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Act Naturally: Francis Ponge's Morals and Measures of Human Nature

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Abstract

This article explores how a poetics of the nonhuman in the work of Francis Ponge underwrites a humanism wherein we no longer have to take sides in the conflict between the linguistic projects that tend toward subordination or comprehension of the nonhuman and the resistance that the nonhuman endlessly opposes to these projects. Close readings of texts that figure the defeat of reason in its linguistic expression of the nonhuman, as well as texts that figure human comportment in nonhuman tropes, reveal an ethical project of human well-being acting in agreement with its nature.

Keywords

Francis Ponge, French poetry, 20th-century poetry, ethics, rhetoric, fable, poetry and philosophy, Aristotle, rhetoric of example, poetics of the object, nonhuman, human and nature

Cover Page Footnote

This essay began as a talk given in honor of Steven Winspur in December 2014 in Madison, WI.

Act Naturally: Francis Ponge's Morals and Measures of Human Nature

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Poetry in the 20th century, in keeping with other forms of modern thought, had its own ways of undermining anthropocentric assumptions about the relationship between objects and human consciousness. The decentering of the human subject from the operations of the world is at work in contestations of lyric as the expressive mode of a sovereign self, or in the inscription of the poetic subject in a world of things. Resistance to the anthropocentric legacy of Descartes's *res cogitans* could hardly be more robustly demonstrated in poetry than it is by the French poet Francis Ponge, well known for the aesthetic and philosophical commitments of his poetics of ordinary objects. Within a literary tradition that often thematizes the limits of human reason and linguistic conventions, Ponge's work, which he characterized as a phenomenological dictionary (*Proêmes* 218) in his essay on Camus and the absurd, is a rich site of reflection on how language expresses and regulates the relationship of human beings to an environment populated by nonhuman things. Look no further than the first poem of his most famous collection, *Le Parti pris des choses* ('In Favor of Things'), published in 1942. In this poem, "Pluie" ('Rain'), we find the pronoun "je" 'I' exactly once, in the first sentence, indicating an observer of the natural phenomenon of rain falling in a courtyard: "La pluie, dans la cour où je la regarde tomber, descend à des allures très diverses" (15) 'Rain, in the courtyard where I watch it fall, comes down at varying speeds.'[1] Ponge's collection opens with the poetic subject, susceptible to appearances (that the properties of raindrops vary depending on the distance from the observer), checking in on the world outside, a trope of a supposedly once-sovereign human interiority turned inside out in favor of the things of the nonhuman world. But despite its contingent and relative apprehension of natural phenomena, the human subject resists complete erasure from the grammatical surface and the deeper rhetorical structures of this poem, which ends by conjoining the natural event and human enjoyment within the insoluble ambivalence of a shared past participle: "il a plu" (16) 'it has rained/pleased.' For Ponge, the inalienably human practice of language inevitably enacts human ends, and this essay explores how his poetics has as its end the happiness of human beings acting in accordance with their nature and the nature of things.

A poetics of the nonhuman is inevitably encumbered by the traces, or signs, of the human linguistic project that enacts it. As practitioners of such a poetics pursue the aesthetic goal of figuring the nonhuman—for instance manmade or

[1] All translations are my own. To avoid syntactic inaccuracies I use "man" to translate "l'homme."

natural objects or substances, or nonhuman inhabitants of the natural world—the forms and regimes of human meaning persist as the remainder in a poetic operation that can only gesture beyond its margins. In "Raisons de vivre heureux" ('Reasons to Live Happy'), Ponge locates the limit of a poetic project that aspires to describe objects "de leur propre point de vue" 'from their own point of view,' remarking famously that, "Il y a toujours du rapport à l'homme. . . . l'on ne peut aucunement sortir de l'homme" 'There is always some relation to man. . . . one cannot get outside of man' (*Proêmes* 198). When Ponge reformulates this remark in "Faune et flore" ('Fauna and Flora') as "L'on ne peut sortir de l'arbre par des moyens d'arbre" (*Parti* 43) 'One cannot get outside of trees by tree-like means,' we see that even our figures of the nonhuman leave us perpetually enclosed within our own practices. Ponge is, of course, hardly unique in negotiating such contradictions. Yves Bonnefoy's *Du mouvement et de l'immobilité de Douve* ('On the Movement and Immobility of Douve'), for instance, figures the demise of the lyric subject by inscribing the poetic text in a virtual space where representation cancels itself, "où se déchire le poème" (62) 'where the poem tears itself up' or "à une profondeur où les images ne prennent plus" (57) 'at a depth where images no longer take.' But the problem remains double: on the one hand, things are not captured by the language we set aside for them, and on the other hand, they can make us overlook the human language of the somewhat social relation we have with them, their "rapport à l'homme"—our experience and the act of representation— "wherein," as Bill Brown argues, "modernity's ontological distinction between human beings and nonhumans makes no sense" (451). "If commodities could speak" Marx speculated in *Capital* (176), and we sometimes forget they cannot, or as Ponge reminds us in *Proêmes*: "Ce ne sont pas les choses qui parlent entre elles mais les hommes entre eux qui parlent des choses" (*Proêmes* 198) 'It's not things that speak among themselves, but human beings that speak among themselves about things.' How are we to assess, in the poetics of the nonhuman, the insurmountably human?

