

The background is a dense, repeating pattern of various letters and symbols in a light orange or tan color. These include standard Latin alphabet characters (A-Z, a-z), Greek letters (alpha, beta, gamma, delta, epsilon, zeta, eta, theta, iota, kappa, lambda, mu, nu, xi, omicron, pi, rho, sigma, tau, upsilon, phi, chi, psi, omega), and other symbols like the hash (#), dollar sign (\$), and various punctuation marks. The letters are of different sizes and are arranged in a way that creates a textured, almost mosaic-like effect.

THE WORLD OF LETTERS

Ann Smock

The World of Letters

Emmanuel Hocquard liked to describe himself as a letter writer.¹ It was one way of explaining literality, for he is said to be a literal poet.² So is his friend and ally Claude Royet-Journoud, who remarked, in a conversation between the two of them, “[F]inalement ce qui m’intéresse c’est ce mystère de la littéralité.”³

“FOR WHOM DOES ONE WRITE?”⁴

Hocquard, the letter-writer, often addressed poems to particular individuals he knew (sometimes beginning them “*Cher Pierre*,” or “*Chère Norma*,” and ending “*Emmanuel*”). Each time, everything about the poem was determined by the person to whom it was addressed. Its destination, that is. You might think that the sense of each—its *sens*—lay in the direction, or *sens*, it headed off in.

I have reflected quite a lot elsewhere upon Hocquard’s epistolary bent.⁵ It has seemed to me that instead of meaning something, each of his poems is meant for someone: its *destinataire*. I often picture him collecting some words, copying them out and arranging them on a page or two because, unexpectedly, they strike him as being just exactly suited for someone he knows. “I wrote this for you,” he states, in his book of sonnets.⁶ Royet-Journoud wrote, however—in the middle of a poetry book that happens to be dedicated to Anne-Marie Albiach—“it is not a book for you.” “*Ce n’est pas un livre pour vous*.”⁷ Elsewhere, in a similar vein, he wrote:

“aujourd’hui je ne parle à personne”⁸



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1 For example, in *Cette Histoire est la mienne. Petit dictionnaire autobiographique de l'élégie*, collected in *ma haie*. See especially page 473.

2 See, for example, Laure Michel. *À la lettre. Représentation et littéralité chez Emmanuel Hocquard et Jean-Marie Gleize*. Hocquard and Gleize are, Laure Michel states in the Introduction to her book, “*les principaux inventeurs et défenseurs d’une notion clé du champ contemporain, celle de littéralité*” (12).

3 *Conversation du 8 février 1982*, collected in *Un privé à Tanger* 163.

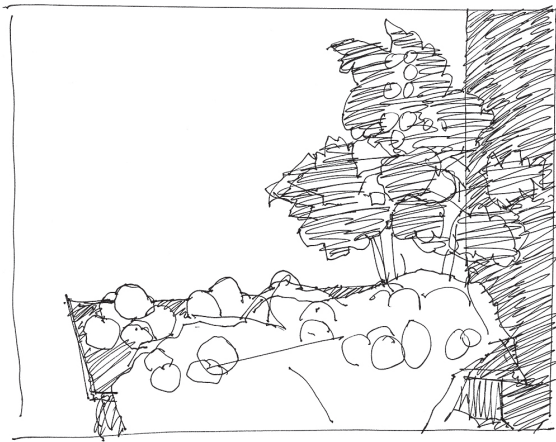
4 This is Sartre’s famous question in *Qu’est-ce que la littérature*.

5 I study Hocquard’s writing in *The Play of Light. Jacques Roubaud, Emmanuel Hocquard and Friends*. His writing for someone, and from someplace, rather than about anything, comes up on pp 39-40.

6 *Un test de solitude* VII. “*Ce livre—j’entreprends de l’écrire pour vous—*” *Un test de solitude* is unpaginated. Each sonnet bears a number; the book is divided in two, with the numbers beginning over again at the start of the second half.

7 *Les objets contiennent l’infini* 53.

8 *Les natures indivisibles* 26.



I do not really mean to oppose Royet-Journoud and Hocquard to each other—Royet-Journoud addressing no one, and Hocquard sending each poem straight off to someone. After all, Hocquard wrote “I’m writing this book for you” in a sonnet book called *Un test de solitude*, as if writing the sonnets were a procedure for determining the character of his isolation. Indeed, he explains in his autobiographical dictionary that other poems he addresses to specific friends and acquaintances are “*indications de ma solitude*.”⁹ They aren’t, I gather, about anything or anyone; rather they are *from* someplace. From Emmanuel. They are signs, that is, or symptoms (*indices*), of one specific lookout on the world—the Emmanuel vantage point.

Sometimes the poems are lists of things scattered around in his particular field of vision at a particular time—at the time the list is getting drawn up (“*Si je vous écrivais au passé j’aurais l’impression de mentir*”).¹⁰ “*La table d’écriture. La table de lecture sous la fenêtre. Deux table. Lampe sept . . .*”

Octobre.

*Le retour des rouges-gorges. Ce que j’ai
sous les yeux.*¹¹

Tables (two of them, one by one), and lamps (one at a time again, seven in all)—these pieces of furniture and the robins’ return are clues about one particular gaze upon a world, one outlook by definition singular, impossible to communicate or share. Insular. Poems by Hocquard inventory his island.

He addresses each one to some other island. Each is just meant for one other specific outlook, for *the* other isolated gaze singularly equipped to read the symptom, as it were—to get the hint, and sense the character, indeed to *recognize* the color or tone peculiar to the Emmanuel solitude. The addressee is obvious: “*seule et évidente*.” Let us say that on one particular day, or for one entire season or a whole year it is Viviane who enters Hocquard’s field of vision in the clear light of her aloneness, her utter singularity, answering to his solitude, in recognition of it. “*Viviane est Viviane*,” he writes, several times in *Un test de solitude*. “*Seule, évidente*.” However, she is, as I understand it—she is, from the Emmanuel outlook—so clearly, so unmistakably she, that all the traits and attributes distinguishing her and responsible, you would have thought, for her being so

9 *Cette Histoire est la mienne*, in *ma haie* 487.

10 In *Livre II* of *Un test de solitude*, I (the first sonnet).

11 In *Livre I* of *Un test de solitude*, II.

arrestingly recognizable have disappeared in the light of her sheer *évidence*. It’s as though this clarity were so strong that it blotted out her features, the color of her eyes, and left her faceless. She could be anyone at all. No one in particular.

For being she—the very one no other is—is no distinction. Any and every one is the only one to be that one. Every robin is the only robin to be that robin, every lamp, every geranium in a bed of geraniums. Hocquard follows this line of thought in his tribute to Fernando Pessoa.¹² Being the-one-no-other-is is the special feature of no one, of nothing. It’s a mark, if you will, of indistinction.

Being Viviane, then, doesn’t pertain to her. I shouldn’t really have said “*her* sheer *évidence*,” for it doesn’t attach to anyone or anything. *Évidence* isn’t an attribute but a state of affairs—whatever “is the case,” to use the vocabulary of the first proposition in Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus*, which Royet-Journoud, as he remarked once in conversation with Hocquard, especially appreciates. You might want to call *évidence* clarity, the perfect clarity of what happens to be there, right in front of you. Sometimes an Hocquard line or phrase seems to come close to calling clarity beautiful. An example would be these lines bearing on the midpoint of a tautology:

la pièce du milieu
est plus silencieuse
*est plus lumineuse”*¹³

But *évidence* is simply plain. It is just exposure. Nakedness.¹⁴ “*Elle n’appartient pas à,*” Hocquard writes.¹⁵ It isn’t a property of anything, or attributable to anyone; it is just the fact that they are. Just the state of being they, *seul, évident*. That is why, in another poem, Hocquard suggests that *jolie* may well not be an attribute of Maylis. If not, then *Maylis est jolie* is a tautology. Like *Viviane est Viviane*, no doubt. A tautology is a case, the Maylis poem continues—“*un cas,*” a state or condition—that has no subject; it cancels persons: “*annule les personnes.*”¹⁶

12 *Je ne sais pas si Fernando Pessoa a vraiment existé*, in *Un privé à Tanger* 90-93.

13 *Théorie des tables* 22. *Théorie des tables* is unpaginated. Each poem is numbered. There are 51; Hocquard was 51 when he finished *Théorie des tables*.

14 The association of nakedness with exposure is a symptom of Hocquard’s “photographic meditations” on nudity. See note 15.

15 *Méditations photographiques sur l’idée simple de nudité* 18.

16 (..) *Si jolie n’est pas*
un attribut de Maylis
Maylis est jolie est une
tautologie, un cas sans sujets
qui annule les personnes.

L’invention du verre 54

So beauty—just to linger a moment longer over it—isn’t a quality belonging to anyone or anything, but just the fact that they are—or again it is just the fact that anything at all is, which unpredictably, from a certain point of view, happens to show in them. It’s an inhabitual loveliness which has been entrusted to them momentarily, in confidence, which is to say, without their knowing anything about it. The main character in Hocquard’s novel observes once on a rocky island in Greece toward noon—when the blinding rays of the sun blot out all forms and colors—the gradual appearance of colors on the dull, matte surface of the island’s extinct volcanos: brown, violet, pale and darker greys, ochre and rose. “I had the impression,” he says, “that [the rocks] were fabricating before my eyes their own light and their own colours, in the same way that certain beings secrete occasionally an inhabitual beauty of which they are *les éphémères dépositaires*, as if nature had lent them that very troubling surplus of charm which spreads all around them consolation and desolation alike, without distinction.”¹⁷

One of Hocquard’s favorite tautologies is: a secret is a secret. “What is the secret, Hélène? It’s a secret.”¹⁸ He considers that a secret is always someone’s private secret, but not a secret they have and keep from others: rather, their secret is secret *from* them. It is a secret that escapes them. A secret, then, is someone’s very own not-having-it, someone’s own, private, incommunicable dispossession. It’s being they, without them. I suspect that for Hocquard the point of writing is to be this secret’s secret communication.

A tautology, like “a secret is a secret” or “*Viviane est Viviane*,” is a “case,” and a case is also an occurrence: the occurrence of a certain condition, for example—such as solitude, when solitude is not just being alone without others, but alone without yourself. A case can also just be something that happens. It shares its etymology with chance: *cadere*, to fall. A tautology is something that befalls. I mean to suggest that it’s being-you coming to you lost to you; it’s you, coming to yourself—it’s an awakening, a birth perhaps—canceling you.

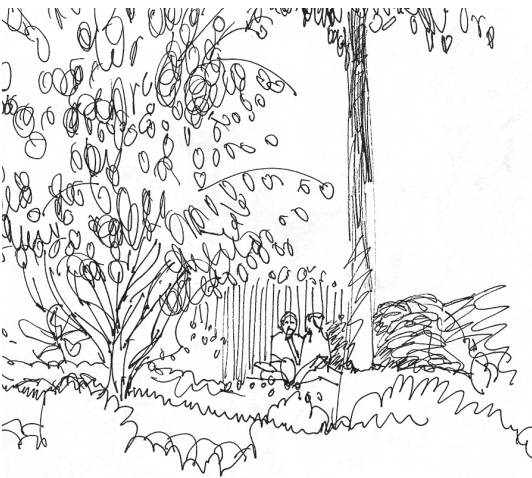
Nothing leads up to a tautology. And nothing follows from one. It doesn’t communicate, it just interrupts. I suspect, though, that this cut itself can, with luck or by a misfortune expose, to a gaze apt to recognize it, the sudden unmistakable evidence of a you. Of a you, I mean, torn from you: a you unattachable to you or to any other person. In *Aerea*, Hocquard’s novel, the meeting of two gazes causes a rip or tear. “*Mais que savons-nous de la déchirure qui se produit en nous quand notre regard rencontre un autre regard?*”¹⁹

17 *Aerea dans les forêts de Manhattan* 156-57. My translation.

18 *Cette Histoire est la mienne*, in *ma haie* 486.

19 *Aerea* 129.

The cut, I wish to suggest, can lay your secret bare—your own particular indistinction. The private, incommunicable thing that is your own and no one else’s. Your specific vantage point, your solitary lookout, your life, which is to say your very own loss of it. If there is a gaze likely to recognize this, it must be the gaze of another faceless solitary, alone without herself: a Maylis, let us say; a Viviane unmistakable in her lack of distinction. And indeed what befalls, I suspect, at the cut, is a case—let us say, a case of



solitude—recognizing itself. Or, it is just something happening in recognition of itself. Just there being something, communicating with itself. Passing itself along to itself in confidence. But this only ever happens between two—*entre nous*, as they say in French:²⁰ just between us, at the divide whose two sides can’t be distinguished, at the separation between us where no one can be distinguished from anyone else, since persons are canceled there, and where no subject of an act such as *to see*, or *recognize*, can possibly stand apart from the object of that act. So it must be between Hocquard, the sender,

and Norma or Rosmarie or Viviane, the receiver of a letter: it must be her answer back that he sends her, across a divide where forward and back, addresser and addressee lie confounded. It could be in that reversibility that the *sens* of a letter lies.

So, when Royet-Journoud says what matters to him is “*ce mystère de la littéralité*,” he might have in mind among other things the mystery of communication in the life of his letter-writing friend Hocquard. He might be thinking of an unknown, an X, shared somehow in confidence. It has occurred to me that some pages in his books resemble the scene of a ceremony. The setting, perhaps, for a particular kind of act—an impersonal one, possibly a ritual?—whereby a mystery would be communicated among readers and writers.

