

---

H-France Review Vol. 21 (August 2021), No. 141

Abigail Lang, *La Conversation transatlantique: les échanges franco-américains en poésie depuis 1968*. Paris: Les Presses du réel, 2021. 331pp. Notes and index. €26.00 (pb). ISBN 978-2-37896-178-7.

Review by Alexander Dickow, Virginia Tech.

Abigail Lang's impeccable literary history *La Conversation transatlantique* does not concern the Franco-American literary dialogue as a whole, but a specific moment of that dialogue, namely the period after 1968. In fact, French literary history exhibits multiple "conversations transatlantiques," some of which are quite independent of the others; before the conversation Lang examines, for instance, the Négritude movement engaged in extensive dialogue with the Harlem Renaissance. The poets and institutions examined by Lang remain quite untouched (remarkably so, perhaps) by this previous iteration of French-American exchange. Throughout the post-1968 period in question, one figure stands out more than any other as an instigator of cross-cultural communication: Emmanuel Hocquard. Consequently, Lang's work revolves consistently around figures involved with Hocquard's principal publishing house, P. O. L, and around his own publishing projects, such as Orange Export Ltd.

Lang organizes her history in three parts: one, "La Réception perpétuellement recommencée des objectivistes," two, "Une communauté de contemporains," and three, "Le Tournant oral." The objectivists were a loose-knit group of poets who first came into the limelight through an issue of *Poetry* edited by Louis Zukofsky in February 1931. The principal poets involved with this somewhat inchoate movement included Zukofsky himself, George Oppen, Lorine Niedecker, Carl Rakosi, Charles Reznikoff, and the British poet Basil Bunting. Although poets such as Liliane Giraudon would salute Lorine Niedecker, it was Reznikoff, Oppen, and Zukofsky who became the most influential figures of the movement for French poets including Hocquard and his friends Anne-Marie Albiach--noted translator of Zukofsky's "A-9"--and Claude Royet-Journoud. The watershed work revealing the objectivists in France was Serge Fauchereau's *Lectures de la poésie américaine* (1968), which impacted several generations of French poets.

The objectivists' theory, as expressed by Zukofsky especially, is summed up well by Lang: "L'exigence d'objectification (pas d'objectivité) aspire à faire du poème un objet à part entière, un objet qui tienne sa place dans le monde et nous affecte comme le ferait un objet. Le poème n'est pas la représentation d'une expérience qui lui préexisterait, il est l'expérience même" (p. 50). Such theories of the poem-object are closely tied to the poetics of literality (*littéralité*) developed by Hocquard and others in the 1980s and 1990s: such poetics resist representation in favor of presentation, and prefer the encounter of linguistic materiality to "l'herméneutique de l'explication de texte" (p. 27). The American poets of *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E*, of course, are not

far behind in this examination of the objectivists' legacy in France, and Hocquard and company would soon dialogue with affiliated poets, including especially Lyn Hejinian, Charles Bernstein and Michael Palmer. The latter encounter, between Hocquard and his fellows and the Language Poets of the United States, was particularly catalyzed by the *Rencontres Internationales de Royaumont* dedicated to the objectivists, in 1989. Later, documentary poetics would be born from a renewed interest in the objectivists, through the work of Frank Smith or Frank Leibovici, for instance.

Part two, "Une communauté de contemporains," is the least well-defined section of Lang's book, and reads like an extension of part one: the objectivists form a kind of base upon which an international community of readers emerges, but Lang this time examines strands not tied to the objectivists, such as the crucial role played by Edmond Jabès for a number of American poets including Keith and Rosmarie Waldrop; Jabès, according to Lang, allowed a glimpse of a poetics not tied to representation, and thereby, a way out of Adorno's infamous pronouncement against poetry after Auschwitz. Part two also discusses the obviously pivotal role of translation, particularly by way of the collective translation workshops carried out at the Abbey of Royaumont in the 1980s and 1990s.

