Introduction: Through the Poet's Eye

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In our century, art criticism has been so widely practiced by French poets as to seem almost a natural feature of that culture's literary landscape, hence a form of writing whose origins and salient aspects, it would appear, neither invite nor require elucidation. On the other hand, the circumstances and events leading to this situation first arose, as has for some time been clear, with the Enlightenment, which means that the phenomenon does have a significant and recoverable history, dating back, most observers would agree, through Baudelaire to the eighteenth century. As Anita Brookner, for one, has shown, before and after Baudelaire, distinguished French prose writers like Diderot, Stendhal, the Goncourts and Huysmans, expatiated at length, if not as brilliantly as Baudelaire, on the artists of their respective eras. In this perspective, Apollinaire's and Malraux's more recent extended excursions into print on art can hardly surprise us, given how much their illustrious predecessors had already accomplished in the way of naturalizing the genre for poets and novelists alike in France.

One must keep in mind, however, that twentieth-century French poets discoursing on art far outnumber their coeval compatriots among the novelists producing such criticism. Whatever the reasons for this discrepancy, the sheer number of writers involved doubtless explains, at least in part, the myriad forms the genre has assumed. In this connection, as we shall see, the essays assembled here bear witness to, among other things, the genre's enormous elasticity, revealing as they do that there are virtually as many conceptions of this kind of writing as there are poets who practice it. As Adelaide Russo has appropriately observed, the French poet-art critic's discourse "is neither strictly poetic, nor philosophical, nor critical, but all three simultaneously" (5).

We shall also notice that a shared ingredient ties these widely varying ventures into art criticism together: each and every time, a powerful surge of feeling flows from poet to artist. Thus, if ever there were a criticism that measured up to Baudelaire's demand that it be partial and passionate, it would surely be that written by twentieth-century French poets on art. Furthermore, these same

poet-art critics illustrate, more persuasively perhaps than any others, Baudelaire's claim that "tous les grands poètes deviennent naturellement, fatalement, critiques" (1059), so inevitable, so utterly fated to come into being, do their essays in art criticism seem.

A crucial development in the relatively short history of the genre took place in 1913 when Apollinaire published *Les peintres cubistes*. Leroy Breunig and Jean-Claude Chevalier have addressed this matter briefly but eloquently (Apollinaire 1965:35):

> L'originalité d'Apollinaire [dans *Les peintres cubistes*] est d'avoir étendu le domaine de la poésie moderne à la prose de la critique d'art en unissant ce que Baudelaire avant lui, dans les écrits des *Curiosités esthétiques* et de *L'art romantique* d'une part, et dans *Les fleurs du mal* de l'autre, avait maintenu nettement distinct. Apollinaire a inauguré ainsi pour le XX^{e} siècle le genre de la "poésie critique," pour employer l'expression de Cocteau, qui sera illustré non seulement par celui-ci mais par des auteurs aussi différents que Reverdy, Breton, Eluard, Aragon, Malraux, Saint-John Perse, Char, Ponge et Bonnefoy.

One could easily expand this already impressive list of practitioners of *poésie critique* by adding to it the poets covered in the present group of essays who are not named by Breunig and Chevalier, as well as other, apparently less likely figures. Among the latter, one might include Pierre Jean Jouve, who as a poet-critic is no doubt best known for his book-length studies of Mozart's *Don Giovanni* and Berg's *Wozzeck*. And yet Jouve's essays on Delacroix, Meryon and Courbet may be the most suggestive to have been written on these nineteenth-century "beacons" since Baudelaire's time. They are also some of the finest specimens of a type of prose corresponding to ekphrastic poetry, that is, poetry which imitates or reproduces in words a pictorial work of art. Anyone who has gazed at *Jacob et l'ange du Seigneur* at Saint-Sulpice in Paris, for example, immediately recognizes the fresco, in all its specificity, in the paragraphs devoted to it in Jouve's piece on Delacroix. In addition, Jouve's essays in art criticism serve to remind us that practitioners of *poésie critique* need not deal solely with their contemporaries—they can treat artists of the past, too. *Poésie critique* thus blurs distinctions not only between poetry and prose, as Breunig and Chevalier (and Russo) have pointed out, but also between art history and art criticism.