20 *Entre deux il y a un champ dont la forme tourne
entre nous*

Un test de solitude XXV (Livre II)

les outils appartiennent à un domaine abstrait

pour éviter les coups

sa décision est prise

les voix ne se conjuguent plus

l’argumentation a besoin

des gestes en noir

sol recouvert

figure de dos

un demi-cercle de crachats

après cela, moi j’ai regardé

From *Théorie des prépositions* 9 (the opening text in the volume)

Or, also in *Théorie des prépositions* (17)

la répétition est déplacement

du bord visible

la voix dissimule

un état d’apesanteur

elle ne saurait interrompre son trajet

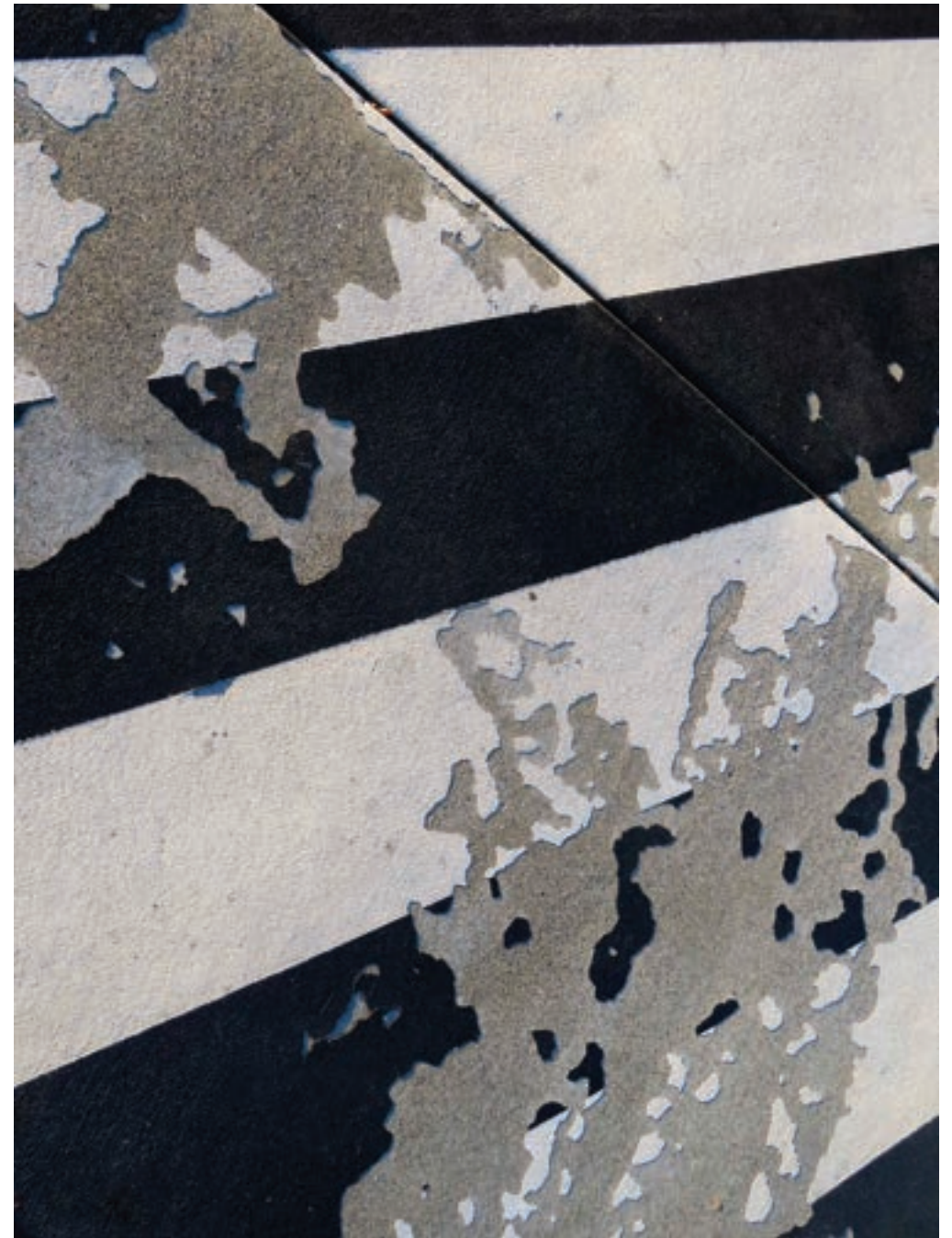
autour de cette tache

le jour du chiffre, de l’étranglement

le poignet brûle l’ancienne manière

lèvres posées sur le nom

ils s’ajointent



Far more prominent in my mind, however, than this dim and infrequent sense of a mystical observance of some sort—whose theater Royet-Journoud’s books could be—has long been his declaration in *Les natures indivisibles* that “today I am speaking to no one.” “*Aujourd’hui je ne parle à personne.*” Indeed, for years now none of Royet-Journoud’s books has spoken to me at all. Perhaps a line or two here and there, if some unexpected context for it happens to come up, or sometimes a remark culled from his prose notes or recorded conversations and interviews. But mainly I have been unable to read his books, and it is on this disheartening note that I would like to restart this essay (without discounting the possibility that some thoughts hazarded above could return, in another light).

“*JE NE SAURAI DIRE QUE JE LIS CRJ.*”

Since I was surprised and disappointed by the wall of ice between me and Royet-Journoud’s books, I was extremely interested to encounter an essay written in his honor, whose author says he doesn’t actually read Royet-Journoud either. “I can’t really say that I read CRJ.” This non-reader is Siegfried Plümper-Hüttenbrink.²¹ I was anxious to learn

21 *Sans voix d’auteur*, in *Je te continue ma lecture* 139-143.
Je te continue ma lecture is a collection of essays addressed to Royet-Journoud,
 edited by Michèle Cohen-Halami and Francis Cohen in 1999.

from him, if I could, what it is like to not actually read certain books, when not actually reading does not mean simply giving up. In fact, my initial impulse in undertaking this study was the wish to glean something about what can or might happen between a Royet-Journoud book and someone like myself, looking through its pages, trying out a different book, sticking with it but not actually reading. This question—bearing on reading Royet-Journoud or not (or not *actually*)—persists throughout what I have written below. It is a question that I expect could eventually be asked about the work of other writers besides CRJ, and maybe even about the writing of a whole tribe of late 20th/early 21st century authors.²² I do little to explore that likelihood; but I do allow my question about reading to mix with other questions as I go along.

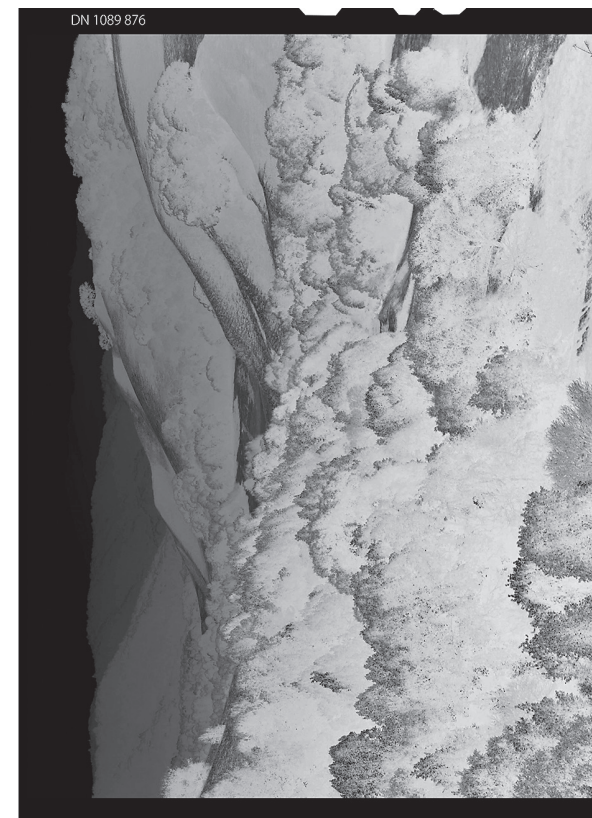
In light of Plümper-Hüttenbrink I feel more sympathetic with Hocquard’s remarks about one of his own favorite books, which he can’t understand because he can no longer read Greek. Hocquard says that since the especially appealing book (by Anacreon), which he first happened upon by chance in a bookstore window, was unintelligible to him, it immediately possessed an altogether different legibility: “*une tout autre lisibilité, qui tenait plus au papier, aux caractères, à la mise en page qu’au poème d’Anacréon.*”²³ It made him understand, he says, that writing is first off a matter of paper, lead, ink and thread.

This conviction is by no means foreign to the progress of my thinking here, nor—as I believe it unexpectedly turns out—is it alien to Royet-Journoud’s remark that “*Les livres n’existent pas.*”²⁴ But as it happened, it was Plümper-Hüttenbrink who more effectively propelled me onward in my efforts, and it came to me bit by bit that what I stood a chance of learning from him (he may well have learned it, or at least recognized it in Royet-Journoud’s books) was something about reading’s shadow, or its mirror image. Not its opposite, or negation, but its reverse. Something analogous to a photographic negative.

Le Renversement is the title of the first of the four poetry books that comprise Royet-Journoud’s *Tétralogie*.²⁵ And the back cover of his fifth book, *Théorie des prépositions*, quotes a linguist, Viggo Brøndal: *La question est ici: Est-ce qu’une relation peut être renversée ou non?* No doubt Royet-Journoud’s title (*Le Renversement*) and Brøndal’s question suggest many different reversals, inversions and overturnings. The question, about the reversibility of a relation, could, for example, recall the relation between sender and receiver of a letter which I brought up earlier, speaking of Hocquard and his correspondence. But the thought of a reversed kind of reading proves worth pursuing. Plümper-Hüttenbrink, in

his own full-length book (called *Jeux de lecture*, which I soon began studying alongside texts by Royet-Journoud), describes “the reader” as an inside-out sort of person. I will return to this soon. For now let me only say that what I was hoping to find out from Plümper-Hüttenbrink after he said he doesn’t actually read CRJ, was (though it has taken me some time to see this) how to turn reading over, like a page; or inside out, like a glove, exposing the lining.

I expect that reading’s inner lining may, at some points in the present essay, come to look like writing. Or, reading and writing may from time to time appear to be reversible, like a single reversible garment—a jacket or a cape.



22 An interesting book to investigate in this regard is *L’illisibilité en questions. Avec Michel Deguy, Jean-Marie Gleize, Christian Prigent, Nathalie Quintane*. It collects the papers presented—by poets and literary scholars—at an international colloquium called “*Liberté, licence, illisibilité poétiques*,” organized by Bénédicte Gorrillot and Alain Lescart in 2008. On the same general topic, I recommend with lively admiration Michèle Cohen-Halimi’s 2013 article on Royet-Journoud in *La Revue de Métaphysique et de Morale*. I will refer several times in the course of this essay to other texts by Cohen-Halimi.

23 *Il rien*, in *Un privé à Tanger* 58.

24 *La poésie entière est préposition* 39.

25 The *Tétralogie* is composed of *Le Renversement* (1972), *La notion d’obstacle* (1978), *Les objets contiennent l’infini* (1983), and *Les natures indivisibles* (1997).

In any case, I should note here that I take Plümper-Hüttenbrink's title, *Jeux de lecture*, for a sign of his book's kinship with Wittgenstein and "*jeux de langage*." It seems, though, that Plümper-Hüttenbrink has never known how to read Wittgenstein: "Assis?" he wonders. "*Debout? Couché? Ou encore en prenant un bain?*"²⁶ This cheered me up when I was feeling dejected over my unsuccessful attempts to read Royet-Journoud. The central section of *Jeux de lecture* is dedicated to Royet-Journoud, but the book as a whole bears this dedication: "*Au plus-qu'improbable lecteur*."

At first I took this dedication for Plümper-Hüttenbrink's breezy way of indicating he'd written a book unlikely to be a hit. But it turns out that he considers readers in general, or as you might say, he considers *the reader*, to be about as likely to exist as a flying saucer. It is not that readers are rare these days, but that, however many or few they may be or have been, *the reader* is not of this world. The idea is not, of course, that she resides, reading, in some other world. It's rather that she is nowhere to be found. For while she is gone from this world, her exile is lodged within it. This interior exteriority (or outer interiority) can't be located on any map.



26 *Jeux de lecture* 105.

I noted above that for Plümper-Hüttenbrink the reader is an inside-out sort of person: indeed, it seems she is herself her place of exile. She inhabits herself from without. To be a reader, it seems, is to enter into oneself as an outcast: it's to be, as Plümper-Hüttenbrink puts it at one point, "*l'île de son exil*."²⁷

"For years," Michèle Cohen-Halimi writes, "I used to leave home for the Bibliothèque nationale, looking 'outside' for a refuge where I might enter my own invisibility." Perhaps readers, though unlikely, are not that uncommon. "Is it not possible," Cohen-Halimi continues, "that reading touches a point where space-time is intimacy and exteriority both, "*de sorte que nous sommes en nous au-dehors, dans l'intimité et l'horizon intérieur de ce dehors?*"²⁸ In her precise and dramatic descriptions of Royet-Journoud texts, her emphasis often falls on the completely disorienting spatial dimensions that obtain in his books. The procedures whereby one habitually takes in a scene, or a picture, she demonstrates—the cognitive operations whereby one is used to gauging distances and speeds, telling up from down, back from front, identifying a continuous sequence of events, marking an interruption—these dependable functions are practically useless in the theater of Royet-Journoud's writing. Ink-black gestures agitate his pages well below the level of lines or phrases; words lunge and jab at one another, then recoil and flatten, letters swell up grotesquely or abruptly shrink before Cohen-Halimi's startled gaze; sometimes they suddenly stick out at an alarming angle. It is as if the one perspective from which an object or group of objects would be clearly recognizable had been eliminated, and the page were suddenly all anamorphosis. "*Ton miroir,*" she writes (addressing R.-J.) "*soulève le tableau couche par couche, gagne tout le champ perceptif, empêche le mouvement de se figer, de se centrer. Le sol est un mur, le mur n'est plus un sol, une surface peut-être, qui ne montre qu'un battement d'intervalles . . .*"²⁹

If Plümper-Hüttenbrink says he doesn't actually read CRJ, Cohen-Halimi puts it this way: "I am the slave reader, *l'anagnoste*, "*soumise au rite d'une lecture régulière et enjointe*." Indeed, between 2004 and 2018, she produced twice each year, for the journal *L'anagnoste* (edited by Royet-Journoud), a four-page "reading" of a book she was authorized to choose among ten or so volumes that R.-J. assembled for her and placed on a table in a room where he left her "*seule en arrêt*." "I am thus the captive reader," she observes in the preface to the collection of texts that she contributed to the last eight issues of

27 *Jeux de lecture* 21.

28 Michèle Cohen-Halimi. *Les Grandeurs intensives*, chapitre deux 11.

29 Michèle Cohen-Halimi. *Seul le renversement* 116-117.

L'anagnoste.³⁰ I gather it was understood between the two of them that Cohen-Halimi would always compose her “reading” in a single day, and would read it aloud to Royet-Journoud over the phone, the evening it was finished.³¹

The word *anagnost* means reader, especially a person trained to read out loud. In Greek the term designated a slave given this training, and in the Early Eastern Church it seems that the cleric who read out lessons from the Old Testament or the Epistles during the service was called an anagnost. The thought of “reader” as a specific role comes to mind. Maybe “the reader” could be described as a person with a particular task or charge to perform—possibly, though not necessarily, in a ritual of some kind. Moreover, if one considers the curious, strict rules bearing on the reading program, as it were, that Cohen-Halimi pursued for several years with Royet-Journoud, the thought of reading as a game occurs to one: some sort of rather rigorous *jeu de langage*, in which “the reader” would be a player.

Both Cohen-Halimi and Plümper-Hüttenbrink bring up a tennis game—the one at the end of Antonioni’s *Blow-up*. I will delay any comment about this for now, except to observe in passing that to picture a tennis ball sailing back and forth between two (“*entre deux*”), is already to predict a connection between games, *jeux*, and the theme of reversal to which I now wish to return. I want to note that from Plümper-Hüttenbrink’s standpoint, the reader—improbable but not, perhaps, especially unusual—appears to be not only inside-out but reversed in another way as well. Her death, it seems, initiates her life, so her past lies before her, her future behind. P.-H. compares her, early in his book, to a person who disappears and washes up on a desert island. A kind of Robinson Crusoe, then: a survivor who must begin all over again, all alone, from zero.³² It seems no one could possibly testify to her disappearance, though, which suggests that the reader is a person who disappears without first having been anywhere at all, and begins over again without ever having begun. The reader starts life banished from it—she enters into it having departed. A born survivor, *c’est le cas de le dire*.

If you recall one of the tautologies mentioned above, “a secret is a secret,” and the thought it suggests of life—not life as a general phenomenon, but each separate person’s own private deprivation—you might surmise that Plümper-Hüttenbrink’s improbable



30 The title of this collection (published in 2021) is *Les Grandeurs intensives, chapitre deux*. I am quoting here from pages 10 and 11.