Recent scholarship on Ponge has fruitfully pointed to how the incomplete apprehension of the material excess or otherness of the nonhuman poses not only an aesthetic challenge for the text but an ethical opportunity for human subjects that would renounce or denounce their imprint on the nonhuman world that their expressions figure. Vanessa Robinson argues that language, "rather than acting as a marker of human superiority, becomes the means by which we recognize the essential otherness of different species" (29). But without restoring convictions of human superiority to the natural world, we may also cite as an ethical end of Ponge's work the recognition that, though it impedes various human projects, the otherness of nature's substance and nonhuman species need not lead to our unhappy renunciation of these projects altogether. The poetic subject inscribed at the end of the final poem of *Le Parti pris des choses*, "Le Galet" ('The Seashore Stone'), is struck silent—"Je n'en dirai pas plus" (*Parti* 56) 'I'll say no more'—at the idea of

the traces washed away from the surface of the stone: "car cette idée d'une disparition de signes me donne à réfléchir sur les défauts d'un style qui appuie trop sur les mots" (56) 'for this idea of a disappearance of signs makes me reflect on the shortcomings[2] of a style that relies too much on words.' Though surely a reflection on the text not being stone enough, this passage also expresses the human excess (words as *de trop*), symmetrical to the irreducible remainder of stone never captured by the text. It is the supplement of a human subject whose projects, though they do not wholly capture the material world, are not wholly effaced, not even by the self-effacing humility at the end of the text. Writing recently on "Le Galet," Julian Murphet cites the material horizon that limits all efforts to transcend it, and argues that in the poem "the only residue of God lies in the very powers of intellection and humility that can adduce such a horizon in the first place, without falling victim to melancholy, rage, or resignation" (1506). Indeed, for Ponge equilibrium of humility and pride restores us to our proper rank, which is not a matter of esteem but of human well-being. In his "Notes premières de 'L'Homme'" ('Preliminary Notes on "Man"') Ponge insists that "Il faut replacer l'homme à son rang dans la nature: il est assez haut" 'We have to restore man to his rank in nature: it is fairly high,' and although the human being judges nature to be absurd, Ponge urges, "Qu'il ne s'en rende donc pas malade" 'He should not make himself sick over it' but find instead an equilibrium within nature.

> Qu'il se félicite plutôt: Il dispose de moyens pour:
> 1^0 s'y tenir en équilibre: l'instinct (semblable à celui de ces magots à cul de plomb qui se redressent toujours), la science, la morale (c'est-à-dire de la santé physique et mentale);
> 2^0 l'exprimer, la réfléchir, se défaire de tout complexe d'infériorité à son égard: la littérature, les arts. (*Proêmes* 225)
>
> Rather let him be happy: he has at his disposal the means to:
> 1. hold himself there in equilibrium: instinct (like one of those weighted figurines that always return upright), science, morality (that is, physical and mental health);
> 2. express it, reflect it, relieve himself of any inferiority complex about it: literature, the arts.

Keeping in mind that a component of Ponge's poetic project is to sidestep a tragic interpretation of the absurd—"Bien entendu, la non-signification du monde! Mais qu'y a-t-il là de tragique?" (*Proêmes* 213) 'Granted, the non-signification of the world. But what's tragic about that?'—this essay argues that

[2] *Défaut* comes from *défaillir*, to be absent.

Ponge's poetics of the nonhuman supports an ethical project of human well-being, wherein we no longer have to take sides in the conflict between endless defeat and claims of mastery. By exploring tropes of insufficiency or excess, of lesser or greater than, of below or above, especially in texts in which the rhetoric of example appears to take nature's substances and other species as models for human comportment, this essay aims to recuperate Ponge's residual humanism, whereby the human being unfolds its own nature, of which it is the sole measure, neither greater nor lesser than the rest of nature.

There are, of course, canonical examples of the human subject in search of its rank in nature. Pascal's *roseau pensant* 'thinking reed,' for instance, surmounts a vanishingly small presence in the universe by understanding what exceeds it: "Par l'espace l'univers me comprend et m'engloutit comme un point, par la pensée je le comprends" (150) 'In space, the universe encompasses me and swallows me up like a point, by thought I comprehend it.' Unwilling to perform this conversion of insignificance into "la grandeur de l'homme" (Pascal 149) 'the greatness of man,' Ponge resolved in "Notes premières de 'L'Homme'": "il faut que je relise Pascal (pour le démolir)" (228) 'I have to reread Pascal (to demolish him).' On the other hand, revealing a similar inclination to situate human beings in the cosmos, Ponge's poem "Le Pain" ('Bread') figures the vast and small dimensions that we inhabit, and Ponge's disinclination to resolve the dialectical conflict between them, in its figurative logic. Because of a resemblance to mountainous landscapes— "à cause de cette impression quasi panoramique qu'elle donne"[3] 'Because of this quasi-panoramic impression that it provides'—the surface of the bread is "merveilleuse d'abord" 'a marvel to behold at first,' "comme si l'on avait à sa disposition sous la main les Alpes, le Taurus ou la Cordillère des Andes" (*Parti* 22) 'as if one had at one's disposal the Alps, the Taurus, the Cordillera of the Andes.' Although this comparison reveals our tendency to revere nature's sublime spectacles, which come so readily to mind that they ennoble the ordinary objects of our domestic life, it also suggests the opposite, that we tend to domesticate nature, and in this way it betrays the mistaken impression (for it is only "as if") of the human observer that all of nature is "à sa disposition," an ambivalence that organizes the figures of the poem's opening two sentences. Whereas bread, an object of daily consumption, is the tenor in the first sentence (cited above) and the landscape is the vehicle, the poem reverses the comparison in the second sentence, where "Ainsi donc une masse amorphe en train d'éructer fut glissée pour nous dans *le four stellaire*" (*Parti* 22,

