

La Conversation transatlantique: Les échanges franco-américains en poésie depuis 1968

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by Abigail Lang

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Literary history is now again, after a longtime hegemony of theory cum philosophy inflected methods, a thriving part of the study of literature. The rise of media studies, the lasting impact of the archival turn as well as the perhaps surprising return of book history (very cool today!) –all exciting side-effects of the digital revolution in art and society– are key factors in this success. Literary history is also all the more exciting since its contemporary forms do not abandon or censor the great debates of the 70s and 80s, when French Theory hit the world. Abigail Lang’s meticulous study of what she calls the “transatlantic conversation” between French and U.S. poets and poetry texts and practices since 1968 is a marvelous example of what literary history is not only representing but also *doing* today: it is an inspiring mix of textual and archival close-reading, also containing a broad analysis of the thriving forces behind cultural change, an open eye on post-national and plurilingual communication, and last but not least a sharp reflection on what is at stake, both aesthetically and politically, in poetry, that most daring and self-reflexive but also most fragile form of writing and living in our modern times.

That French poets would start looking at the U.S. in the 1960s was far from self-evident, even taking into account that there existed after WWII a very dynamic American cultural center in the center of intellectual Paris, which did much more than providing France and Europe with anti-communist propaganda. The obstacles were indeed multiple. First, there was the typical French and widespread disdain of all things American, certainly in the postwar period with the cultural hegemony of the French Communist Party. Second, there still was the even stronger prejudice that the real center of literary prestige could only be Paris—and not New York, as had become the case in painting. Yet for the new generations of poets, this twofold *a priori* was suddenly cracking. On the one hand, young authors found the French literary scene, heavily marked by post-Surrealism, old-fashioned and asphyxiating, lacking all sense of risk and experiment, fossilized by an age-old tradition of snooty literary language deprived of any relationship with everything that had enabled the emergence of new poetical forms and practices in America, namely new media, mass culture, ordinary language, in short real life and the things as they were. On the other hand, these young poets discovered in the American examples working models of how to bypass the limitations of institutionalized literature and thus to get rid of the national French style in radical ways. It also worked the other way, round, of course, but clearly not with the same sense of urgency: American poets felt at home with what the newest forms of French writing and the transatlantic conversation definitely comforted them in their own attempts to reshape their own traditions, but it would be exaggerated to claim(which Lang doesn’t do!) that they would have been incapable of pushing the boundaries of their own tradition without the help of the French.

Lang's study approaches these poetic exchanges from three points of view. First, she studies the French reception of the American objectivists (Reznikov, Oppen, Zukofsky) and "language" poets (Bernstein, for instance), not only at the moment of their discovery by young writers of a subsequent generation, but also through the various polemics and reappraisals since their progressive and sometimes partial and shattered appearance in the French poetic field. Lang clearly describes the channels that enabled this discovery (she rightly emphasizes the role of anthologies) and the role of the various go-betweens (each of them occupying different positions in the literary field). Besides, she convincingly focuses on the motivations of the French authors and the internal strategies, tensions, and conflicts disclosed by their interest in radical American writing. Not all American poets were read the same way by various authors and groups, while the lessons that were drawn from the U.S. models could also largely diverge. Yet in spite of the differences and skirmishes between authors and groups, the overall picture was strikingly consistent: all young French poets were turning away from "literature" (that is from all types of alienated, artificial and socially disconnected forms of writing) and trying to explore what they labeled as "literalist" forms of writing, both highly formalist and dramatically close to ordinary language, the combination of extreme formalism and complete immersion in plain language being seen as a vital part of the political dimension of poetry as a critical take on all forms of alienation.

The second part of the book is a meticulous reconstruction, based on a wealth of archival documents, of what actually happened in terms of human and social interaction: Who was in contact with whom? How did these contacts materialize (correspondences, mutual invitations, translations, collective productions, reviews and criticism, etc.)? Key in this regard was the role played by the mutual enrichment of a strong DIY spirit (many poets practiced collective self-publishing –powerfully enhanced by technological changes : the democratization of new reproduction devices, from tape recorders to xerox machines, but also the creative appropriation of old hand presses that commercial enterprises were massively replacing by offset presses) and the active involvement of well-funded institutional partners supporting travel and subsistence costs for moving poets. Radicalism was no longer synonym with bohemianism. What appeared thanks to the interplay of these forces was not only a new corpus of texts but also totally new forms of collaboration, more specifically of collaborative writing (via translations, the difference between writing and translation often becoming very thin, if not utterly problematic) as well as new forms of presenting poetry by the poets themselves (and no longer by professional reciters) to a living audience (either physically present or listening to the radio or to a record, for instance). Of all these transformations, the poetry reading was, at least in France, the most challenging one, but this brings Lang to the last section of her study.

The third part of the book addresses the issue of the oralization of poetry, a phenomenon that cannot be reduced to the new practice of poetry reading (in the American sense of the word, very different from classic reciting in the French context). The oral turn –and here the banalized word of "turn" must be read in the strong sense of *paradigm change*–does not just refer to the fact that poets are no longer exclusively focusing on the page or the book (most of them still do), it stresses above all the idea that just like the visual experiments that characterized almost all written and printed poems by these authors, orality can become a strategy to achieve what experimental poetry is aiming at in general, namely highlight the materiality of language as well as foreground the proximity with ordinary language, two elements that are imperative in the attempt to rethink the social and political dimension of poetry in the alienating context of standardized "literary" writing and institutions.

Lang's book, which I can only hope to see in English translation as soon as possible, is a vital contribution to our knowledge of modern writing and the transnational dynamic of today's culture. It is exceptionally well-documented, while escaping any form of encyclopedic piling up of facts and figures. As shown by the clear structure of the book, the author succeeds in laying bare lines of force, which radically reshape our thinking of writing and literature. The mutual emulation of visuality and orality, for instance, which at first sight seem to contradict and exclude each other, is thus powerfully unveiled. Besides, Lang also manages to avoid useless polemics: her presentation is sober and moderate, the main purpose of the book is to understand who, what,

when, how and why people (for hers is a history of people, not of concepts or abstract forces) have been doing what they were doing and what were the consequences of their actions, including of course their failures, on the larger literary and cultural landscape. Power relations were a daily reality, just as personal ambitions and rivalries, but the ambition of this book is clearly not to hint at winners or losers –a major difference with the tone of many contemporary writing and criticism, often characterized by extremely violent and systematically scornful language. Finally, this book is also, despite the incredible wealth of documentary evidence and historical information, a real page-turner. It is written without any jargon, while proving capable of summarizing extremely complex theoretical debates and controversies, in simple and always very elegant words. Yes, this is not only a work on literary history, it is literary history in the making—and why not also literature itself.