31 I remember these two details from a conversation with Michèle Cohen-Halimi, where they came up by chance, almost parenthetically (I was not interviewing her).

32 See *Jeux de lecture* 17.

reader, who enters life expelled from it, is a person who lives in the secret that leaves him out of it. If my intuition that the “mystery of literality,” so important, apparently, to Royet-Journoud, is the mystery of communication, then perhaps reading, and books (or at least some of them) have to do with the secret communication from one of us to another of the life we live, so to speak, from the outside, not knowing it, though it is unmistakable, of course—too obvious, really, for words. Perhaps readers and writers share this plain-as-day unknown among themselves, via a particular kind of act.³³

THE ACT OF READING

The thought of reading’s mirror image—or its shadow (two possible reversals of reading)—suggests a pantomime reading: a dumb show or a shadow play. If that were what Plümper-Hüttenbrink undertakes with respect to the Royet-Journoud books he so admires, one could well understand why he says he doesn’t actually read them. Indeed, in *Jeux de lecture* he refers so regularly to “*l’acte de lire*,” that one begins to wonder if reading isn’t in his view just an act—*un jeu*—a form of make believe, or of going through the motions, the way Bach is said to have recommended to his students that they practice the piano: look at the score and pass your fingers accordingly over the keys, but don’t press down.³⁴

Plümper-Hüttenbrink would be loath to agree that practicing in this way is just an exercise, and does not qualify as playing the piano. This is how he differs from J. L. Austin, whose *How To Do Things with Words* seems initially to have appealed to him a good deal. Austin would no more allow that pantomime piano playing such as Bach recommended could amount to a musical performance than he would acknowledge that an actor in a Justice of the Peace costume who marries a couple in a play has really married anyone, or that someone pretending in private, at home, to baptize a ship has accomplished anything at all. Plümper-Hüttenbrink, however, appears to take a lively interest in several things that he considers people do, without actually doing them. It is characteristic of him, for example, to dwell on trial runs of various kinds, auditions, test-drives or *mariages blancs*, where doing something and not doing it are not mutually exclusive. I wonder if he would be willing to count among such acts purely ceremonial ones, which an unsympathetic observer might call mere rituals—substanceless. I am inclined at least half seriously to imagine readers and writers partaking of such a rite, which would require no authorized officiant at all.

33 It occurs to me to wonder, parenthetically, whether the math in Anne-Marie Albiach’s poetry, sometimes suggesting an equation featuring an unknown, could be related to the “mystery” that I’m considering here.
34 Plümper-Hüttenbrink mentions this advice of Bach’s in *Jeux de lecture* 125

In any case, not quite content to speak of things people do without really doing them, Plümper-Hüttenbrink says there are things that are done “with the without” (he is intrigued by the English word *without*).³⁵ Here is a different example: everyone knows certain things perfectly well—such as My feet are at the end of my legs, or Here is a hand—right up until someone asks how they can be so sure. And then (as in Wittgenstein’s *On Certainty*) everything becomes awkward and uncertain. Perhaps one knows such things not so much just by knowing them as by a kind of knowing that is accompanied by not. A knowing, if you will, that keeps its without with it. Reading (without actually reading) may be akin to this kind of knowing: to having certain things that one has without having them, such as one’s secret, or one’s life. It would be good to keep in mind, for consideration later, that living could be something we do without really doing it—a kind of make-believe; a kind of play. And that, at least in this regard, reading and existing could practically be synonyms. Cohen-Halimi seems always to have felt—perhaps instinctively?—that reading is a form of existence that can easily dispense with any existing reader. In *Les Grandeurs intensives, chapitre deux*, she describes her understanding of the phrase *je lis* by comparing it to Kant’s *je pense*, inasmuch as Kant, she asserts, meant to keep open for *je pense* the possibility of existing in the absence of any existing thinking subject. I imagine she feels reading allows her to leave herself alone—alone to exist (to read) without her. She puts it this way: reading has ever been for her “an authorization to absent myself from myself.”³⁶

CONSULTING

Now Plümper-Hüttenbrink’s comments, in his tribute to Royet-Journoud, about not actually reading him, bear initially not so much on reversals or solitude or pantomime as on omens, constellations, or instruments such as the compass or clock. He says he doesn’t read but consults CRJ’s books, the way one consults an oracle, or one’s watch. Or again, he does read the books, but the way one reads the stars or the expression on someone’s face. None of these examples involves a spoken language. It seems that reading (when, in any case, one is reading Royet-Journoud) involves confronting a language that one does not speak. I expect this is one reason why the child, *l’enfant*, has such a prominent role in Plümper-Hüttenbrink’s *Jeux de lecture. L’enfant: infans*, not speaking.

35 See *Jeux de lecture* 133.
36 See *Les Grandeurs intensives, chapitre deux* 10-11.

The child is significant not only because not a speaker, but also because, having grown up a little, he is barely a reader. At most, a beginner. He scrutinizes individual printed letters and their separate groups, considers these combinations slowly one at a time, and



decodes each in turn, murmuring (in P.-H.’s description) almost inaudibly to himself what he makes out as he goes along. Telling himself softly what there is to read. This effortful deciphering process may serve as a model for reading without actually knowing how (without really doing it yet: just getting ready to, perhaps). Or it may put into relief the similarity between reading books such as those that especially appeal to Plümper-Hüttenbrink, and reading code, or some ancient, dead language, no longer spoken, or at least a foreign tongue that you yourself don’t speak. It isn’t yours.

A person might easily begin to suspect that the topic under discussion in Plümper-Hüttenbrink’s *Jeux de lecture* is not a topic at

all but just words, nothing but words, including some made-up ones that don’t figure in any language anyone actually uses. I’ve already mentioned that P.-H. considers the reader (the more than unlikely reader) to be an inside-out kind of person: he can’t be located anywhere because he enters the world an outcast from it. He is someone who inhabits himself from without, and is the island of his exile. *Sich eininseln* is the verb in German, Plümper-Hüttenbrink says, for being a reader; the French, he lets on, is *s’illéiser*.³⁷ In English I suppose it must be “to en-island oneself”: to get bound into oneself and shut out both; to stay confined inside one’s banishment. I must say it seems to me perfectly reasonable to object that this unlikely idea—this idea of being the locale of one’s remoteness—is not properly speaking an idea at all,³⁸ but rather an enigma that might appear to be spelled out by a scattering of words such as *lire*, *lier*, *île*, *il*, *exil*, *déliér*, *ligaturer*, *lecture*, if one happened to notice them lying at the bottom of one’s teacup. Indeed one could entertain the suspicion that, at least as much if not more than

developing a theory or an argument about reading or about anything, Plümper-Hüttenbrink’s pages just keep signaling or hinting that some words are code for other words, that any word could be an anagram or a word scramble, that a given pattern of words could bode well or ill. In short, that reading printed matter is, at least sometimes, more like studying a page upside down, or consulting the tarot cards, or interpreting the behavior of birds in flight, than not.

In his slender volume of prose notes, called *La poésie entière est préposition*, Royet-Journoud compares his work to a branch of paleontology that aims to reconstitute, by means of fossil footprints, the characteristics of prehistoric animals. “Ichnology” is the name of this discipline. “*La science des traces*,” Royet-Journoud calls it. And he prefers traces—clues and signs; hints or symptoms—to images or metaphors.³⁹ It has sometimes occurred to me that his books might bear here and there traces of some dead, forgotten language. Indeed, reading Royet-Journoud puts the poet Claude Esteban in mind of the Rosetta stone:

*J’imagine un instant le trouble qui fut celui de ce jeune savant, un soir, devant la pierre de Rosette, lorsqu’au terme d’investigations infinies et d’incertitudes il parvint à faire surgir d’une colonne de figures énigmatiques, à partir d’un lion couché, d’un profil d’oiseau, de l’ovale d’un oeil, les neuf lettres du nom de Cléopâtre.*⁴⁰

My own dim sense of pages marked perhaps by illegible traces of a lost or forgotten language is akin, I think, to Esteban’s response to Royet-Journoud. Sometimes I’ve imagined I may be seeing signs, in *Le Renversement*, say, or *Les natures indivisibles*, of some language still waiting to emerge, whose future features would be imprinted in advance in between the letters of some ordinary French terms. Or again, I’ve occasionally suspected that some phrase or another on a Royet-Journoud page is a loan translation: an awkward, literal rendition of an expression belonging to some other tongue. The reader might be a tracker, then—examining the stray marks that a missing language may have left upon a given text, and following them. “*Il cherche sa langue*” is a line at the beginning of *Les objets contiennent l’infini* (13).

37 *Jeux de lecture* 16.

38 —despite the line of Royet-Journoud’s that it does remind me of, “*la distance est le lieu*” (*La notion d’obstacle* 57), and this one of Albiach’s, “*quelle est la compacité du déplacement*” (*État* 12).

39 *La poésie entière est préposition* 15, 24. Éric Pesty, who published this book, says that it is “*assimilable à un art poétique*.” He also observes that the word *poésie*, which appears in the title, lies outside the vocabulary of Royet-Journoud the writer. See the note on the back cover of *La poésie entière*.

40 *Les Mots à peine écrits*, in *Je te continue ma lecture* 133-34.

NO ONE SPEAKING

The title of Plümper-Hüttenbrink’s tribute to Royet-Journoud is *Sans voix d’auteur*. I believe this means that in Royet-Journoud’s writing there is nothing that might be taken for an “inner voice.” A book doesn’t need a voice, Royet-Journoud writes, in *La poésie entière*. There is no particular advantage in hearing it read aloud. The nondescript character of print, “*la neutralité de l’impression*,” best suits the vivacity of a book’s sense (“*l’élan de son sens*”).⁴¹ Thus, even at the poetry readings Royet-Journoud sometimes gives, Plümper-Hüttenbrink doesn’t get the impression that anyone is saying anything. It sounds, he reports, more as though Royet-Journoud were simply enumerating the words he finds printed on his own pages—just reading them out, separately, listing them aloud.⁴² He pronounces them (one by one), but I imagine it doesn’t sound as if they are his. Perhaps he doesn’t say anything in his own words. “I don’t have a language,” he remarked to Hocquard in a recorded conversation.⁴³

In that same conversation he recalls listening to a recording of a reading he himself gave once from the poetry book he entitled *La notion d’obstacle*, and he says that he remembers hearing nothing but a number of individual words responding to each other: answering and echoing from page to facing page. He gives a brief list of words: “*voix, sommeil, froid, il(s), elle(s) . . .*”

A list of words, “*loin de faire une phrase*,” as Plümper-Hüttenbrink would say. Bare words, admired by Susan Howe.⁴⁴ For his part, Royet-Journoud suggests that the list of words he provides is a list of *dramatis personae*, and that the book wherein they move around and react to each other, challenging and answering each other, plotting and conspiring, is a theater.

*Ce sont ces mots qui font personnages. (. . .) Je pouvais vraiment ressentir cette tension des personnages, cette théâtralité, qui circulait de la première à la dernière page du livre.*⁴⁵

Several commentators appreciate the theatrical character of Royet-Journoud’s work—of Anne-Marie Albiach’s also, as well as of Hocquard’s. For example, Michèle Cohen-Halimi writes of *Le Renversement*: “*L’acteur devient le mot qui montre son étoffe, progresse en relièf, s’avance, s’efface, cousu dans son obligation théâtrale . . .*”⁴⁶ And Michael Palmer, praising

41 *La poésie entière* 39.

42 See *Sans voix d’auteur*, in *Je te continue ma lecture* 142.

43 *Conversation du 8 février*, in *Un privé à Tanger* 162.

44 See *Raccourci (ou le principe de la note)* in *Je te continue ma lecture* 55-60.

45 *Conversation du 8 février*, in *Un privé* 161.

46 *Seul le renversement* 27.

Albiach’s *Mezza Voce*, says that it “represents a true theater of the page.” “If we can imagine the words themselves finding voice, becoming the persons of the poem,” he continues, “then perhaps we can begin to appreciate Albiach’s accomplishment.”⁴⁷ Plümper-Hüttenbrink, moreover—in his tribute to Royet-Journoud—stresses the “scenic aptitude” of a word no one is saying. It has a bearing, a posture. It simply appears—for example on a list—and becomes a gesture, a signal. “*Il se fait geste, il fait même signe*,” Plümper-Hüttenbrink writes. “*Simple indice*,” he adds. It appears, and thereby points, indicates, signals, but doesn’t say anything. “*Il figure sans dire*.”⁴⁸ It indicates, but what?

It could seem that P.-H. perceives words’ scenic propensity differently from the way Palmer does, for he describes words as mute when they appear and gesture all on their own, independently of anyone’s intention to say anything (“*ils figurent sans dire*”), whereas Palmer says they “find voice” and “speak” in the theater of the book. Yet I suspect that, at times at least, it’s a speechless kind of speaking that animates the scene. I imagine, that is, that words can sometimes speak, unmistakably, without its being at all clear what, if anything, they say. I mean you could hear and understand them with total confidence but if anyone asked you what they say, you would not be able to tell them, despite its being as clear as day, since they are what they say. This may well introduce one element, at least, of the tense theatricality that Royet-Journoud says he felt circulating from start to finish of *La notion d’obstacle*, independently of his own voice, even though he was the author of that book and read it aloud.

“ELLE NE DIT RIEN; ELLE ‘PRÉFÉRERAIT NE PAS’. OU ENCORE ‘ELLE NE DIT QU’EN DISANT’.”

—J.Roubaud⁴⁹

A series of thirteen poems within the book Royet-Journoud entitled *Les natures indivisibles* is called *i.e.*—short for *id est*, it is—and Plümper-Hüttenbrink suggests that that is what mute words, all the more “*parlants*” for being no one’s, say of a thing, when they appear, signaling and pointing: they say, it is. But not what.⁵⁰

I would try putting it this way: they say, but not what. For they are what. And they say what, not by saying anything at all but by being. By being what. You might imagine that their silent appearance just says: this.

47 See the back cover of the English translation (by Keith Waldrop) of *Mezza voce*.

48 *Je te continue ma lecture* 140.

49 Jacques Roubaud. *La pluralité des mondes de Lewis* 72

50 *Sans voix d’auteur*, in *Je te continue ma lecture* 140.

Jacques Roubaud describes poetry itself in a comparable way. “*La poésie dit ce qu’elle dit en le disant*,” he likes to affirm.⁵¹ Or again, “*elle ne dit qu’en disant*.”⁵² But nothing can be said if it’s not something else, besides just the saying—something that some other words can also say. Poetry however, in Roubaud’s estimation, doesn’t say anything else. Thus it says, but not anything.

I expect Plümper-Hüttenbrink has something similar in mind—similar to poetry’s saying, but nothing—when he describes the effect of Royet-Journoud’s poetry readings. He says that the ordinary words CRJ apparently enumerates just as he finds them on pages he has written, all of a sudden don’t mean anything to anybody, at the same time that they convey to all “*la précision irrécusable d’un dire*.”⁵³

Of course, Roubaud grants, it is not strictly true that all poems say nothing. It may not be true, strictly speaking, that any poem at all does, language being such that any series of words whatsoever can eventually be construed to have some sort of meaning. Poems generally say other things in addition to what they say essentially—as poetry, that is. But poetry itself says; that is all. It says, but not anything. Or, at the very most, *this*. You can’t fail to grasp this indication, and it can’t fail to elude you.