[3] It has often been suggested that *panoramique* 'panoramic' is a pun based on a phonic similarity to "pain" 'bread' with bread replacing the Greek "pan" 'everything.' This linguistic account of the dominant trope of the text does not alter the present reading.

my emphasis) 'Thus it was that an amorphous, belching mass was slid into the heavenly oven for us' makes the domestic environment the vehicle and the cosmos the tenor, completing a symmetry that recalls Pascal's double infinity. Unsure where we stand between the literal and figurative poles, between the domestic and the cosmic spaces, we human beings summon, not a thinking reed's dialectical solution, but instead "ce *pouvoir vivre* entre deux infinis" (*Proêmes* 229, emphasis in the original) 'this ability to live between two infinities.' Ponge's conviction that "Il faut réintégrer l'idée de Dieu à l'idée de l'homme. Et simplement vivre" (*Proêmes* 228) 'We have to reintegrate the idea of God into the idea of man. And simply live' is expressed in the assimilation of bread (including its religious signification) to our vital functions rather than to our symbolic operations. "Mais brisons-la: car le pain doit être dans notre bouche moins objet de respect que de consommation"[4] (*Parti* 23) 'But let's break bread: for bread in our mouths must be less an object of respect than of consumption' is a response to the contradiction between our reverence for the natural contexts that humble our modern poetic urges and an exalting conviction ("thus it was") that the planet was made for us, one that has a long history with powerful precedents, such as the *Encyclopédie* ('Encyclopedia') of Diderot and d'Alembert.

> Si l'on bannit l'homme ou l'être pensant & contemplateur de dessus la surface de la terre ; ce spectacle pathétique & sublime de la nature n'est plus qu'une scene triste & muette. L'univers se taît ; le silence & la nuit s'en emparent. (*Encyclopédie* 5:641)
>
> If we banish man or the thinking and contemplating being from the face of the earth, this moving and sublime spectacle of nature is nothing but a sad and dead scene. The universe goes quiet: silence and night take hold.

The situation is the reverse for Ponge. The thinking and contemplating human being seeks admittance to the natural environment from the things that remain silent. Acknowledging "les choses [qui] se taisent" 'the things that stay quiet,' Ponge invites us "en leur honneur à faire observer une minute de silence. . . . Pour savoir d'elles si elles nous admettent, si elles nous tolèrent sans trop de rancœur ni de dégoût" (*Méthodes* 658) 'in their honor to observe a moment of silence. . . . To know if they admit us, if they tolerate us without too much rancor or disgust.' Language can block us from taking our place in nature, and in opposite ways. Either language risks running roughshod over its material object, or material nature leaves us tongue-tied, as in *Le Pré* ('The Meadow') where, disposed as he is

[4] The homophonic "brisons-là" (note the accent) is an idiomatic expression for "enough talk."

toward "[le] pré que je veux dire" (340) 'the meadow I want to say,' the narrator quickly finds his progress on the page, and across the meadow, to be blocked:

> Mais qu'est-ce qui obstrue ainsi notre chemin?
> . . . .
> Pourquoi, dès notre issue en surplomb sur la page,
> Dans ce seul paragraphe, tous ces scrupules? (341)
>
> But what is this now in our way?
> . . . .
> Why, as soon as we set out over the page,
> In this one paragraph alone, all these scruples?

These *scrupules*—from the Latin *scrupulum*, meaning pebble, such as the sort we might feel painfully in our shoe—impede our twin projects of traversing and talking about nature.[5] Ponge imagines us welcomed by the nonhuman, but for our sake as much as anything, and this is unmistakably an ethical aim:

> Si j'ai choisi de parler de la coccinelle c'est par dégoût des idées. Mais ce dégoût des idées? C'est qu'elles ne me viennent pas à bonheur, mais à malheur. (*Proêmes* 213)
>
> If I have chosen to speak of the ladybug, it is out of disgust for ideas. But this disgust for ideas? It's because I have them not happily, but unhappily.