Since Apollinaire's time, Yves Bonnefoy has probably done the most to enlarge the genre's scope. Following Jouve's past-oriented

lead, but more especially the erudite example of art historian Henri Focillon, specifically his magisterial *Peintures romanes des églises de France* (1938), in 1954 Bonnefoy brought out his first major work in *poésie critique*, *Peintures murales de la France gothique*, a rigorous, learned, if entirely personal (i.e., "partiale, passionnée") study of the subject in question. As this work promises, from the outset of his career, Bonnefoy embodied the next consolidating stage in the evolution of *poésie critique*, after the key contributions to it of the cubist poets (particularly Apollinaire and Reverdy) and the surrealists. More focused than Malraux's sprawling *Les voix du silence*, yet fully as ambitious, Bonnefoy's 1954 opus, his award-winning *Rome 1630: l'horizon du premier baroque* (1970) and his stunning *Alberto Giacometti* (1991), together with his many other texts on art, establish him as the preeminent practitioner of *poésie critique* since the mid-century. It thus seems only fitting that he should be the one poet whose art criticism is discussed in no fewer than three of the present group of essays.

It in no way diminishes Bonnefoy's extremely important, possibly determinative impact on *poésie critique* to recall the supportive historico-cultural context within which he has functioned as an amateur and critic of art. As has already been implied, increasingly over the last hundred years or so, the values, interests and activities of French poets and artists have converged. Against this background, the rise of *poésie critique* becomes but one manifestation of that convergence. A smaller but equally telling such manifestation is Braque's publishing in *Nord-Sud*, at Reverdy's behest, "Pensées et réflexions sur la peinture," with its celebrated concluding sentence: "J'aime la règle qui corrige l'émotion" (5).

Still another sign of this confluence is the illustrated book, including *le livre de peintre*—a joint undertaking involving a series of artists (poet, painter, etcher, master printer, designer)—which has proliferated in France since the turn of the century, as Gérard Bertrand, Anne Hyde Greet, Renée Riese Hubert, Breon Mitchell and David Scott, most notably, have demonstrated. In this regard, Robert Halsband's review of an exhibit entitled "The Art of the French Illustrated Book, 1700-1914," held at the Pierpont Morgan Library in spring/summer 1982, points to a possible source of the kinship that many twentieth-century French poets feel with artists: "The books in the exhibition support the generally accepted opinion of bibliophiles that French illustrated books, from the 18th century onwards, represent the summit of book-making" (558). What, therefore, could a contemporary French poet possibly want more than to collaborate in the making of such an artifact, and to become

ever more familiar with the work of his co-creator? But without doubt the most intriguing fusion of poetry and painting in France in our century carries the name of Henri Michaux, who is almost as much admired as a painter as he is as a poet. Is there a French poet alive today who, because Michaux lived, has not mused about common roots for art and poetry?

To speculate further at this point as to why in France, in our century, poets have so often put pen to paper to explore the plastic arts, would take us too far away from reliable fact and convincing argument. We can, nevertheless, make one solid cross-cultural comparison, which will confirm that France is indeed the home of *poésie critique*. John Updike's *Just Looking: Essays on Art* and John Ashbery's *Reported Sightings: Art Chronicles 1957-1987* impress us not only for their sophistication, but also in their capacity as exceptions to the rule in America where, unlike the artistic scene in France, poets and novelists are only rarely art critics, more rarely still art critics of perception and taste, possessing intimate knowledge of their subject. As J. D. McClatchy has lamented in the introduction to his anthology of essays in art criticism by British and American poets: "In England or America, there is nothing comparable to the extraordinary associations, bridged by prose, of Picasso, Braque or Matisse with Apollinaire, Éluard, Aragon, Char, Reverdy, Marteau or Du Bouchet" (xiv). The essays gathered here will allow us to scrutinize some of these "extraordinary associations, bridged by prose," to look through the poet's eye, to share again and again, if only for a moment each time, a particular poet-critic's view of art, while simultaneously probing the temperament holding that vision.