I am reminded of the Sybil’s index finger, pointing. She neither says nor shows anything, Maurice Blanchot writes; rather “*elle indique*.” He links this *indice* to the sacred language described by Heraclitus which neither reveals nor conceals anything. “*C’est une parole qui n’expose ni ne cache, mais indique*.”⁵⁴ Perhaps we should be ready to wonder if Royet-Journoud’s words are like that: too clear for words, and thus not of this world, this world of things to say. Perhaps they are really nothing to say, words there are no words for.

Hocquard, with his penchant for tautologies and his impulse to write things so obvious it would be absurd to claim authorship, may well share Royet-Journoud’s wish to enable words to dispense with words and go without saying. Maybe both writers would like to increase words’ chances to reach someone’s ear unsaid. Hocquard noted once that he’d been glad to learn from Paul Badura Skoda’s performance of the *Hammerklavier* something about Beethoven’s hope to give music its chance to disappear.⁵⁵ I think

51 This is an axiom of Roubaud’s, and reappears in various places. See for example *Poésie, etcetera: ménage* 69-81.
52 This formulation appears in *Poésie, etcetera*, and also in Roubaud’s *La pluralité des mondes* de Lewis 72. “*Elle [la poésie] ne dit rien; elle ‘préferait ne pas’*. Ou encore: *elle ne dit qu’en disant*.” I try to pursue this severe idea of poetry in *The Play of Light* (but without reference to Royet-Journoud, whom I don’t approach in that book).
53 *Sans voix d’auteur*, in *Je te continue ma lecture* 143.
54 Maurice Blanchot. *L’Entretien infini* 44.
55 *Cette Histoire est la mienne, in ma haie* 469.

that Hocquard, who claims not to like music and wants to eliminate it from poetry, nonetheless wishes it the luck to be listened to unheard.⁵⁶

Plümper-Hüttenbrink, for his part—regarding words no one says and that say, but not anything—imagines a language that is “*lacunaire, détimbré*.” Its words are faint, he seems to feel, and thin—at any rate, hardly resonant or eloquent: graphic, rather, I should think, which is to say vivid, and, as he adds himself, forever exempt from any meaning anyone might insist on trying to extract from them.⁵⁷

PRECIPITOUS

Now a word, or an assemblage of words, or a page that unexpectedly you perceive saying, but nothing, may be what Royet-Journoud has in mind when, at the beginning of *La poésie entière*, he describes an abrupt halt—“*un arrêt qui est un blanc*.” He adds that to write is to produce this “hole” in space. A writer’s table is something mental, he goes on: it’s a way of knowing how to stop, thus making a hole. But this stop sets the world in motion. Knowing how to stop, Royet-Journoud concludes, is to start: it’s to start with the knowledge that there is no start.⁵⁸



If there is no start, I expect it must be because first there is a stop. Stop appears to be in start’s position. It interrupts, apparently, before there is anything at all to interrupt, and puts an end before there is anything to finish off. Such a precipitous incident suggests a

56 I wonder if Plümper-Hüttenbrink might not have something similar to this in mind when, describing the *Tractatus* as one of the rare books “*sans voix d’auteur*,” he tries to imagine “*une sorte de vacuum acoustique*,” and then goes on:
“*Ou encore, dans le domaine musical, une audition qui serait intransitive, qu’aucun silence ne saurait restituer, et qu’il m’arrive parfois d’appréhender à l’écoute de John Cage. Avec à chaque fois, au sortir d’une séance d’audition, la sensation tenace et un peu gênante de faire tache dans le décor. Une tache silencieuse*” (*Jeux de lecture* 120-21).
57 *Sans voix d’auteur*, in *Je te continue ma lecture* 140.
58 See *La poésie entière* 9.
C’est dans la mesure même où l’on est arrêté dans une immobilité voyeuse que les choses sont mobiles. (. . .) Écrire, c’est faire ce trou dans l’espace. (. . .) La table de l’écrivain est mentale, c’est une façon de savoir s’arrêter, de commencer en sachant qu’il n’y a aucune origine. Écrire est un métier d’ignorance.

pre-position. “*Action de mettre en avant*,” Royet-Journoud writes, just after noting the title of a book of essays by Louis Zukofsky, *Prepositions*. This is at the bottom of page 34 in *La poésie entière est préposition*.

“UN ACCIDENT DU SENS”

A person might experience this reversal (stop in advance of start; in short, preposition) to be a misfortune. She might consider there had been an accident and that something had happened to disorder things: the direction they ought properly to take—their *sens*: first before second, going before stopping, future following the past, and so on. And indeed, in *Aerea*, Hocquard’s novel, we encounter an “*accident du sens*.”⁵⁹ It seems to comprise all on its own a world. A dreadful forest world in which people suddenly find themselves lost. They keep turning round in circles, looking for the way out. It’s a subordinate, secondary world, a fallen world, one suspects. Everything in it is an echo, a mirror; every tree, every rock is known already—and yet none of these memories can be attached to any past. Everything is new. By accident, this forest world began with its loss.

Some might well think that before being lost a world must have existed, just as one cannot depart without first having arrived. But the forest world’s loss is *it*, in *Aerea*, the way “*la distance est le lieu*” (that is a line from Royet-Journoud’s *La notion d’obstacle* (53)).

Unhappy inhabitants feel the forest to be “*le lieu de perdition*,” but in the course of the novel it gets called, on and off, “*le lieu de l’accomplissement*,” as if with its disappearance it had abruptly come into being. Maybe, after all, “*l’accident du sens*” is not such a misfortune; it could just be the accident that “sens” is: the “sens” that Royet-Journoud “*ressen[t] physiquement*.”⁶⁰

CLUMSY

When Royet-Journoud speaks of the sudden stop that makes a blank or a hole in space, and adds that to write is to know how to quit in this precipitous way, I understand him to be thinking that to write is really to write words too clear for words—words there are no words for save the words they are. But of course these are not the only words on Royet-Journoud’s pages. Besides such blanks, holes, stops, his books feature intermittent opportunities, as it were, for a reader to become more susceptible to the cuts and the

59 See *Aerea* 52-53.

60 He says so in a video portrait by Charles Bernstein, available online: <http://writing.upenn.edu/pensound///> See also another online video, by Jean-Paul Hirsch, in which Royet-Journoud discusses his 2021 poetry book, *L’usage et les attributs du coeur*.

voids when they do happen: more liable to get brought up short on the edge of one, more apt to fall. I am thinking of a haphazard sort of training in awkwardity, comprised of spots here and there in Royet-Journoud books where one notices one can’t tell if a particular word is a word or a thing. A word for a thing, or a word for a word. A word being said or being cited or counted or named. Perusing Jean Frémond’s “*Numération*” of Royet-Journoud’s *Tétralogie*—the census, as it were, that Frémond took of the words in those four books—I had a number of double takes, such as when I suddenly realized I had taken the word *elle* for her, for *elle*’s, name.⁶¹ I could refer to various passages in Royet-Journoud poems that rather bluntly provoke the discombobulation I mean to describe here. Here is one example:

table était le mot

un noeud enserre le dehors

d’autres viennent mourir sur la table

Les natures indivisibles 19

Writing is “*un métier d’ignorance*,” Royet-Journoud says.⁶² Ignorance, or at least a stumbling kind of uncertainty—as to words and things, and things and names—might be poetry’s element. “*Une extrême maladresse préside à tout cela*,” he notes, in *La poésie entière* (34). And he refers offhandedly to the importance of stumbles that enabled, according to a scholar of prehistory whom he duly quotes, the ability to walk upright on two legs (41). His books might come to infect you with a kind of clumsiness, so that you’d become more and more apt to trip on a word that pokes up unexpectedly on your path, looking to you all of a sudden like some featureless thing; a word with no word for it, a nameless word-thing. This could well be an experience known to Anne-Marie Albiach. “Monstrous anonymity,” we read on one page of her *État*. “[*L*]’*anonymité monstrueuse me fascine*.”⁶³

61 See *Numération d’une tétralogie*, by Jean Frémond, in *Je te continue ma lecture* 95-98.

62 *La poésie entière* 10.

63 *État* 23.

(...) il s’est passé
quelconque chose
dont l’anonymité
monstrueuse
me fascine

I suspect this disconcerting glimpse (for which you would be developing an aptitude) could be related to the snag, the “*accroc*” that Hocquard sometimes refers to—the sudden glint of the underside of a fallen leaf when a gust exposes it against the dark carpet of other leaves and dirt, or some briefly distracting flicker in your peripheral vision as you turn a page in a book . . . Suddenly you see something, and that’s the point of writing, as a famous Zukovsky phrase has it—the phrase that Hocquard took as a kind of motto. “*‘Toute la poésie, c’est cela. Soudain on voit quelque chose.’ L. Zukovsky.*”⁶⁴

Hocquard also prized a certain idiocy, and I mean to suggest here that Royet-Journoud books, by contributing to making you a little idiotic about words and things and their relations, expose you to the chance that you’ll see something—something that is not anything, not anything to see. Or say.⁶⁵

Possibly these observations of mine, about startling halts, gaps or unexpected intrusions in Royet-Journoud texts, and the abrupt attacks of awareness they can provoke, are akin to certain remarks in Plümper-Hüttenbrink’s tribute to CRJ: he says, for example, that the point, *chez* Royet-Journoud, is to write by lurches. “*Écrire par arrêts soudains. Faire des incises. Ouvrir ici pour refermer là-bas. (. . .) Tout n’étant qu’une question d’affût, de détente et de retombée.*” He makes these comments as he recalls Royet-Journoud’s thought (mentioned above, along with his statement that to write is to stop) that to write is to start, knowing there is no start. As soon as you’ve read a page, Plümper-Hüttenbrink adds, everything goes blurry. There’s nothing to retain, except a few syllables forgotten and left behind.

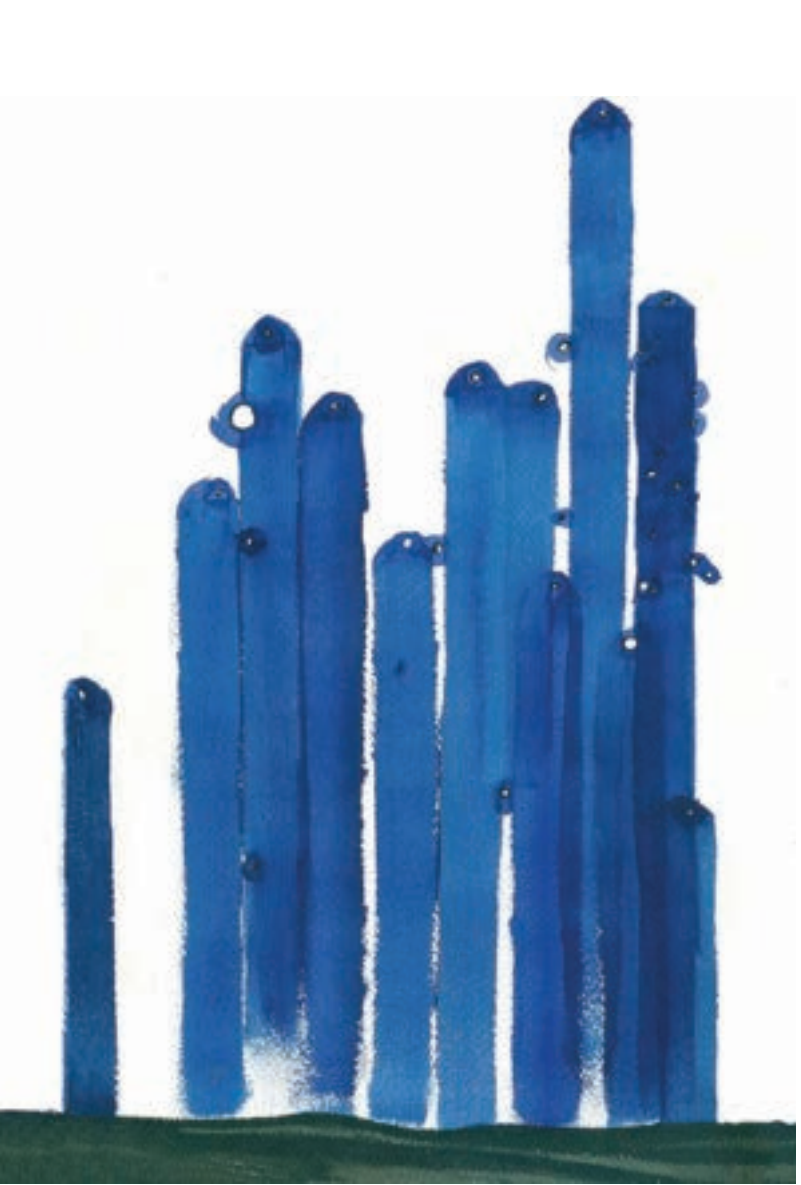
—*night falls in the hand*: “*il fait nuit dans la main*” (CRJ)⁶⁶

C’est dit comme c’est. Exactement comme ça s’est trouvé à dire. À sec et à ciel ouvert.

64 This is one of Hocquard’s epigraphs to *La Bibliothèque de Trieste*, in *ma haie* (15-31).

65 I learn from Laure Michel, who points it out in her study of Hocquard that the etymological sense of idiocy is singularity. See her *A la lettre* 161. She is right, I believe, to connect idiocy—an inability, say, to navigate in standard language the way everyone else does—with the singularity of a glance that sees something else, unaccountable. In *Un privé à Tanger*, Hocquard describes an idiot who lived in the town he grew up in, and who would sing in the middle of the street, getting in everyone’s way. See *Un privé* 219-220. Elsewhere he recounts an experience of idiocy at an outdoor market later in his life, when suddenly he couldn’t see what the relation was supposed to be between the basket of oranges at the fruit vendor’s stall and the numbers written in chalk on a slate next to them.

66 Here Plümper-Hüttenbrink is citing a line—from Sappho, probably—as it appears in *Les natures indivisibles*, page 23. He does so, with the brief commentary I’ve included, in *Sans voix d’auteur, Je te continue ma lecture* 141.



Without a single witness, P.-H. adds, and forgoing all confirmation. “*Il y eut: chute de nuit dans la main.*” Demosthenes must have practiced speaking this way—clumsily, I dare say, his mouth full of pebbles: “*La rétention contre l’effusion,*” Plümper-Hüttenbrink writes. “*La voix rêche qui contre le flux et d’adhère plus à l’air ou au vers, mais broie des syllabes caillouteuses.*”⁶⁷

67 *Sans voix d’auteur*, in *Je te continue ma lecture* 141.