Happiness, the overall end achieved by autotelic human action in eudaimonist thinking, is the overall end of poetry for Ponge: "L'on devrait pouvoir à tous poèmes donner ce titre : Raisons de vivre heureux" (*Proêmes* 197) 'We should be able to give all poems this title: Reasons to live happy.'[6] Poems bear within them a

[5] For this insight, and for much else, I am indebted to Steven Winspur. See *La Poésie du lieu* ('Poetry of Place'). "A ces moments-là le corps nous fait défaut, notre pied résiste tout en nous rappelant que nous sommes bel et bien un animal de chair qui se déplace sur la terre, un corps parmi d'autres plutôt qu'une conscience abritée du hasard et capable de tout" (81) 'At these moments, the body fails us, our foot resists while at the same time reminding us that we are indeed an animal of flesh that moves across the land, a body among others rather than a consciousness sheltered from chance and capable of anything.'

[6] See Winspur, "La Poéthique de Ponge" ('Ponge's Poethics'). "L'activité de 'vivre heureux' devrait donc trouver sa justification profonde dans chaque poème (et non seulement dans ceux qu'un poète aurait écrits à cet effet), ce qui souligne le rapport réciproque qui existe entre le déchiffrement des formules poétiques et la construction continue par les lecteurs (y compris l'écrivain) d'une forme de vie qui est particulière à chacun d'eux" (243) 'the activity of "living happily" should therefore

logic of human actions oriented toward overcoming the various kinds of unhappiness resulting from our own endeavors, and it comes from a certain orientation of our bodies and our intellectual faculties toward each other, and toward the material world around us, the reconciliation arising at the moment when, as Ponge puts it, human beings "[perdent] à peu près la parole" (*Méthodes* 631) 'just about lose speech.' Not losing speech altogether but only nearly, or more or less, we may, with the example of poetic language, quiet the claims of dominion and the concessions of defeat, and instead feel at home in 'le monde muet . . . notre seule patrie" (631) 'the mute world . . . our only homeland.'

The geological story narrated in Ponge's poem "Le Galet," is the formation and ongoing disaggregation of an ancient or antediluvian unity. This story implicitly raises a question of whether, in a larger narrative of natural history, human beings have emerged on the landscape as a species presiding over nature through their ideational projects of individuating and defining nature's elements and inhabitants, and reflecting on their place in nature. From the start of the poem, the outlook is not good, and various forms of hedging ensue. "Le Galet" is a story of compromises, deficiencies, and failures of a human epistemological project oriented toward talking about stone in universal claims with ultimate legislative authority. Since, as the first sentence concedes, "Le galet n'est pas une chose facile à bien définir" (*Parti* 49) 'The stone is not an easy thing to define well,' one might consider settling for a description—"Si l'on se contente d'une simple description" (49) 'If we settle for a simple description'—though that, too, leads to problems, specifically the questionable legitimation of a discourse that relates words, objects, and ideas: "Mais ce *propos* déjà indique de la *pierre* une *notion* qui doit être justifiée" (50, my emphasis) 'But this remark already indicates a notion of stone that needs justification.' And all this wanting for notions makes one susceptible to mistaking figures for nature: "A l'esprit en mal de notions qui s'est d'abord nourri de telles apparences, à propos de la pierre la nature apparaîtra enfin, sous un jour peut-être trop simple, comme une montre dont le principe est fait de roues qui tournent à de très inégales vitesses" (53) 'To the mind wanting for notions, having first fed on such appearances, when it comes to stone, nature will ultimately appear, in perhaps too simple a light, as a watch whose principle is made of gears that turn at very unequal speeds.' This well-worn metaphor of the clockwork cosmos in natural philosophy is a parodic form of Derrida's *usure* 'wear/ usury,' the unlimited currency of metaphor passing for philosophy's universal concepts, metaphor "qui cache et se cache" (251) 'that hides and hides itself.' For what could be more apparent than the transparent historicity of this mere but unmistakable appearance?

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find its deep justification in each poem (and not just in those a poet might have written to this end), which underlines the reciprocal relationship that exists between the deciphering of poetic formulas and the ongoing construction by readers (authors included) of a form of life particular to each of them.'

And so like the painful pebble of *Le Pré*, resisting figuration, the sensible materiality of stone asserts itself to the body, not the *esprit* 'mind', for when a grain of sand blown by the wind manages to get "réellement dans nos yeux, c'est ainsi que la pierre punit et termine notre contemplation" (*Parti* 52) 'really in our eyes, this is how stone punishes and ends our contemplation.' At first figuratively in our eyes, and then physically—or really—so, "l'objet qui nous occupe" (52) 'the object that occupies us' exchanges one occupation for another, defeating us in the moment of our contemplative gaze on the landscape and punishing us the only way it can, with its materiality, and in collaboration with our own. Discomfort, distortions, banality, and settling for less, each a different area of human unhappiness, are the results so far. In the end, however, although the narrator appears as the loser in the epistemological story, when he imagines his future critics looking back and saying, "Ayant entrepris d'écrire une description de la pierre, il s'empêtra" (56) 'Having set out to write a description of the stone, he got entangled,' he nevertheless achieves a felicitous end, when Derrida's *etymon*, the imprint of a lost primitive meaning, makes a poetic appearance in the false etymology of the overdetermined result written in stone, so to speak: "il s'empêtra."[7] "Trop heureux seulement d'avoir pour ces débuts su choisir le galet" (56) 'All too happy merely to have chosen the stone for this first try,' he cannot help but smile—as if in trying to describe stone, one can only meet a *petr*ifying end—snatching a poetic victory from the jaws of defeat.