The present issue of *Dalhousie French Studies*, devoted to art criticism by French poets since World War II, contains essays ordered (approximately) according to the birth chronology of the poets treated in them. Thus, for example, Ponge and Michaux, who were born in 1899, which makes them the oldest poets considered here, are discussed first. Of course, including poets of that vintage in a collection focusing on post-1945 work might appear inappropriate. In fact, however, Ponge's place in this setting is quite justified since, as he told (p. 89) Philippe Sollers in 1967, he began writing about art circa 1945. As for Michaux (a painter himself hence a poet whose reflections on art inevitably take on the character of autobiography), he produced work in this domain both before and after 1945, but brought out the bulk of it following the war, in a combination of expanded reissues of previously published material and entirely new texts.

Although born only ten years after Reverdy, through their respective critical corpuses Ponge and Michaux belong fully to our tentative, turbulent age. By contrast, Reverdy exhibits, in his essays on painters and sculptors of his day, the intense, neo-classical rigor of cubism, the revolution in esthetics that he witnessed first-hand, but that now seems a remote event in the history of our century. As regards Char and Frénaud, both born in 1907, they, too, made their principal statements about the plastic arts after World War II. By virtue of this fact, they have in effect claimed citizenship in the second half of our century, the era we collectively tend to view as ours. With Bonnefoy, moreover, as I have suggested above, a page of history has truly turned; with him, everything comes after 1945. The following essays will show that virtually the same observation, referring now to a genre's range of possible forms, can be made about the varieties of art criticism practiced by French poets in our era: everything comes after 1945.

Dianne E. Sears opens our series with an illuminating application of Derrida's notion of the *parergon*, the paratextual elements (shared by poetry and painting) of title, frame and signature, to Ponge's essays on Braque. Paying particular attention to the poet's 1971 piece, "Braque ou un méditatif à l'œuvre," Dianne Sears shows how Ponge, like Braque (and, indeed, like artists as varied as Bach and Michel Tournier), incorporates forms of self-reference in his text, such as the rebus signature, to raise basic questions about the artist and her/his work. Where, for example, does one begin and the other end?

Peter Broome's rather unexpectedly (at least initially) juxtaposing Michaux's written *œuvre* (both critical and poetic) with Zao Wou-Ki's paintings, soon enough suggests an astonishing degree of convergence between the two artists. In fact, the case that Peter Broome makes for elective affinities between the older Belgian/French poet/painter and the younger Chinese artist, in the end seems both ingenious and incontrovertible. Thus, where the former foreshadows the latter in words, the latter actualizes the former in visual-graphic terms.

Michael Worton persuasively demonstrates how Char's writings on the plastic arts privilege our emotional response to a painting over any desire we might feel to decipher it or to comment upon it analytically. For Michael Worton, Char's writings on art must therefore be viewed as so many paradigms of the esthetic experience itself. As Michael Worton also makes eminently clear,

for Char every painting is a window opening onto otherness, but a window that both reveals and refuses to reveal.

Richard Stamelman subtly elucidates the esthetics of light articulated in Bonnefoy's art criticism and poetry. In Bonnefoy, Richard Stamelman convinces us, the history of painting becomes the history of light, and the painter is closer than the poet to the tangible reality of the world, to the presence of light and the light of presence. But since light, like presence, is unrepresentable, any attempt to render either must fail. Yet, for Bonnefoy, poet and especially painter harness light to transform the reality of being into (rejoices Richard Stamelman) a "wine to be consumed with delight."

The next two essays also treat Bonnefoy, the first Bonnefoy and Frénaud, the second Bonnefoy and Du Bouchet. **Anja Pearre** adroitly compares and contrasts Bonnefoy's and Frénaud's essays on Raoul Ubac. Both poets, in Anja Pearre's acute gloss, are drawn to the peasant world displayed in Ubac's *œuvre*, but where the artist nourishes Bonnefoy's need for movement forward, he also sustains Frénaud's affirmation of human fellowship.