“JUSTE 1 MOT”

Let me pursue a slightly different, though related, current in Plümper-Hüttenbrink's account of Royet-Journoud's books. He says that he "consults" them, as I've reported—the way you might consult a fortuneteller, a sundial, etc.—or, a dictionary. I picture him opening *Le Renversement*, say, in order to consider a lineup of separate words, printed one by one the way they are on the pages of a dictionary, but no doubt he also goes to an R.-J. poetry book from time to time to check all the different circumstances in which some word appears there, from page to page—just as one checks a dictionary for examples of a particular word's use, conscious that the context affects its sense. I imagine him checking the pages of *La Notion d'obstacle*, say, for variations in words' flavor, color, attitudes and inclinations depending on their degree of sparseness, or density, their drift with respect to the margins, not to mention the typeface they're printed in, the interference among them of numerals, of punctuation marks, the intermittent appearance of titles and subtitles. Scrutiny like this could lead a person to perceive some common word on one of its specific occurrences—some common word such as *jour*—to be unique: the one *jour* that appears just this way, right here, literally, at this spot, in these specific surroundings, distinct from all other *jours* elsewhere, in different circumstances on other days. I believe this *jour* is what Plümper-Hüttenbrink calls "*1 mot. Juste 1 mot*"—thereby superimposing a word's singularity upon its ordinariness, its unique accuracy exactly here upon its general utility—to form an ever so unstable, yet indivisible union.⁶⁸

Exactly this word, none other, and just a word: transportable, replaceable, translatable, forgettable. . . Michèle Cohen-Halimi brings out this very concomitance. She cites a fragment of *Le Renversement*, “cette / route-ci,” and continues: “est n’importe laquelle, et surtout celle-dite-telle-route, aucune autre.” Any road at all, it doesn’t matter, *and* also this one, especially this one: *said road*, none other.

It is certainly not the essence of road, Cohen-Halimi continues: the road that has come into perfect accord with its own rule and turned timeless: “*Il n’y a plus de route telle qu’en elle-même.*”⁶⁹ It is rather said road, “*celle-dite-telle-route, aucune autre,*” unforgettable in the singularity of its lack of distinction: “*inoubliable dans l’unicité de son être quelconque.*”⁷⁰ Maybe a person could hypothesize that reading some texts, at any rate, brings one into intermittent contact with the distinctiveness of the undistinguished, and likewise the any-old-road dustiness, say, of the road to Damascus. No need to dwell on that, though. It suffices to imagine the faded inconspicuousness that reading may be apt to expose a person to—the featurelessness of a word no other can name.

“*Cette dite chose*,” Plümper-Hüttenbrink writes, remembering the proximity of *thing* and *nothing* in the latin *res*: “*Cette dite chose—Res—à l’état brut. Au rien confinant.*”⁷¹

He imagines or remembers a child, or he invents a child with a childish wish: “*il veut se trouver là où il y a l'être même d'une chose.*” He wants to enter the real world where things live without us, speaking all on their own, wordlessly, saying simply by being exactly what they are. No one can find himself in that world, but the child will have taken a chance at it, thrown himself into it, and whereas usually everywhere he looks he sees something to say—indeed, whereas that is his habitual practice (paging through books to see what there is to read, looking around his household and his neighborhood to see what there is to observe and recount)—now he sees nothing: nothing to say.

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69 This is an allusion to the famous first line in Mallarmé's
Tombeau d'Edgar Poe: "Tel qu'en Lui-même l'éternité le change."
70 *Seul le renversement* 79. The fragment she quotes from
Le Renversement is on page 37 of that book.
71 *Jeux de lecture* 149.



It might be thought he’s caught sight of sheer indeterminateness. He can’t shed any light on it. Plümper-Hüttenbrink suggests he just grasps the thing “*en suspens*,” as it falls out of its name and becomes a nameless thing, unidentifiable, unqualifiable, purged as it is of every image.⁷²

Cette dite chose—Res—à l’état brut. Au rien confinant (. . .) Encore qu’au dire de Maître Eckart—‘*cela est et personne ne sait quoi*’.

ACCIDENTS, ENCORE

It seems, as I noted earlier, that Royet-Journoud especially likes the first proposition in Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus* which, in a conversation with Hocquard, he cites in French: “*Le monde est tout ce qui arrive*.” The world is everything that happens. The standard English translation says “The world is everything that is the case,” and the usual French is “*Le monde est tout ce qui est le cas*.” But out of sympathy for CRJ., and with an eye to the German—“*Die Welt ist alles, was der Fall ist*”—and remembering that “case” can mean

something that occurs, one might propose The world is everything that befalls. “*J’ouvre le Tractatus; je vois: ‘Le monde est tout ce qui arrive’; je suis content*,” Royet-Journoud said conversationally to Hocquard. “It goes right along with what I think about accidents” (“*Ça va avec ce que je pense de l’accident*”).⁷³

“Accident” means “a thing that happens.” An unexpected thing, without apparent cause. Fortuitous. It can mean something that is present, but not necessarily so. Inessential, then; incidental. Accident can mean an unfortunate event, of course, causing injury or damage. Or again accident can designate an irregularity in the landscape, *accident de terrain*. “*Irrégularité du relief*,” the Larousse indicates. “*Chercher les accidents que la langue ne cesse de provoquer au-dessous de la surface*,” Royet-Journoud writes, in *La poésie entière* (41). You might think there’s an underground language where something like tectonic plates sometimes happen to rub or bump against each other, opening up a crack in the surface of language or heaving up a ridge. “*Des mots font soudain relief*,” he notes at another point in *La poésie entière*. Suddenly a few stand out.

Or, you might notice a hint here and there in his texts of something legible—of the echo, at least, of something, the memory of a book perhaps—lying underground, in a gravel pit, or in some sandy stratum, liable to get exposed in some eventual geological upthrust.

[L’écho d’un livre dans les
graviers—*ni poids ni souff-*
rance—*attouchant une*
mémoire. *Ce qu’il écrit la*
désigne dans le soulève-
ment des terres.]⁷⁴

At any rate, Royet-Journoud links accidents with legibility. “*Ils sont ce qui donne la forme et sa lisibilité*.”⁷⁵ “*L’accident est notre seule possibilité de lisible*. ‘*Le monde est tout ce qui arrive*.’”⁷⁶

In the next few pages I mean to pursue the thought of accidents, of legibility, and of sense, along a winding route.

73 Conversation du 8 février, in *Un privé* 163. Laure Michel observes that “*Toute la diversité du réel, de ‘ce qui est le cas*,” has a good chance of entering into Hocquard’s *Elegies*, and she notes:

“*Tout ce qui est le cas*’, c’est-à-dire tout ce qui arrive, en latin accidit, autrement dit l’accident. (. . .) Claude Royet-Journoud avait fait lui aussi de l’accident une voie d’accès privilégiée au réel. . .” See À la lettre 126-27.

74 Claude Royet-Journoud. *L’usage et les attributs du coeur* 19.

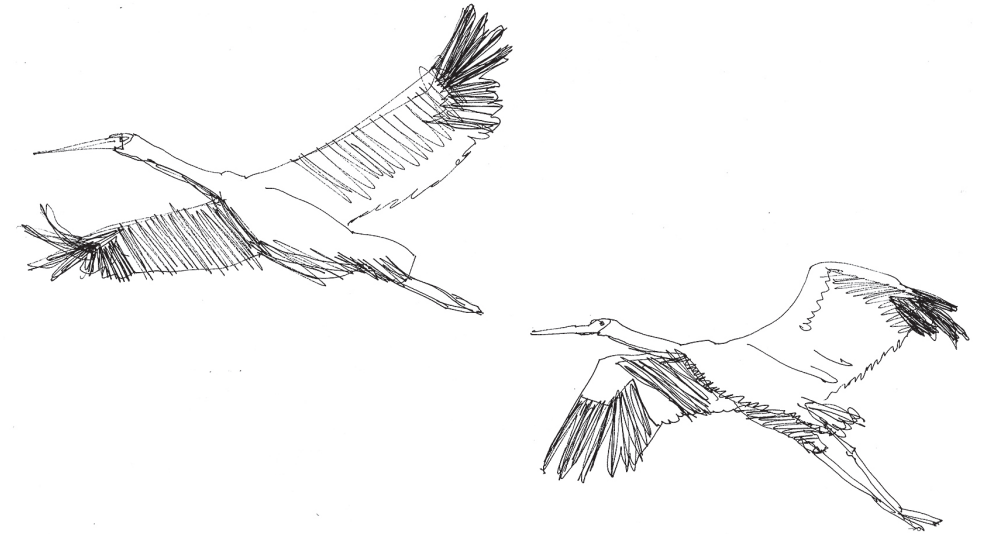
75 *La poésie entière* 29.

76 “Conversation du 8 février,” in *Un privé* 163.

72 See, in *Jeux de lecture*, the pages entitled *Un vœu d’enfant*: 145-150.

In an essay bearing (in its way) on the writing of several poets among his friends, including Royet-Journoud, Hocquard describes a diviner marking off a rectangular patch of sky in the sky with his stick, in case some birds might chance to fly through it. This augur, according to Hocquard, attaches no importance to the heavens, the earth, the vast oceans, those cosmic presences, given in advance, which someone else might undertake to map or describe or compare with something else—to represent, that is, in one way or another.⁷⁷ The great blue vault is so insignificant to Hocquard’s diviner that he makes another, small, provisional sky for his own immediate use which, if it turns out not to serve him well, he can forget. But, having marked it off, he observes. Nothing might pass through it, or some birds might, it’s a matter of chance. The augur makes no arrangements ahead of time; no one does, nothing is in charge. Whatever happens in the patch of sky has no general or durable import; the patch is simply the locus of a *particular* flight of birds (if any birds happen to show). And Hocquard adds this (which is what I mean to stress now): it’s their passage, should they pass, that forms the isle of sky they cross. Their flight is the accident that, in Royet-Journoud’s terms, “*donne la forme et sa lisibilité*.” Hocquard calls this form “*l’espace inaugural*.”⁷⁸

He pictures the writers he has in mind (Albiach and Royet-Journoud for example) marking off, like the augur, a square of sky, which he takes to be “*l’espace-récit de l’écriture*.”⁷⁹ Elsewhere he has recalled the chalk square left on the blackboard by a geometry teacher earlier in the day at school when he was a child—a black square delineated with white on the black board—and also the open school book forming a pale rectangle on the dark surface of his desk, or again the square table drawn up close to the shore of the Mediterranean where his archaeologist friend sorted ceramic shards. Perhaps this is the “*carré de sens / devant un monde abrupt*” that Royet-Journoud notes, in *La notion d’obstacle* (90). While his friend recalls the various rectangles in a schoolroom long ago in Fez, Royet-Journoud remembers the singular experience of another friend, Roger Laporte, which occurs, as they both remark, not before he writes about it, but on the page as it is written.⁸⁰



This is just to stress that nothing will be represented in the “*carré de sens*” drawn up before a sudden world, or marked off on a blackboard or in the sky. The “*espace inaugural*,” “*l’espace-récit de l’écriture*” is separate from the circuit of representations. Should anything—should a *récit*—appear in the “*espace-récit*,” it will not be an account of anything else, occurring earlier or elsewhere, but will draw its whole meaning, Hocquard maintains, from the space which it comes to occupy and thereby to inaugurate. “*Le récit ne tient pas d’autre place que le lieu du récit*.” It is itself its sole before, its only outside. This, for Hocquard, is the definition of a book, “*lieu d’une lisibilité*.”⁸¹

It seems that the sudden advent of legibility is the site of an encounter. “Une *rencontre*, cette *rencontre particulière*.” In the case of the soothsayer and the flight of birds, the place of legibility is the place where some birds in flight chance to meet a gaze. By appearing in this smallish expanse the birds, as I pointed out, make it into the space they appear in. I expect this is why Hocquard calls the “*rencontre*” a “*fait accompli*,” and the inaugural place it takes “*le lieu de l’accomplissement*.” For the “*rencontre*” is an event whose outcome conditions it—whose conclusion launches it. It reminds me of an encounter described in *Aerea*—the scene of a discovery, where the discoverer and the thing discovered can’t really be distinguished. *Aerea*’s principal character, Adam, has an ornithologist

77 Throughout *À la lettre*, Laure Michel stresses Hocquard’s (and Gleize’s) determination to cut all ties with representational language. Of Royet-Journoud she says, in her Introduction: “*La tétralogie de Claude Royet-Journoud est tout entière remise en question de cet usage du langage, qui pose l’antériorité d’un référent sur le mot qui le représente*.”

78 *Ibid.* 54.

79 *Il rien*, in *Un privé* 55.

80 See Royet-Journoud’s *Lettre de Symi*

81 *Il rien*, in *Un privé* 56.

friend named David, and it is he who tells of the event: it's the unexpected discovery of a particularly fine mushroom in the underbrush—or rather, I should say that David recounts the meeting of the little fungus and the gaze of a woodland passerby, who could be Adam himself. When one of your glances, David says, happens suddenly upon a bronze-colored boletus at the the foot of some tree trunk or in a drift of dead leaves, “*quelle rencontre ineffable!*” It's as if this small object, he goes on—which, obviously, nothing had been hiding—came abruptly to be present at your feet, thanks to your eyes having chanced to light upon it. Indeed, David says, it's as if the shapely mushroom had just been born, under your nose, on account of your having spied it. “*Né d'un regard comme d'un coup de foudre!*”

“*Une aussi abrupte naissance,*” he adds; “*un si violent silence inaugural.*”⁸²

Two things, not one, bear stressing here. First, the convergence of a discovery and the existence of something to discover: the *meeting* of an event's having just already occurred and of its abrupt, initial occurrence. The collision of start and finish, start and stop. This is the halt—or, it could be—that Royet-Journoud speaks of in *La poésie entière*, saying it makes a blank, a hole, and that writing provokes it. He calls this simultaneity—of discovery, say, and the birth of something to discover—emplacement (“*l'emplacement*”). This is the first thing to stress: “*l'emplacement.*” The second thing is emplacement's impossibility.⁸³ We will return later to that. At present I wish to note that Royet-Journoud describes the stopping place as a gaze: “*immobilité voyeuse.*”⁸⁴ A spying kind of stare, I imagine, fixed upon an unseen world, which no look in advance of looking has made visible. Emplacement is position, not pre-position.

A FIRST LOOK

Reading Royet-Journoud's *Le Renversement*, Michèle Cohen-Halimi thought of Saunderson, the man blind from birth but cured as an adult, whom Diderot met and wrote about in his “Essay on the Blind.” Saunderson could describe a *first look* at the world. I suspect that if he came to Cohen-Halimi's mind while she was reading Royet-Journoud it was partly because one can imagine Saunderson telling how it is to see a world that no look in advance of looking has rendered perceptible. When for the first time he could use his eyes, perhaps Saunderson saw an unseen world. In any case, Cohen-Halimi quotes Diderot: “*On ne voit rien la première fois qu'on se sert de ses yeux.*”⁸⁵

You see nothing because you haven't learned yet which objects answer to which names, how to tell foreground from background and so on. Perhaps you don't know yet how to see seen things. Only unseen. Cohen-Halimi observes that the first time you can look,



your eye is more like a hand, groping, touching, grasping—feeling its way. And this, she says, is how her own eye works when she encounters pages by Royet-Journoud. Her vision becomes the sheer muscular activity of the eye which, instead of sweeping smoothly over the pages must dilate, squint, refocus, blink. . .⁸⁶ Perhaps, in addition to the various other activities that reading (or not) Royet-Journoud resembles (consulting an oracle or interpreting the look on someone's face. . .), we could

add touching, pressing, feeling with one's eye a world unseen. For my own part, I did not happen to think of Diderot and Saunderson, but of the child at the window in the brief scene that Blanchot published more than once, giving it a different title each time: *Scène*, *Une scène*, “*Scène primitive*,” *Scène primitive*? The child seems to be seven or eight. He stands by a window, draws the curtain aside and looks through the pane.