If such poetic consolations are possible, having nature "à notre disposition" in poetic texts may be a more ambivalent posture than it seemed at first, reflecting our conflicting commitments about nature: that on the one hand it is subordinated to us and at our disposal, and that on the other hand our own (human) nature is disposed toward nature writ large in ways we have yet to realize, as the opening to *Le Pré* suggests.

> Que parfois la Nature, à notre réveil, nous propose
> Ce à quoi justement nous étions disposés. (*Le Pré* 340)
>
> Let Nature sometimes, as we awake, propose to us
> Precisely that to which we were disposed.

The goal is to unfold this natural disposition of ours in such a way that we no longer remain "dès l'abord . . . interdits" (341) 'from the start . . . forbidden/speechless,' achieving a linguistic felicity, not by expressing our dominion over nature in definitions, laws, or the lost, utopian unity of word and thing, but rather by figuring

[7] *S'empêtra* is an inflected form of the verb *s'empêtrer,* which is etymologically unrelated to the Latin "petra" 'stone.'

nothing more—or less—than its resistance. "Le Galet" ends this way, with the "Je n'en dirai pas plus" that leads to the narrator not exactly uttering a *bon mot*, leaving the folly of having the last word to his critics, but having instead the last laugh, with the immobilizing entanglement that accomplishes the comic reversal of the tragic romance of defeated reason.[8] Adjusting its ends at first from definition to description to legitimation, the poem eventually figures stone as the material that defies all ends, being the only thing in nature "qui y meure constamment" (*Parti* 53) 'that constantly dies there,' and in doing so, the poem shows "l'art de résister aux paroles" (*Proêmes* 193) 'the art of resisting words' by its own resistance ("contrairement à l'opinion commune" [*Parti* 53] 'contrary to what is commonly thought') to the petrifications of *doxa*, to the too-permanent, worn-out metaphor of rock as permanence. "Le Galet" ultimately changes altogether the ends that we pursue with language, its subversion of the lure a non-rhetorical discourse having no end other than itself. All too happy at the end to have chosen the difficult stone from the start; "Le Galet" is an example of an autotelic act.

These changes in linguistic aims provide a template for reorganizing other ends that we pursue. For instance, consider the competing modes of happiness, or pleasure, in the poem "Les Plaisirs de la porte" ('The Pleasures of the Door'). The first mode depends on recognition of a universal claim, not merely a statement but an injunction, uttered in the name of political authority—"Les rois ne touchent pas aux portes" (*Parti* 21) 'Kings don't touch doors'—and is that which is done "au plaisir du roi" 'at the pleasure of the king.' The second mode belongs to the valet, or the rest of us: "[Les rois] ne connaissent pas ce bonheur d'empoigner au ventre par son nœud de porcelaine l'un de ces hauts obstacles d'une pièce, ce corps à corps rapide" (21) '[Kings] do not know this happiness of grabbing one of these great obstacles of a room right in the belly by its porcelain knob, this quick body-to-body.' This is the happiness of an action done for its own sake. The door participates in both. In the first case, it is the object that structures the order of the court through the ritual of valets, not kings, opening doors, and that along with the subject, produces or legitimates the king. In the second case, the happiness is produced by the mutual embrace of the subject's material qualities and those of the object, all of which are the opposite of "the immaterial excess that differentiates a royal body from its brute physicality," as Bill Brown puts it in "The Tyranny of Things" (458), a body that is missing from the text and that precisely does not act. But by restoring to our imagination a political order that we only recognize as *révolu* 'long gone,' this text is the opposite of revolution and the establishment of a radical material equality. "Les rois ne touchent pas aux portes" sits atop the text, forbidding democracy, "le copieusement habité lieu commun" (*Parti 30*)

[8] Julian Murphet identifies in this poem "the comic resuscitations and regenerations of the contemptible organic cycles" (1505).

'copiously inhabited commonplace' in "Bords de mer" ('Seashores'), the realm of cliché that Ponge famously views with suspicion.[9] Any equality here is asymmetrical (the door acquiring a body, and a belly[10]) and short-lived, resolved back into the reign of the subject: "D'une main *amicale* [le corps] la retient encore avant de la *repousser* décidément et s'enclore" (21, my emphasis) 'With a *friendly* hand [the body] holds it open a moment before *pushing it away* brusquely and shutting itself back inside.' "On ne peut aucunement sortir de l'homme" (*Proêmes* 198) 'we cannot step outside of man,' which is to say into an apolitical realm of pure materiality, since the fleeting pleasure transforms the materiality of 'one of these great obstacles' into a passage, and back again into *clôture* 'enclosure.' Though it reveals the contingency of authority, reminding us that "the difference between democracy and monarchy is an illusion" (467), as Bill Brown argues, the text does not liberate the object once and for all from human projects. Instead, the object is reenlisted in actions done for their own sake by a subject that is ethical, not political, in nature, a pursuit of happiness neglected by those whose actions are not self-legitimating.