In her probing analysis of Bonnefoy's writings on Claude Garache and Du Bouchet's on Pierre Tal Coat, **Dominique D. Fisher** convincingly identifies the poets' respective texts as oblique critiques of poetry and poetics. For both poets, if in different ways, as Dominique Fisher demonstrates with verve, the inscription of spatial rhythm in art gains ascendancy over the transmission of sense.

In a second essay dealing with Du Bouchet, one that casts a slightly different light on the poet's relationship with Tal Coat, **Annette Sampon** focuses with great sensitivity on points of contact between the poet and the painter, especially as these points turn up in their respective writings. For example, Annette Sampon establishes beyond question that, for both of these artists, the reader/spectator must move into the dynamic space of the page/landscape, the replication of nature's flux being the *sine qua non* of art for both Du Bouchet and Tal Coat.

The following two essays take up, appropriately enough, Jacques Dupin who, like Bonnefoy and Du Bouchet, served on the editorial board of the review *L'Éphémère* (1967-1972). Dupin has collected much of his art criticism in *L'espace autrement dit*, the volume that **Maryann De Julio** subjects to compelling, illuminating analysis. Among Maryann De Julio's intriguing conclusions: "Dupin's art criticism permits him to articulate those physical aspects of his own medium that can only be apprehended in their reflection in the mediating structure of another art form."

Renée Riese Hubert, focusing first (and foremost) on Dupin's five essays on Antoni Tàpies, discloses the manifold ways in which the French poet gives us insights into, rather than information about, the Catalan artist. Renée Riese Hubert then deftly examines texts by Jean Daive and Valentine Penrose on Tàpies, to indicate how, despite the three poets' divergent approaches to the painter, certain essential components of the artist's vision, like the fragment, draw all of them to his work.

Claude Esteban, an occasional contributor to *L'Éphémère*, and editor of its successor, *Argile* (1973-1981), is then considered. In scanning the first twenty-five years of Esteban's writings on art (1966-1991), I discover patterns, such as the poet's reservations about cubism and his preference for Spanish artists (except for Picasso, who is totally rejected). Most significantly perhaps, I observe the steady emergence of landscape painting as the genre that Esteban, for particular philosophical reasons, holds in the highest esteem.

Discussion of the art criticism of Michel Deguy, another review editor (*PO&SIE*), comes next. **Michael Bishop** surveys Deguy's essays in this realm, from those collected in *Fragment du cadastre* (1960) to the poet's more recent pieces on such artists as Pignon, Quotbi, Bram Van Velde and Maricarmen Hernandez-Brossolet. Michael Bishop highlights the blend of knotted word and primal event that characterizes Deguy's writings on art, texts which point to how, for example, Van Velde's gaze and ours coincide, or how, in Hernandez-Brossolet, our connection to the earth is captured not mimetically but homologically.

Scrutinizing Bernard Noël's writings on art, **Steven Winspur** concentrates on the poet's 1988 work, *Onze romans d'œil*. As Steven Winspur proves irrefutably, "élan" is the key word in the collection, where everything turns on the distinction the poet makes between looking and seeing, between the spectator's active engagement with art and her/his merely consuming familiar forms to fuel standard daydreams. Steven Winspur sums up Noël's lesson succinctly: "What pictures teach us to see is not a profusion of signs pointing *elsewhere*, but a profusion of bodily actions that beckon us *into the world* with their promise of joy-through-action."

Adelaide M. Russo closes our series with a provocative study of Marcelin Pleynet, former disciple of Ponge and editor of *Tel Quel* for most of its existence, and the one poet considered here whose art criticism may rival Bonnefoy's in quantity and, possibly, in impact as well. Following an informative overview of the poet's didactic/polemical writing in this realm, Adelaide Russo explores

Pleynet's Bataille-influenced critique of surrealist thought, in particular Breton's naive approach to painting. In a strong complementary thesis, Adelaide Russo suggests how Pleynet's discourse on art changes as his era's language evolves.

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