What he sees: the garden, wintry trees, the wall of a house, in short, his play space, and then, idly, looks up toward the sky, the ordinary sky which suddenly opens up, absolutely black and absolutely empty, revealing (as though the pane had broken) such an absence that all has since always and forevermore been lost therein—so lost that therein is affirmed and dissolved the vertiginous knowledge that nothing is what there is—*rien est ce qu'il y a*—and first of all nothing beyond. The unexpected aspect of this scene (its interminable feature) is the feeling of happiness that straightaway submerges the child, the ravaging joy to which he can bear witness only by tears, an endless flood of tears. He is thought to suffer a childish sorrow; attempts are made to console him. He says nothing. He will live henceforth in the secret. He will weep no more.⁸⁷

82 *Aerea* 30.

83 *La poésie entière* 14.

84 *La poésie entière* 9.

85 *Seul le renversement* 23 and 113.

86 *Ibid.* 83.

87 *The Writing of the Disaster* 72.

This text preoccupied Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe for decades, and the child in it returns from time to time in his own writing, especially in *Phrase*. It is the child, I think, who speaks in the following passage, referring to himself in the third person. He speaks of nothing's happening (*"l'arrivée de rien"*):

*L'enfant, à supposer que ce soit lui, regarde. Ou bien,
peut-être, a regardé. Ce qu'il voit néanmoins, ce qu'il a vu,
nul ne le saura jamais, pas même lui qui l'aura
d'avance oublié mais ne cessera d'affirmer en avoir gardé
l'immémoriale mémoire: l'arrivée de rien
à ce rivage sans bord. Douceur et douleur, ensemble*⁸⁸

IMPOSSIBLE EMPLACEMENT

Emplacement is position, not pre-position, I claimed earlier. It's the fixed lookout upon the unseen world. But *"l'emplacement est impossible."*⁸⁹ This is the second thing to stress with regard to the anecdote about mushroom hunting in *Aerea*. As anyone can tell you, if you are to see something, first there must be something to see. If there is not, you must provide it. You must imagine some things, you must see them in advance and tell yourself about them, if they are ever to be there at all, under your nose. The halt, the staring halt that makes a hole or a blank (*l'emplacement*) may well be impossible; this does not mean it doesn't ever happen, just that it is exactly what sets everything in motion, as Royet-Journoud observes. For it happens before it can—positioned in advance, after all, in a pre-position. It lacks something to finish off. No stop can put an end to something that has not started already. If there is nothing, then something must be made up. Discovery, to put it in a barely different way, must invent something for invention to discover.

A WONDERFUL LIFE

Wittgenstein, whose way of just entering into the world without fuss or feathers and describing what he finds there, just as he finds it, is all the more appealing, it seems, to Plümper-Hüttenbrink because he considers that Wittgenstein invented everything he simply came upon. *"Ich berichte wie ich die Welt forvand,"* Wittgenstein wrote, and P.-H. cites him with no less admiration for having gathered, from his own experiments



⁸⁸ *Phrase* 95.

⁸⁹ *La poésie entière* 14.

reading Wittgenstein, that one cannot decipher the logic of the world without inventing a duplicate, parallel world which exists only in the heads of those who speak and move around in it.⁹⁰ The implication is that Wittgenstein, rather like a child whispering stories to himself in the dark, told himself a marvelous tale about what to find—about what there was for him to find lying right under his nose and report on. Indeed, Plümper-Hüttenbrink interprets Wittgenstein’s unexpected last words—“Tell them I’ve had a wonderful life”—to mean that his life had been an enchanting tale, *ein Wunder*.⁹¹

Invenire—to invent, in Latin—means both to come upon and to make up, to discover and to compose. Here the two meanings are superimposed. You might say each is the other’s lining. They form a single two-faced verb designating one reversible act which is no less making up something to find than it is finding something by surprise. *All* of that is the act of discovery, I would say—all of it comprises the whole, undiluted act.

READING AND WRITING

It seems that Plümper-Hüttenbrink was asked once, by a fellow passenger on a train, permission to read the newspaper he’d laid aside. “I haven’t had a thing to read in days!” the man said, in a tone like the one you would use if you were starved for something to eat.⁹² So P.-H. wonders (or pretends to wonder) if reading matter isn’t something like the nourishment you need in order to read; and I (for my part) wonder if this doesn’t mean that reading material is something you need to read in preparation for reading it. Indeed, P.-H. seems to have the impression, upon encountering certain texts, that they are instructions for how to read them. It’s as if you always (or at least often) had to read a text before being able read it. Or, indeed, before it’s been written. Perhaps in such cases, reading has to write something for writing to read.

It is interesting to note in this regard the strong necessity of writing that Michèle Cohen-Halimi says came over her while reading, in the stringent reading program she undertook with Royet-Journoud. She evokes “*le lecteur qui écrit pour lire*,” and pictures him as one or the other of two silhouettes—author, reader—neither of whom retains much identity, having drifted into a light that blots out familiar functions and attitudes.⁹³

From my own perspective, reading and writing appear as mirror images, twin phases of the same operation, each depending on the other to come first. The hand that writes and

the eye that reads presuppose each other, “*énigmatiquement*,” Cohen-Halimi herself writes, at the close of her book on *Le Renversement*: “*un échange silencieux et intime*.”⁹⁴ They keep changing places. Thus does the impossible emplacement, the abrupt halt (END) unleash a wheeling movement whereby before and after, writing and reading, displace and replace each other along a circular course without start or finish. “*C’est dans la mesure même où l’on est arrêté dans une immobilité voyeuse que les choses sont mobiles*.” The stop is what gets something started that can only circle round and round back again to the spot (stop, blank, hole, *FIN*), away from which the way leading up to it leads. For what it’s the end of lies beyond it. “*FIN*,” Royet-Journoud writes in *La poésie entière*, “*pour que ce qui suit devienne ce qui précède*.”⁹⁵ Writing, he adds, is “*le temps rabouté*.”⁹⁶ Time bent in a circle.

The whole of poetry, then, is positioned in advance of itself. The whole of life, too, perhaps. Maybe it amounts to the same. There was an accident. Or there are accidents all the time. Something happens—a life, a world. And this brings the whole thing to a stop too soon for it ever to start up. “*La description sur l’heure fut impossible*,” Royet-Journoud writes, as if once upon a time there had been one initial accident—one pre-start finish. Words arrived too late, so they had to fabulate or somehow fabricate something, a world, to get to the end of. But it could be this happens all the time, every time there is a birth (so abrupt, so violent a clap of silence). Every time it happens, it happens out of time, too soon to happen, and way too soon for words which, arriving late, must spin out a story of some kind to finish—must spin out a life.

In this make-believe existence you’d play your own role. Which brings to mind the only theater Rousseau thought he could tolerate: the rustic one set up in village squares on festive occasions, where ordinary people go on stage and pretend to be no one, just themselves. Each a stand-in or replacement for nobody else. I think of Lacoue-Labarthe’s commentary: “*Mimésis de rien, ou de personne*.”⁹⁷

90 *Jeux de lecture* 115.

91 *Jeux de lecture* 159.

92 *Jeux de lecture* 107

93 *Les grands intenses* 8.

94 *Seul le renversement* 117.

95 *La poésie entière* 23. This order of things is demonstrated in *Les natures indivisibles*, where *FIN* appears all by itself on page 95, followed—as is generally the case at the end of French books—by the Table of Contents, and after that, the usual page listing books by the same author published by Gallimard as well as by other publishers. This page is followed by the familiar one usually lying just inside the back cover of a book, bearing the name and address of the printer, date of the print run and the ISBN number. After that, in *Les natures indivisibles*, a few blank pages—and then the Title Page, with the copyright date inscribed on its reverse side, followed by the opening texts in the volume. They cover the next several pages, numbered up to 16, and, if you take the trouble to count everything up carefully, are followed, just inside the front cover of the book, by page 17, with the text which the Table of Contents indicates is to be found there. In short, what follows *FIN* precedes.

96 *Ibid.*

97 Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe. *Poétique de l’histoire* 129-130.



THEATRICALS

Lacoue-Labarthe recognizes in Rousseau the thought that whereas animals are always furnished with some particular characteristic or quality, some natural gift of their own, humans have no natural attributes at all. To possess no proper trait is what is proper to them.⁹⁸ Perhaps his conception of humans is comparable to the thought about things that we’ve been circling round: the thought that in their, as it were, raw essence (“[leur] *état brut*”)—in the state of being proper to them, I mean—they *are*, but no one knows what, next to nothing. In any event, for Lacoue-Labarthe, not to be anyone is a human’s distinguishing trait. So, I should think, if a person appears at all, on the world stage, it must be by letting himself be created as a character by an actor: by making himself up, if you like, as a role, and playing it. Plümper-Hüttenbrink often refers to the sensation a person can have of being ventriloquized. When you speak, he says, it not infrequently sounds to you as if someone else is speaking with your mouth. Especially if you listen to what your mouth is saying. And he cites a sentence of Klossowski’s which states, “*en substance et avec une consonance toute lacanienne que ‘l’on n’est jamais là où l’on est, mais toujours là où l’on n’est que l’acteur de cet autre que l’on est’.*”⁹⁹

“Denatured” is Lacoue-Labarthe’s word for beings that possess no natural attributes. Denatured just means a being who is alive but not, he explains: “*un vivant non vivant.*”¹⁰⁰ “*Un mort-né,*” is the way he puts it in *Phrase*. “*Nous autres mort-nés. . .*”¹⁰¹ “*Acteur né*” is Plümper-Hüttenbrink’s term for this “*vivant non vivant.*”¹⁰² “*Acteur né,*” aka “*le lecteur,*” “*le plus qu’improbable lecteur*” who disappears before appearing anywhere—or better, vanishes at the same time that he appears as a sort of zero: just a place holder, a stand-in for himself, a temporary substitute or fill-in for no one. Nobody’s *doublure*, if you like.

Suppose this person—a reader, or a writer, Royet-Journoud, perhaps—preferred eventually not to lay claim to a life, but grew content instead to live the one that doesn’t belong to him. One can imagine him having taken up residence, impersonally and rather distantly within himself, making no assumptions, in a provisional kind of way, as a stand-by. He’d be like Bartleby, living cool and quiet in the secret that escapes him.

There is a more melodramatic way, however, of considering this. To write, as we’ve seen now more than once, is—according to Royet-Journoud—to know how to quit, leave a

98 *Poétique de l’histoire* 43.

99 *Jeux de lecture* 33.

100 *Poétique de l’histoire* 43.

101 *Phrase* 51.

102 *Jeux de lecture* 142

blank, bore a hole. It's to end. I expect that among other things it's to stop the show and abolish mimesis. But let me suggest first that it's to encounter a word that has unexpectedly landed right in its place, lodged itself in position. Perhaps this word—this phrase, line or stanza or even *récit* (in short, this form)—has come to join and coincide with itself. I expect that writing, from R.-J.'s perspective is not just running into such a language fragment, settled down into itself, but that to write is sometimes actively to place a word or a clump of words or a page right on top of itself, so it can sink into itself. Indeed, Royet-Journoud notes in *La poésie entière* that the reason for his characteristic stress on prepositions may well lie with his equally strong inclination to superimpose words and word-groups immediately upon each other and upon themselves.¹⁰³ A word, a phrase, or an entire *récit* so positioned would, instead of naming or saying anything else, say nothing else. It would just say itself—or no: rather, it would *be* what there is no other way at all of saying. It wouldn't name itself or say what it says so much as be itself, nameless and unsaid.

I am reminded of Jacques Roubaud's interest in certain medieval theories of light, according to which light itself is unseen. Though it illuminates everything else and makes all the world's shapes and colors visible, light is invisible. If it could be seen, it would just be yet another thing, brightened up by some other light. But there is no other light to shine its rays upon light. When light turns away from the world of things that it illuminates—when it turns back toward itself—it “blacks.” It vanishes into itself, quitting the world. Roubaud's expression, “some thing black”—which he once observed could also be read “some thing blacks”¹⁰⁴—suggests to me this formula for Royet-Journoud's halt (*arrêt*, *FIN*, *trou*) that writing runs up against, or that writing is apt to produce: some thing unsaid.

An absence of language obtrudes; its disappearance suddenly crops up, like some underground stratum emerging on the earth's surface. Some thing undistinguished—the retreat into itself of some determination¹⁰⁵—intrudes, the way light on occasion, withdrawing into light in Roubaud's world, brings forth the terrible beauty of black.

Plümper-Hüttenbrink sometimes refers to the way an actor looks on stage backlit, or to the way anyone at all can look, coming down a path toward you with her back to the sun at the tail end of an afternoon. They overlap perfectly with their shadow; they disappear into their sharply defined absence. You see a sort of negative of them: the reverse of their

presence. P.-H. suggests that these silhouettes offer a glimpse of the lack that's positively theirs. He remembers a corporal in a comedy often cited by Paulhan, who liked to say, when inspecting his men lined up before him, “*J'en vois qui n'y sont pas.*”¹⁰⁶ “I see some who aren't here.” I am inclined hypothetically to connect this perception of a perfectly identifiable absence with the strange impression one might have on occasion of a distinctly recognizable silence. The stop—the blank in language or hole in space—that Royet-Journoud associates with writing might, I mean, be the occasion on which without warning you'd hear how a specific phrase sounds unspoken. You'd recognize the silence proper to it, its reverse or negative. You'd encounter a language unsaid, or a piece of one.

Returning to the sight of absentees at roll call, and broadening the context again by recalling the theatrical character of life (everyone an understudy for himself), let me suggest that the abrupt sight of what—of who—is not there to see arrests the make-believe, halts the play, interrupts the act of being someone, anyone, in favor of what P.-H. calls an “absolute act.”¹⁰⁷ I expect this act (to end all acts) is the one he mentions in his brief gloss on the roll call: “*Je les vois,*” P.-H. writes, “*en pleine action, de ne pas être là.*” “I see them in the very act of not being there.” He calls their action “*un acte perpétré en blanc.*” Something like a trial run or a *mariage blanc*, I suppose—the sort of act in which we've noted his interest. But here, we meet up with the ultimate thing, I should think, that a person can do without doing it: the act of not. It would blacken the stage and produce nothing, no one. Not “*mimésis de personne*” anymore: rather, *personne en personne*! This act (no mere act) would consist in swallowing itself up. *FIN*.

In Royet-Journoud's *Les natures indivisibles*, the words “*acte sans défaut*” (22) may well refer to the same act that Plümper-Hüttenbrink calls absolute. I think the “flawless act”—flawless, I expect, because it has no leftovers or preliminaries—is words' act of not saying. I mean, their saying, but not anything. Their *saying* nothing. One of the first subtitles in *Le Renversement* is “*Spectateur d'une annulation.*” It's an alert: the reader of *Le Renversement* is liable to see language engulf itself.

“IT JUST KNOCKS YOU DOWN”

When Royet-Journoud remarks in *La poésie entière* (12) that no manuscript ever shows the ongoing development of a poem—“*un état réel du texte en train de se faire*”—I expect it is because a poem for him is a whole-thing-all-at-once type of affair—comparable possibly

¹⁰³ *La poésie entière* 34.