The king is dead, or illusory, long live the king! As an example to us all of unhappiness. The authority of his example is enduring and universal, valid in all contexts, even those, like this text and our daily lives, without royal bodies. Bertrand Russell worried whether "The king of France is bald" is true or false given that France is a Republic (Russell concluded it was false). To consider the truth conditions of "kings don't touch doors" is to overlook its force. Neither true nor false, it has as a perlocutionary effect to make us see (or say) what we already know, not that kings do not touch doors (for who can say?), but that we often do. When Ponge famously remarked, "Je désire moins aboutir à un poème qu'à une formule" 'My goal is less a poem than a formula,' he understood the *formule* as "capable d'effets pratiques" (*Pratiques* 1029) 'capable of pragmatic effects.' Taking his examples from Jean de La Fontaine's "Le Lion et le rat" ('The Lion and the Rat')—"Patience et longueur de temps / Font mieux que force ni que rage" (*Rage* 425-26) 'Patience and passage of time / Accomplish more than force or rage'—he saw in them not the authority of La Fontaine—"où est en cela La Fontaine?" 'Where is La Fontaine in any of this?' —but the truth of an action, "la vérité d'un acte de lion" (426) 'the truth of a lion act.' Philippe Met has argued that the pragmatic potential of Ponge's *formule* depends on one aspect of its abstraction, the fact that it is "détachable de son initiateur et de son contexte" (67) 'detachable from its originator and its context.' Having no connection to a legitimating origin, the *formule* is a self-

[9] See Philippe Met, *Formules de la poésie* ('Formulas of Poetry') for a superb discussion of the spatial logic of language as a liberating enclosure in Ponge. (20-25).

[10] Austin Hancock identifies in this poem a "non-anthropocentric anthropomorphism" that figures the sensation of "having the door touch us back" (393).

authorizing utterance, exemplified in the organization of "Le Lion et le rat," which begins as follows.

> Il faut, autant qu'on peut, obliger tout le monde:
> On a souvent besoin d'un plus petit que soi.
> De cette vérité deux Fables feront foi,
> Tant la chose en preuves abonde.
> Entre les pattes d'un Lion
> Un Rat sortit de terre assez à l'étourdie.
> Le Roi des animaux, en cette occasion,
> Montra ce qu'il était, et lui donna la vie. (77)
>
> One must, as much as possible, be kind to all:
> We often need someone lesser than we.
> Of this truth two fables will persuade,
> So abounding in proof is it.
> Between a Lion's paws
> A Rat emerged thoughtlessly.
> The King of animals, on this occasion,
> Showed what he was, and spared him.

The demonstration by example follows the moral, but the exemplary act is outside any chain of causation or demonstration, appearing even to precede its cause.[11] The lion shows kindness to the rat spontaneously (that is, before he is ensnared and at the mercy of the rat, who frees him by gnawing the net, all of which comes next in the fable), making this not a fable of a lesson learned, but of not needing to learn the lesson of humility expressed in the moral. Such morals, for Ponge, are not rules to follow but pragmatic utterances that can "montrer aux gens ce qu'il pensent, les mettre d'accord avec eux-mêmes" (*Pratiques* 1029) 'show people what they think, put them in agreement with themselves.' Needing no example, the lion 'showed what he was.'

How might such an exemplary creature instruct us? To see the problem more clearly in Ponge's work, we may look to the pascalian shakeup that opens

[11] In *Crises of the Sentence* Jan Mieszkowski has recently explained, "propositions articulated in anticipation of demonstrations required to validate or refute them irremediably betray their own incompleteness" (50). La Fontaine's fable "Le Loup et l'agneau" ('The Wolf and the Lamb') begins "La raison du plus fort est toujours la meilleure:/ Nous l'allons montrer tout à l'heure" (*Fables* 53) 'The reason of the strongest is always the best. We will now show this is so.' Reading this text as a fable of the tyranny of western reason, Michel Serres comments, "La raison du plus fort, c'est la raison tout court" (*Hermès* 104) 'The reason of the strongest is reason itself.' By Serres's reading, the moral of the fable is that its moral needs no demonstration but is instead true from the start, "sans autre forme de procès" (*Fables* 53) 'with no other form of trial.'

"Notes pour un coquillage" ('Notes for a Shell') and its apparent lesson about grandeur.

> Un coquillage est une petite chose, mais je peux la démesurer en la replaçant où je la trouve, posée sur l'étendue du sable. Car alors je prendrai une poignée de sable et j'observerai le peu qui me reste dans la main après que par les interstices de mes doigts presque toute la poignée aura filé, j'observerai quelques grains, puis chaque grain, et aucun de ces grains de sable à ce moment ne m'apparaîtra plus une petite chose, et bientôt le coquillage formel, cette coquille d'huître ou cette tiare bâtarde, ou ce "couteau," m'impressionnera comme un énorme monument, en même temps colossal et précieux, quelque chose comme le temple d'Angkor, Saint-Maclou, ou les Pyramides. (*Parti* 38)
>
> A shell is a small thing, but I can enlarge it beyond measure by putting it back where I found it, resting on the expanse of sand. For I will then take a handful of sand and observe the little that remains in my hand after almost all of it will have run between my fingers, I will observe a few grains, then each grain, and none of these grains of sand will at that moment appear to me a small thing, and soon this formal shell, this oyster shell or this volute, or this "razor" shell, will impress me as an enormous monument, at once colossal and precious, something like the temple of Angkor, Saint-Maclou, or the Pyramids.