Part three, "Le Tournant oral" examines the emergence of a poetics of orality and performance whose first harbinger was Allen Ginsburg's performance of "Howl" on October 7, 1955 at the Six Gallery, which set an important precedent for public poetry readings. From this inaugural moment, other American poets, such as the talk poet David Antin, but also Robert Creeley, would perpetuate and diversify the valorization of poets reading or performing their own work, overturning, in France, the tradition of professional actors delivering poetry (and likewise overturning the tradition of stylized *déclamation* long dominant in France, in favor of a much less stylized and ostensibly more authentic approach to reading). In France, performance poets such as Bernard Heidsieck and Henri Chopin would also take advantage of new developments in home recording technology, for instance. France would take its time developing this emergent tradition of poets reading their own work: "Il faut attendre le milieu des années 1970 pour commencer à entendre régulièrement en France les poètes lire leurs poèmes, d'abord à la radio, puis dans des lectures publiques" (p. 244). Some 200 authors read their work on Claude Royet-Journoud's radio show *Poésie ininterrompue* (1975-1978): Royet-Journoud prompts the mention of Hocquard, once again an important mover and shaker of public poetry reading in France after the 1970s. By way of public poetry performance, oral improvisation would come to the fore as an antidote to the perceived normative rigidity of written French. One is surprised to find a long discussion of Jacques Roubaud in this final section of Lang's book; perceived in recent years to be somewhat hostile towards performance poetry, he was in the early 1980s responsible for such books as *Dire la poésie* (1981), and in fact theorized his reading practices and the relationships between writing and oral delivery, and his *Grand Incendie de Londres* among others are founded on improvisational procedures.

If there is a *grand absent* in Lang's discussion of the "conversation transatlantique," it is perhaps that of the university. In the United States, for instance, two major figures emerged, exported from France to the United States well after 1968, and whom Lang does not mention: Philippe Jaccottet and Yves Bonnefoy. Arguably, these two poets represent, at least within the university, the most canonical figures of French poetry of the last fifty years. Lang does note that many of the American poets she mentions emerged by way of the university, and she devotes a brief discussion to SUNY-Buffalo as a hotbed of contemporary poetics. But there is no corresponding

development devoted to the poets aggressively defended by literary scholars, which do not cleanly overlap with the *cercles de sociabilité* of Hocquard or others. Hocquard's generation was not necessarily wedded to the university, unlike some of his American contemporaries. Lang does not directly confront this sociological difference, in particular because her perspective remains undeniably French. A literary history written from an American perspective might include figures, institutions, and tendencies not included by Lang, even if Lang does provide abundant evidence of the impact of French poetry on American figures (Palmer, Keith and Rosmarie Waldrop, Ashbery, even Duncan). However, that Lang's object surpasses and overflows her own treatment of it is a testament to the relevance and vitality of the "transatlantic conversation." There is more here to be uncovered, and this is only to Lang's credit.

In Lang's conclusion, she discusses the possibility of a new turn in the transatlantic conversation. Noticing the interest of American contemporary poets in social justice and multiculturalism, she wonders in closing: "Reste à savoir si la conversation transatlantique aura permis de continuer à ignorer les ressources poétiques des espaces colonisés et de la francophonie ou si elle constitue un premier pas vers des formes multiculturelles" (p. 319). Unfortunately, in this regard, Lang's book suggests nothing quite so much as the exact opposite. All evidence here points toward the continuing dominance of Paris-as-literary-center and institutional stronghold of French poetry, toward the continued draping of prejudice and near-sightedness in abstract "universalisme" (p. 319), and toward a still largely white and masculine literary landscape. Lang herself notes that from a contemporary American perspective in poetry, "la poésie française apparaît terriblement majoritaire et 'privilegiée'" (pp. 317-18). Indeed, the presence of women and minorities in Lang's own literary history is almost negligible, with the exception of Anne-Marie Albiach (a crucial figure) and a few passing mentions of Liliane Giraudon. This is no indictment, nor even a criticism, of Lang's meticulous literary historical scholarship: it is a mark of France's continued and continuing literary conservatism. In France even more than in the United States, poetry, and literature at large, remain a boys' club. Recent backlash in France against so-called woke culture, perceived as an American import, suggests that this will very much continue to be the case, in spite of the hopeful note Lang strikes in her conclusion, where she instead defends American multiculturalism as a possible source of literary renewal for France, a "possible étape pour sortir du cadre littéraire à la fois national et universaliste qui s'est mis en place à partir de la Renaissance, et un premier pas vers des formes mondialisées et multiculturelles qui restent à inventer" (p. 317). May it be so, in spite of all evidence to the contrary.

Alexander Dickow  
Virginia Tech  
[ard@vt.edu](mailto:ard@vt.edu)

Copyright © 2021 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for redistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of *H-France Review* nor republication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views

posted on *H-France Review* are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies.

ISSN 1553-9172