¹⁰⁴ *Some Thing Black* is the title of Roubaud's 1986 book of poems, published by Gallimard, translated by Rosmarie Waldrop. *Quelque chose noir* is the title of the French original.

¹⁰⁵ I try to hear, in my head, some music unplayed.

¹⁰⁶ *Jeux de lecture* 154.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.* 147.

to music played by Lennie Tristano as admired by Bruce Nauman: “just there all at once,” Nauman observes; “you never see it coming; it just knocks you down.”¹⁰⁸

I think of a language that’s a scene and all of a sudden the scene of its obliteration, but also I recall a sudden “sign of life” described in *Aerea*: the pull a fisherman is lucky to feel from time to time at the end of his line, “*la touche*.” It signals life; it is “*le signe de reconnaissance*.” It comes or it doesn’t. The fisherman can’t determine anything. All he does is wait, attentively, and blindly. If the signal comes, it comes like lightning, gathering up all the time before and all the time yet to come in an instant. “*De sorte que l’on peut affirmer qu’au moment de la touche le pêcheur tient dans sa main, par la grâce d’un invisible poisson, son passé et son avenir*.”¹⁰⁹

A life’s past and future all at once, its start and stop together.

Something’s having happened—having been, the case—surges up for the first time ever. So abrupt a birth. Words get there too late to express this, David remarks in *Aerea*, when picturing for Adam a charming bit of *sotto bosco* born of the look that lights upon it—born of the love it suddenly ignites. “*Rencontre ineffable*.” “*La description sur l’heure fut impossible*” (Royet-Journoud).¹¹⁰

The *forme-récit*—to recall that event (that locus of legibility)—is a collision, I’ve maintained, of no longer, and not yet: a collision, or a coincidence, an accident at any rate whereby the *récit* is itself all at once all that precedes it and all that follows. The accident forms the present proper to a *récit*. A person can feel the “force” of it, Royet-Journoud has said, and know that “*le récit existe*.”¹¹¹ The force of its present must be something like “*un signe de vie*”—something akin to the sign of life that Adam waits for blindly at the end of a fishing line, in *Aerea*. In fact, it seems (according to Royet-Journoud’s hesitant remarks in interviews and in *La poésie entière*) that writing in his experience involves waiting blindly, more or less at loose ends (“*Comment fait-on. . . ?*”), just in case from inside a black recess where language ebbs and sleeps (“*dans le creux du langage*,” as he puts it, “*jamais dans le plein*”),¹¹² a restless word, a whole phrase or a ragged, incomplete one should suddenly emerge and demand a form. “*Des phrases, des bribes de phrases cherchent leur place pendant des années*” (*La poésie entière* 41). “*Comment fait-on pour capter ce récit qui oscille à l’intérieur du texte. Qui balbutie. Qui tente de trouver une forme, un souffle*” (33).

108 A Rose Has No Teeth. Bruce Nauman in the 1960s 10.

109 *Aerea* 149-150.

110 *Le Renversement* 15.

111 Online interview cited above, in footnote 59, page 24.

112 *La poésie entière* 30

It sounds as though somewhere inside language—even inside the language of a text, a restless text that stays inchoate for years—the form which a *récit* is (the accident. . .), can sometimes be sensed wanting to exist, or to happen. *Récit*, as I take it, equals *form*, equals *existence*. It shouldn’t be forgotten that “form” goes with “*lisibilité*” in Royet-Journoud’s thinking. Form means solidity, too, and resistance. One can feel the form “holding,” Royet-Journoud says, in an interview (“*elle se tient*”):¹¹³ one can sense it holding together, holding its own—withstanding, I gather, the ever-lurking threat of disintegration. Of *accomplissement*’s turning over into *perdition*. Or again, of the “normal” order’s swallowing back up some “*abrupte naissance*,” some “*coup de foudre*” accidentally lifted out of the Word there was in the beginning (“*l’économie de dieu*”). “*Naufragée, elle tourne et se perd dans le verbe, bord nocturne de la loi*.”¹¹⁴

Since “*la description sur l’heure fut impossible*,” fear gets its chance to move in and pass “*le lieu de l’accomplissement*” off as “*le lieu de perdition*.” At least, so Adam tries to explain in *Aerea*. I expect the fear is fear of so final a beginning, so violent a clap of stillness. I dare say it is dread of an act whose subject and object are indistinguishable—an act like seeing when a gaze meets a gaze—an act which I mean now to suggest is an “act of birth.”¹¹⁵ An act of recognition, that is: a life abruptly discovering itself coming straight for it from the opposite direction—taking itself by surprise. *Coup de foudre*. Fear, I surmise, deforms this act, and makes it into a crime and the discovery of this crime: a life suddenly surprising its nudity, covering itself with shame, bowing to the law. A form can, though, at least for a moment, hold out against fear, and it holds out against the reader, too. When Royet-Journoud speaks, seeking politely to converse with his interviewer, of a form’s “*résistance*,” he quite clearly means both its way of withstanding the threat of crumbling, and its manner of withstanding the reader, holding her off, and resisting the understanding of the writer as well, who senses he must just place his own body in the *récit*’s present.

Perhaps Royet-Journoud feels (intermittently) that a *récit* exists, but nothing more. It’s conceivable he feels in his hand a whole life, past and future together, but not whose. And cold. “*Le froid dans la main comme un récit*.”¹¹⁶ A featureless, effaced—a naked—existence.

113 See online material indicated above, notes 59 and 108.

114 Claude Royet-Journoud. *La Finitude des objets simples* 86

115 This expression appears in *La poésie entière*¹⁴, where Royet-Journoud hazards the thought that writing is a balancing exercise whereby it might be possible, via a poem, to reach “l’acte de naissance.” He adds in the same sentence “*comme si l’on pouvait le montrer*.”

116 *Les objets contiennent* 50. I associate these words (“*le froid dans la main comme un récit*”) with this passage in *La poésie entière* (13): *Faire surgir la partie du corps qui écrit (la rendre visible, lisible): bras, poignet, main, doigt, bouche. . . L’inscrire dans la fable, en faire un personnage de l’intrigue. Comme si tout se tenait là: dans la main qui se sépare du corps par l’écrit. Et le froid.*



NAKED LIE

“Naked lie” is a phrase Hocquard uses¹¹⁷ to designate a text—a *récit*—that can’t be connected to anything outside or prior to it (since it is its own outside and prior to itself). It is not a faithful representation of any reality separate from it, but it does not misrepresent anything either. It is without truth value, and is foreign to “*l’économie de dieu*.” Whence, I suppose, its designation as a lie. It can construe itself guiltily as a lie when fear captures it; it can take itself for a crime, in this way installing a law over itself. But it is also an equivalent of the “*réminiscence vide*” that comes to Adam suddenly in *Aerea*, on an autumn afternoon in Riverside Park when a flash of black (“*accroc noir*”) flares up in the dead leaves, bringing with it the scent of other leaves, “*c’était il y a longtemps*.” “*Réminiscence vide, qui ne peut être rattachée à rien*.”¹¹⁸

“C’était il y a longtemps. *Ainsi devraient commencer tous les récits*,” Royet-Journoud wrote in *Les objets contiennent l’infini* (53). That’s how they all ought to begin since, as I take it, they begin at their end. They are a recollection, but not of anything—not of anything else that would precede, that would be earlier, older, prior. “*La distance est le lieu*.” This is a phrase from *La notion d’obstacle* (53), which Royet-Journoud quotes himself, again in conversation with Hocquard, when his friend reminds him of the long-ago and the far away in *récits*. “*Ça vient de loin, mais sans profondeur*,” he says. “*Ce que je donne est dans la surface; il n’y a pas d’en deça*.”¹¹⁹ Susan Howe felt this close-up remoteness in Royet-Journoud’s writing: “*Quelque chose se passe sous la surface en même temps que cette chose est la surface*,” she wrote.¹²⁰

I expect a person who, like Plümper-Hüttenbrink’s improbable reader, begins by disappearing—departs before she has been anywhere at all, and thus arrives as the return of no one (no one who has ever been anywhere before)—I expect such a person partakes of that paper-thin faraway-ness, and is such an empty remembrance, such a naked lie.

This nakedness must be what the meeting of two gazes places in evidence—what the act of discovery exposes. It causes a “*déchirure*” in us. The word *effacement*, which comes at the end of the first sequence in Royet-Journoud’s *Renversement*, is, I suspect, a synonym of nakedness, and indicates the dazzling indistinction of no one’s ghost, the facelessness of no one in particular suddenly right in front of you. The first few pages of *Le Renversement*

117 *Il rien*, in *Un privé* 54.

118 *Aerea* 103.

119 *Conversation du 8 février*, in *Un privé* 169

120 *Raccourci (ou le principe de la note)*, in *Je te continue ma lecture* 56. Translated from the English by Dominique Fourcade.

(ending with “*effacement*” and approximately reproduced below) appear to me to comprise a brief anti-*Genesis*, cutting loose without apologies from reverence of any sort, and likewise from any variety of engendering or filiation, and any garden scene or delinquency or ruined pastoral. That would be in keeping with Hocquard’s *Aerea* and the dim view he takes of the Bible as the principal model for all books. It would not be foreign to the violence that seems inherent in birth—that act of discovery, that inaugural crash of silence. In the radiant indistinction of some one person’s sheer evidence there persists the feel of a face torn off.

sans offrandes
ni
traversée parentale
hors de l’écart
hors de l’implosion rurale

ce qui est devant nous

distance rompue
sans souci de l’économie de dieu’
la nécessité de l’effacement

FEAR

Like Hocquard in *Aerea*, Royet-Journoud evokes fear quite often. There is a persistent “threat” in his poems (“*une menace*”). It isn’t, though, as I understand it, quite the same as the fear Hocquard associates with a miserable sense of guilt. It seems to correspond, in Royet-Journoud, with an almost irresistible surrender, to “law.” “*Naufragée elle tourne et se perd dans le verbe, bord interne de la loi . . .*”¹²¹ But release from shame, from “la loi,” is not, in Royet-Journoud’s writing, release from fear, or from the threat always accompanying the forming of a form (the sudden presence of a *récit*). For unashamed, innocent nakedness will be frightful or will not be: it is effacement. “*Je donne à lire quelque chose qui est à peine visible: c’est là que s’exerce la menace, que quelque chose de violent peut naître. Bataille dit que le philosophe est quelqu’un qui a peur.*”¹²² The

121 *La Finitude des corps simples* 86.
122 *La poésie entière* 12.

lurking possibility that a form barely forming will collapse is by no means opposed to, or even separable from the form itself, the scarcely visible thing that might be born, the effaced, flayed, featureless thing. The likeliness of collapse is the utter indistinction of the perfectly unmistakable thing, *holding its own*, withstanding everything. Its looming disintegration is its nothing-in-particular look—the any-old-thing-at-all look of the thing no other is. Thus, a form’s likely collapse and its cold staying power conjoin. Its *effondrement* and its *résistance* go together. “*Sa fragilité lui sert d’expédient.*”¹²³

Rather than overcoming fear, then, the point, if I can put it that way, is to release accidents from law. “Viens dehors” is the title of one sequence in *La Finitude des corps simples* (61). *Veni foras*, Christ’s words to Lazarus. Resurrection, then. The resurgence of life, of dreadful life with its threat of violence (“*quelque chose de violent [qui] peut naître*”). Life delivered from Law, which is first among the names of death.

So we read in Alain Badiou’s book on Saint Paul, from which I don’t doubt Royet-Journoud borrows, the way he borrows from Bataille, Simenon, Merleau Ponty, Wittgenstein, *Le Roman de la rose*, “*un homme qui passe dans la rue en parlant tout seul.*”¹²⁴ It had occurred to me that he was remembering, when he set down on a page in *Le Renversement*,

Parallèle il suit cette
route-ci

a couple of Badiou’s words about Saint Paul’s accident on the road to Damascus: “the event— ‘it happened,’ purely and simply,” Badiou wrote, “in the anonymity of a road.”¹²⁵

It was the ordinary uniqueness, you will recall—the singular indistinction of *cette route-ci* that Cohen-Halimi noted. But perhaps Royet-Journoud was just reminded, perusing Badiou’s *Saint Paul*, of his own affection for accidents, for everything that happens, for “events,” and of how it all goes along with what he thinks about *le lisible*. He might have jotted down a note in the margin when the interdependence of singularity and universality is articulated especially tellingly by Badiou, or an asterisk next to a description of Saint Paul’s Jesus as “‘someone’” absolved of all identifying features (all “predicative traits”) by his resurgence (his “resurrection”).¹²⁶ It is a pleasure, I feel, to catch a hint, from time to time (no doubt this happens to some other people far more

123 *L’usage et les attributs du coeur* 13. This phrase (“*Sa fragilité . . .*”) is the title of one sequence of poems in *L’usage et les attributs du coeur*.
124 *La poésie entière* 24.
125 *Saint Paul. The Foundation of Universalism* 17.
126 *Ibid.* 63.

often than to me) of a Badiou sentence, or a Charles Bernstein phrase, or a quip by some other writer in Royet-Journoud's head, or the other way round, and to think of Plümper-Hüttenbrink's picture of the countless individual people all over the planet who, unbeknownst to each other, happen to be reading the same thing at the same time, in different languages, editions, quoted in different volumes. Plümper-Hüttenbrink imagines that clandestinely they configure the community of all the readers in the world. This is not an imaginary community, he says—just unverifiable. "*Une existence fantomatique, menée en quelque infra-monde, et qui serait donnée en partage tout aussi bien aux lecteurs qu'aux flâneurs et dormeurs.*"¹²⁷ So, not so much a matter of references and footnotes as is the case in the present, rather effortful study.

TIME BENT IN A CIRCLE

I wish with a schoolgirl's obstinacy to turn back again to the thought of the stop (hole, blank, end) that had us stopped for some pages earlier on, and to recall Royet-Journoud's assertion that this halt sets things going. It launches everything that is the case into orbit.



Everything that happens. All it can do is circle round and round back again to the spot (halt, void, *FIN*), away from which the way leading up to it leads.

I have a gloomy tendency to think of this as the circular course of a life trying to catch up with itself. Chasing after itself like a fox chasing its tail. But there must be more than one way of picturing this whirligig. Hocquard, for example, resists the gloomy sense of entrapment—the feeling that, ever since the "*accident du sens*," one can only turn round in circles, searching for the way out of a snare one is caught in—the way out which is, precisely, over and over, the way in.