Though the change in perspective aggrandizes the relative size of the mollusk in its environment, the text nevertheless expresses the *démesure* 'disproportion' of the human perspective. Hubristic enough to see lessons in nature, we learn from them how to be humble. This contradiction cannot be overcome. It is a contradiction at the core of our actions. For whereas the poem proposes the law of the mollusk for our moral edification, the mollusk, on the contrary, needs no law other than its own. No wonder that this poem, as examples of "la disproportion grotesque" (40) 'the grotesque disproportion' of our imagination and our bodies, names a temple, a church, and the Pyramids. Whether we turn for our laws to the examples of the natural world around us or to the divinities we created and then mistook for our creators, the result is the same for Ponge, a form of alienation. We have not yet found our own law and become, "Cet homme sobre et simple, qui veut vivre selon sa loi, son équilibre heureux" (*Proêmes* 230) 'This sober and simple man, who wants to live according to his law, his happy equilibrium.'

"Escargots" ('Snails') gestures at the resolution of this alienation of our ethical and imaginative labor, the snail being an example of an organism whose actions, or expressions, are indistinguishable from its form.

> Leur sécrétion même se produit de telle manière qu'elle se met en forme. Rien d'extérieur à eux, à leur nécessité, à leur besoin n'est leur œuvre. Rien de disproportionné—d'autre part—à leur être physique. (*Parti* 27)
>
> Their very secretion is produced so as to take form. Their work has nothing exterior to them, to their necessity, to their needs. Nothing disproportionate—moreover—to their physical being.

The rhetoric of example is explicit and repeated near the end of the poem: "*Ainsi* en est-il de tous ceux qui s'expriment d'une façon entièrement subjective sans repentir" (27, my emphasis) 'Thus it is with all those who express themselves in an entirely subjective manner without remorse.' Or a few lines later: "Mais c'est ici que je touche à l'un des points principaux de leur *leçon*" (27, my emphasis) 'But here I touch on one of the principal points of their lesson.' Or yet again, "Et voilà *l'exemple* qu'ils nous donnent" (27, my emphasis) 'And this is the example they provide.' At each of these moments, the reader confronts an exhortation to pattern his or her own behavior on the snail's peculiar feature, but in the end, this feature blocks the reading of the snail as an example altogether, for the exemplarity of the snail, its saintliness, is its obedience to nothing but its own nature: "Mais saints en quoi: en obéissant précisément à leur nature. Connais-toi donc d'abord toi-même" (27) 'But saints how: in obeying exactly their nature. First off, therefore, know yourself.' This complicates things for reading because the explicit moral interferes with the logic of representation, and vice versa. The poem enjoins us to know ourselves and to express ourselves in a manner suited to our nature, but finding our way to this lesson requires that we answer to a name that is not our own, that of the snail.[12] And if we cannot learn to obey the Delphic maxim "Know thyself" by imitating models, since that would be to commit the error that the poem condemns, this is ultimately because we must in this process develop the ethical independence of an organism that knows its nature and how to deploy it. Doing what we are told requires no such understanding, nor does it allow that self-knowledge is not achieved and expressed once and for all, as if it were "une demeure solide . . . plus durable qu'eux-mêmes" (27) 'a solid dwelling . . . more enduring than them,' but is instead the ongoing activity of acting in character, harmonizing our commitment

[12]In *Fables of Responsibility* Thomas Keenan identifies this as central to how fables function, taking as an example the fable of the eagle and the raven in Caxton's fables of Aesop. "The apostrophe of reading (which is the signature of the fable as a genre, the moral as address to the reader) is just as aberrant as the simile of the fable. You are not a raven, not even like a raven, and don't think you are. But to learn not to make this figural error, you must compare yourself to the raven, with its disfigured self-knowledge. […] The fable is structured as a double-bind: to heed its call you must ignore its call, you must make the mistake the fable denounces" (66).

to self-knowledge with the means of pursuing and expressing it, allowing us to be "des êtres dont l'existence même est œuvre d'art" (27) 'beings whose very existence is a work of art.'

