprécient peu, si peu de chose au fond leur reste quand du bec à l'anus ils en sont traversés.

★

Mais le poète au cours de sa promenade professionnelle, en prend de la graine à raison : 'Ainsi donc, se dit-il, réussissent en grand nombre les efforts patients d'une fleur très fragile quoique par un rébarbatif enchevêtrement de ronces défendue. Sans beaucoup d'autres qualités, – mûres, parfaitement elles sont mûres – comme aussi ce poème est fait.'

The Blackberries

On the typographic bushes of the poem down a road leading neither out of things nor to the mind, certain fruits are composed of an agglomeration of spheres plumped with a drop of ink.

★

Black, rose and khaki together on the bunch, they are more like the sight of a rogue family at its different ages than a strong temptation to picking.

In view of the disproportion of seeds to pulp birds don't think much of them, so little remains once from beak to anus they've been traversed.

★

But the poet in the course of his professional promenade takes the seed to task: 'So,' he tells himself, 'the patient efforts of a fragile flower on a rebarbative tangle of brambles are by and large successful. Without much else to recommend them – *ripe*, indeed they are ripe – done, like my poem.'

Le Cageot

À mi-chemin de la cage au cachot la langue française a cageot, simple caissette à claire-voie vouée au transport de ces fruits qui de la moindre suffocation font à coup sûr une maladie.

Agencé de façon qu'au terme de son usage il puisse être brisé sans effort, il ne sert pas deux fois. Ainsi dure-t-il moins encore que les denrées fondantes ou nuageuses qu'il enferme.

À tous les coins de rues qui aboutissent aux halles, il luit alors de l'éclat sans vanité du bois blanc. Tout neuf encore, et légèrement ahuri d'être dans une pose maladroite à la voirie jeté sans retour, cet objet est en somme des plus sympathiques, – sur le sort duquel il convient toutefois de ne pas s'appesantir longuement.

The Crate

Midway from a cage to a dungeon, the French language has crate, a simple slatted case devoted to the transport of such fruits as at the least shortness of breath are bound to give up the ghost.

Knocked together so that once it is no longer needed it can be effortlessly crushed, it is not used twice. Which makes it even less durable than the melting or cloudlike produce within.

Then, at the corner of every street leading to the marketplace, it gleams with the modest sparkle of deal. Still spanking new and a little startled to find itself in the street in such an awkward position, cast off once and for all, this object is on the whole one of the most appealing – on whose destiny, however, there's little point in dwelling.