In *Aerea*, Adam's friend Sokrat takes him to visit the inner courtyard of a mosque in Egypt, designed, like many other buildings, he says, in the image of the garden of Eden. Paradise had its limits, and all structures modeled on it must show their own, Sokrat explains, lest the visitor's soul remain a captive of the place. To this end, a flaw interrupts the visual harmony of the courtyard in the mosque: it's a startlingly messy patch in the geometric design of blue and red arabesques and interlacings, just inside the door: "*une petite catastrophe de céramique peinte.*" A miniature *renversement*, then, at the entrance: the entrance reversed. "*Voici l'accroc dans le filet,*" Sokrat says to Adam: "*la déchirure par laquelle celui qui sait demeurer vigilant peut échapper à la quiétude bleue et à l'endormissement de l'esprit, comme un poisson s'évade de la nasse où il s'était laissé enfermer et où il tournait en rond.*"¹²⁸

The way out of the circle, which always turns out to be the way back in, turns again from the way straight in to the way back out again. I suspect this is not really a more cheerful way of construing the circular course of things than the gloomy way is; instead, it conveys a hint of gloom and cheer's indistinction, and reminds me of the passage near the end of *Aerea* which I have already cited—the one bearing on the "troubling surplus of charm" occasionally lent to certain beings, or things, such as rocks. Consolation wafts from them momentarily, or desolation—consolation or desolation "*indifféremment.*" I imagine that to read Royet-Journoud is to turn ahead toward pain and back toward gladness and then back ahead again toward the light and then back back . . . , over and over till you are worn out and cannot tell the difference.

Reading Royet-Journoud—or, possibly just reading, simply reading—reminds both Plümper-Hüttenbrink and Cohen-Halimi of the scene viewed from a distance at the end of Antonioni's *Blow-Up*: two people play a play tennis match. I gather P.-H. and C.-H. are both imagining, as I also tried to do, a reader and a writer at play, always changing places—reader writing for writer to read, writer reading for reader to write. In *Blow-Up* the tennis players play without a ball. "*Les livres n'existent pas,*" I recall, from Royet-Journoud. Books don't exist, just their *sens*. Reader and writer loft *le sens* back and forth, back and forth between them. They keep the direction, I mean, from one side of the net to the other, in play. And if they keep on playing as darkness falls, it will become less and less possible to tell one way from the other: the way to extinction, the way to rebirth. "*Douceur et douleur, ensemble,*" Lacoue-Labarthe wrote.

127 See *Jeux de lecture* 18-19,

128 *Aerea* 102-03.

As it happens, there are a great many circles in Royet-Journoud’s poems. One sequence in *Le Renversement* is called “*Le cercle nombreux*,” and the opening section of *La Finitude des corps simples*, “*Kardia*” (heart, in Greek)—as well as the title of Royet-Journoud’s most recent book, *L’Usage et les attributs du coeur*—might introduce the circulation of the blood into the back of a person’s mind, and cause them to notice it when, in remarks during a recent interview, Royet-Journoud dwells on *l’usage, l’usure, la circulation, ce qui s’use, le coeur*.¹²⁹

I referred earlier to a phrase in *La poésie entière* about words’ sometimes unexpectedly jutting out, demanding—I took the liberty of suggesting—a form. “*Des mots font soudain relief*.” Actually, the fragment goes on a bit longer: “*Ils signalent leur épuisement, leur trop grande utilisation*.”¹³⁰

Une force passe de main en main

tout ramener au noir

These are two lines from *La notion d’obstacle*.¹³¹ Keith Waldrop translates: “A strength passes from hand to hand / bringing everything to black again.”¹³² This brings to mind a wearing-down, weakening process caused by the exchange of a strength, its passage from hand to hand, round and back around again. Perhaps, though, in concert with the sudden conspicuousness of some words’ exhaustion, it suggests something salient in depletion. Entropy as a sudden outcropping. Some doubt, thus, about the direction things are going in when they go toward black again.

“*l’usure comme mémoire*,” Royet-Journoud wrote in *Les objets contiennent l’infini*.

l’usure comme mémoire

elle dépose les corps dans le jour (69)

He seems to propose thinking of wearing things out as bringing them back (remembering them). Use, overuse sets bodies down in the light of day; it is a kind of deposition.¹³³

129 Online material cited above. See note 113.

130 *La poésie entière* 42.

131 *La notion d’obstacle* 9.

132 *The notion of obstacle* 13.

133 A form of testimony, if we picture a court. “Deposition” also brings to mind the scene of Christ’s body removed from the Cross, and the way saints’ bodies and relics were once, as it were, placed in evidence.

It was on two facing pages of *Les objets contiennent l’infini* (18-19) that I thought I caught a hint of words circulating like money, from hand to hand. Near the top of the left-hand page Royet-Journoud places a phrase of Mallarmé’s: “*l’homme poursuit noir sur blanc*.”¹³⁴ On account of these Mallarmé words, I think—perhaps idly—of *Crise de vers*, as I read, lower down on the same Royet-Journoud page, “*commerce quotidien*”—and, on the opposite side of the book’s seam, “*les objets passent de main en main / il y faudrait du silence*.” Mallarmé, in *Crise de vers*: “*à chacun suffirait, peut-être pour échanger la pensée humaine, de prendre ou de mettre dans la main d’autrui en silence une pièce de monnaie . . .*”¹³⁵ It is not that Royet-Journoud is “in dialogue” with Mallarmé. Rather, the Mallarmé words here are, as I take it, found shards of French without relation to any *oeuvre*, which catch Royet-Journoud’s attention and take on a look of their own on the page he sets them down on (due to their position, and to the other words nearby)—the way various language fragments stand out suddenly under Hocquard’s nose and make him want to write them down, more often than not for someone in particular; but they also provoke joy in him on occasion because of the unforeseen, and utterly convincing connections they suddenly make with other, equally contextless words he has collected or just accumulated on his tables, his pages. Perhaps their brilliant liveliness comes of their having got completely worn out (*usés par un usage excessif*) and fallen out of circulation. Hocquard’s affection for *lieux communs* comes to mind: these expressions are overused and, like the “*cancre*,” the inert dunce whom he also appreciates—whose merits, if he has any at all, do not show up on the rainbow spectrum of strong points and weak—clichés are colorless.¹³⁶ Yet, they endure in memory, even if no longer in active usage. Their lasting power could well cause one to think of a “form”’s capacity to “resist,” recognized by Royet-Journoud (we mentioned it earlier). A form, suddenly glimpsed, can hold out, perhaps only momentarily, but against everything. Maybe, for his part, Royet-Journoud notes a certain blunting effect produced on objects such as words that pass from hand to hand: their sharp edges get rubbed down, they grow duller, become ill-defined—they go inert, and take on relief, emit a signal.

Hocquard’s novel *Aerea*, whose first person narrator is called Adam, and which prominently features a painting of Eve by Cranach and appears, thus, to bear some relation to Genesis, gradually approaches “*dégénérescence*.” It nears its end on an

134 See Mallarmé’s *L’Action restreinte*, in *Oeuvres complètes* II 215.

135 *Oeuvres complètes* II 212.

136 See *Un privé* 221.

island formed by extinct volcanos, “*un chaos de lave stérile,*” completely given over to “*l’épuisement générale.*” In the extreme light of a late morning sun that blots out forms and colors, the dull rocks on this island secrete their own particular spectrum, as I have mentioned—brown, violet, greys both pale and dark, ocher and rose—the rainbow proper to indistinction.¹³⁷

I have, elsewhere, drawn attention to Hocquard’s description of twilight during Ramadan in Fez. It appears in a prose text called *Deux Leçons des ténèbres*. Women gather on the roof terraces toward the end of each day as light withdraws and “a particular silence” sets in; they wait there for the moment when it is no longer possible to distinguish a white thread from a black. Then the day’s fast is over, a joyful clamor breaks out and everyone goes home. “*A l’approche des ténèbres.*” I’ve also tried elsewhere to bring out Hocquard’s admiring description of Raquel Lévy’s paintings—diptychs that seem to show colors in their very least possible distinction from each other: a bluish red on one panel ever so close to a reddish blue on the same diptych’s other leaf and the shadowy separation between, where their separateness practically disappears. She may have wanted to paint the unseen: “We don’t see indifferentiation.”¹³⁸

“*Pourquoi,*” Royet-Journoud asks at one point, “*travailler autant pour trouver le point le plus faible?*” (*La poésie entière* 41).

Here is the page in *La Notion d’obstacle* where “a strength passes from hand to hand,” bringing everything back round to black:

l’accomplissement de cette tâche	<i>comme ce corps</i>
s’ouvre sur le sommeil	<i>dans sa perte</i>
	<i>il prend sens</i>
une force passe de main en main	
tout ramener au noir	<i>coup de langue</i>
	<i>jusqu’à la corde</i>

137 See *Aerea* 130, 131, 156.
138 *Deux leçons de ténèbres*, in *Un privé* 200-204.



This page¹³⁹ suggests a gain that comes of loss, perhaps a kind of waking up that arrives with sleep; and maybe the work unaccountably required just to run out. “*Faire travailler la répétition jusqu’à la cassure*,” Royet-Journoud writes in *Les objets contiennent*. . . (59). Belaboring language in this way—exacerbating its returning, reversing, over-and-over bent till it gives out and breaks—could be at the same time to elaborate an eroded, old out-of-use language—everything in it gone indistinct. That is, relentlessly wearing out a language that’s still in circulation might be simultaneously to detect at least a memory of some overused, no longer current tongue flaring up in the breakdown, flickering in some word or other. “*Réminiscence vide*,” I am tempted to think. “*C’était il y a longtemps . . .*” For in the passage I just began to cite from *Les objets contiennent l’infini*, there is “*une mémoire qui retrouve*.” It seems to accompany the elaboration of an ancient tongue. I think it must be a remembrance unattachable to anything: a recollection of something that never was anything but the loss of it; a glimpse, then, not of anything that ever disappeared, but of disappearance. Of departure itself: right there, such an abrupt birth. An “upsurge,” Badiou might say: “surrection.”¹⁴⁰ Some writer brutalizing repetition, relentlessly hollowing out the groove whereby an end tries to arrive at something it can be the end of—some such writer might bring up out of the shambles some worn-out word with a flame in it, like a workman digging and turning over the dirt in a field or garden.

Faire travailler la répétition jusqu’à la cassure. L’élaboration sourde d’une langue ancienne. Une mémoire qui retrouve. Un feu. Dans l’espace d’un mot. Sol porté à hauteur des coudes.”¹⁴¹

Near the beginning of *La Finitude des corps simples*, a prose text seems to describe a faltering search for such a threadbare vestige. The remains of something that never yet has been, its crumbled ruin—the memory, I mean, of something new.

Of prose passages like this one, Royet-Journoud has explained that they are for the most part failures, but occasionally one proves useful, if more or less by chance some patch or strand in it points toward a form—resisting. In the passage I am about to quote, night has fallen, there is no color anywhere, words are weakening, memory discerns an image through the dust, “*une chose encore vive et palpable qui vient faire basculer l’instant*.”

139 Actually, just a little more than half the page. Roman and italics are set in the original.

140 See Badiou’s *Saint Paul* 56.

141 *Les objets contiennent* 59.

Elle recouvre un titre ancien. Nuit éprouvée, défaite où la parole se dissout. Seule l’inertie pourrait vaincre. Et encore. Une espèce de chaleur persiste en dépit de cette humidité qui emplit le corps. Une phrase est seule. Elle est désorientée. Ne sait plus sa direction.

(La Finitude des corps simples 25)

A lone sentence is lost, “*ne sait plus sa direction*.” Which way should it go, in what grammar can it make what rustles underneath heard. “*La faiblesse tourne, éperdue, elle insère un mouvement imprévisible dans cette ligne ultime. Une trace légère perdure*” (La Finitude 25).

A faint trace persists—inert. The unlikely depth from which its exhaustion seems to rise is new: a new place.

Seule jusqu’à ne plus entendre, ne plus savoir. D’une inertie qui paraît surgir d’une profondeur inattendue, d’un lieu neuf.

(La Finitude 25)

X MARKS THE SPOT

Talking with Hocquard, and responding apparently to Hocquard’s remarks about a place like an island, where life is very airy and spacious at the same time that it is very confined—an island kind of a place where the various ways round and about are more limited than elsewhere, more concrete, and also much more abstract—Royet-Journoud brought up a place that is neither outside nor in. If writing is linked to anything, he muses, it’s to that. And he goes on to recall having seen a dead person carried through the streets of a Greek town. It was the end of the afternoon, people were busy closing up their shops, the body was carried along in an open coffin or maybe it was on a ladder; it was wearing new shoes—“*un mort promené par la ville et qui est là, à quelques mètres de notre visage*. . .” Writing has something to do with that, Royet-Journoud said to Hocquard: something to do with death or perhaps with pre-birth, “*la pré-naissance*. . .” In any case, it has something to do with the place, “*ce lieu*,” “*ce lieu qui n’est ni dehors ni dedans*” (Un privé 158).¹⁴²

142 In *La poésie entière est préposition*, we find a similar remark (p. 14). I have cited part of this observation before, but now I would place the emphasis on “*balancement*,” meaning equilibrium but also hesitation, indecision.

J’ai l’impression que ce livre [Les objets contiennent l’infini] est une hésitation entre le dedans et le dehors, une avant-naissance; ce moment où le corps même n’est ni dedans ni dehors. Le ‘balancement’ entre vers et prose est une image de cela. Il s’agirait peut-être d’agencer vers ou prose de façon à rejoindre par le poème, l’acte de naissance comme si l’on pouvait le montrer.

Neither outside nor in, neither here nor not—no more absent than present—sheer indetermination. Writing seeks to recover *that*? It is true that “*Neutre*” is the title of the second sequence of poems in *Le Renversement*, but what of *la poésie ENTIÈRE*? I mean, what about any given text all at once, nowhere observable in development, never perceptible moving toward itself or away, just there all of a sudden, “you never see it coming, it just knocks you down”?

What about the place exactly over the net in a tennis game *alla* Antonioni, where coming and going cross paths: where *le sens* meets up with itself and forms an X, and that X marks the spot where *nothing* IS?

All of that is the whole of poetry: poetry all at once (“*coup de foudre*,” “violent silence inaugural”), *and* poetry spaced out, behind and ahead of itself, indefinite, indeterminate. *All* of that, the *whole* of it is preposition—preposition taken now to mean the small words that provide the hinges in language, the joints, where it flexes and bends. “*Le sens*,” Royet-Journoud writes (in *La poésie entière* 143), floods into prepositions, as though the hinge, the bending joint were all—were the whole (the elbow the entire arm, the knee the whole leg). This is because the whole happens all at once at the point where it bends and reverses—at the spot where it is, in its perfectly precise and definitive way, indeterminable. In its “*unicité*,” “*quelconque*.” In its abstract way, concrete, in its spacious way, confined. In its made-of-nothing way—when it’s like an imaginary tennis ball floating through the air—nonetheless a matter of paper, lead, ink and thread.



AUTHOR’S COMMENT

At the very start of this book I evoked Sartre’s famous question in *Qu’est-ce que la littérature*, “For whom does one write?” I was introducing Royet-Journoud and Hocquard as a pair, one writing for no one, and the other for someone, in particular. But really I quoted that question of Sartre’s as a reminder to myself of a happy afternoon of tributes to Denis Hollier, author (among other remarkable books and essays) of *Politique de la prose. Jean-Paul Sartre et l’an quarante* (Paris: Gallimard, 1982). On that festive occasion in 2023, trying out a few of the intuitions that later I sought to develop in *The World of Letters*, I wanted, by citing Sartre, to stress the thought, suggested by Hollier, that one might very well write specifically for the one person least likely to read. Hollier was thinking of Kafka; I thought of Ocean Vuong. But Hollier brings up several interesting and different examples of Sartre’s and other writers’ impulse to write for a non-reader.

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