To explore how a text's examples might lead to our obeying our own nature, we may look to two tropes from *Le Parti pris des choses* that illustrate how nature's elements coincide with themselves despite our efforts to make them into metaphors of human behavior. One of these is water in the poem "De l'eau" ('On Water'[13]), and the other is again the stone from "Le Galet." From the beginning "De l'eau" places the human above water: "Plus bas que moi, toujours plus bas que moi se trouve l'eau. C'est toujours les yeux baissés que je la regarde" (31) 'Beneath me, water is always beneath me. I always look at it with lowered eyes.' Water, always beneath the narrator, seems to occupy a lower ethical rank because of "cet hystérique besoin de n'obéir qu'à sa pesanteur, qui la possède comme une idée fixe" (31) 'this hysterical need to obey only gravity, which possesses it like *une idée fixe*.' But this poem also bears the latent signs of respect for water, "les yeux baissés" (31) 'lowered eyes,' as would express the humility of a valet before the king. In the ambivalent hierarchy of this *texte à deux sens*[14] 'two-way/two-meaning text' we see water as an opportunity to educe an ethical law, but at the same time, we see in its obedience only to the laws of its physical properties an inalienable behavior that is like an *idée fixe* but is no idea at all, ideas being our domain and precisely where our own attempts at formulating ethical principles run amok, especially when we make of water an idea about our own behavior.[15] When the narrator remarks, "Toujours plus bas: telle semble être sa devise: le contraire d'excelsior" (31) 'Ever lower: so seems to be its motto: the opposite of *excelsior*,' the issue here is not that water aspires to be ever lower and is therefore an ignominious model of perpetual self-debasement, but instead that water does not aspire at all, much less to the pursuit of moral perfection called for in "Escargots" (27). The "ever higher" of *excelsior*, on the other hand, is a fitting motto for human beings, who can aspire to

[13] The partitive article makes "Some Water" a possible translation.

[14] In *Poétique de Francis Ponge* ('Poetics of Francis Ponge') Bernard Beugnot characterizes allegory in Ponge as a case of there being "deux sens, sans que l'un nécessairement abolisse l'autre, même si le plus souvent de l'un à l'autre une hiérarchie tend à s'établir" (9) 'two meanings, without one necessarily abolishing the other, even if most often a hierarchy tends to establish itself between them.'

[15] On the relationship between proverbs, *lieux communs*, and Ponge's 'disgust for ideas' (*Proêmes* 193) see Philippe Met. "La formule verbale pongienne fournit l'un des meilleurs garde-fous, l'un des plus sûrs moyens de résistance ou de défense contre la tyrannie des idées et des pensées" (77) 'the Pongian verbal formula provides one of the best guardrails, one of the best means of resistance or defense against the tyranny of ideas and thoughts.' See also Michel Collot (140-44), who notes that objects (or animals) modeling human behavior enact a movement "de l'objectif au subjectif, du physique au moral" 'from the objective to the subjective, from the physical to the moral' that threatens the commitment to the object itself, but that it is accompanied by a scientific terminology that is an extension of non-exact knowledge, which resists the categories of abstraction.

more laudable behavior precisely because they are the origin and cause of their own actions.

Human aspiration requires acting for certain reasons, or as the philosopher Julia Annas explains regarding virtue, "virtue is not just a habit of copying what others do but a disposition to act which involves understanding what you do, self-directedness, and a drive to improve" (27). The distinction between a body subject to the laws governing nature and one capable of ethical action is an Aristotelian one, between the involuntary and the voluntary, and bodies that do not have the principle of action within them do not aspire to excellence, to the "living and faring well" defined in the *Nicomachean Ethics* as happiness, the self-justifying end of human action, performed "in accordance with the appropriate excellence" (14-15). Of the involuntary Aristotle explains, "that is compulsory of which the moving principle is outside, being a principle in which nothing is contributed by the person who acts—or, rather, is acted upon, e.g. if he were to be carried somewhere by a wind" (48). Whereas the grain of sand in "Le Galet" is carried by the wind, the human visitor to the landscape is not solely compelled by the physical laws governing material nature but is "a moving principle or begetter of his actions" (59).[16] Gravity is among those laws to which we are subject, of course ("Certes, tout au monde connaît ce besoin" [*Parti* 31] 'To be sure, everything in the world knows this need'), but it does not operate in that area of our behavior where laws are not determined for us, or those laws that we are free to obey or not and that solicit our practical reason.[17]

Often translated as disposition or state of character, *hexis* is for Aristotle both cause and effect of our actions, something within us that disposes us toward certain kinds of actions and that is also formed by those actions in the course of our ethical development, which cannot be a matter of copying others (or copying examples) because it is the expression of our aspiration to self-directedness. Though water is disposed invariably to follow the effects of gravity and evaporation—the competing influence of the earth, and a moon and sun that are "jaloux" (*Parti* 32) 'jealous'—this scientific notion of disposition excludes the rational principle of aspiration to faring well, which requires that we move past doing what we are told, and that we learn to act more and more in accordance with our character. Ponge's poetics of the nonhuman, though respectful of the silence of nature, names reason as the representative of nature in human beings, and clamors

[16] See Sarah Broadie, *Ethics With Aristotle*: "We are natural substances whose essential nature is to act, feel and think as voluntary agents. Such is the view of human reality that emerges in Aristotle's *Ethics*" (130).

[17] See Lionel Cuillé's commentary on Darwinism and Ponge. "Ce que Ponge privilégie c'est la volonté (politique) de l'homme qui lui permettra de s'affranchir de l'ordre naturel pour établir un ordre social plus juste" (240) 'Ponge privileges the (political) will of man that will allow him to free himself from the natural order so as to establish a more just social order.'

for it to speak up and be heard by us, at once self-expression and self-knowledge, as we see in "Des Raisons d'écrire" ('Reasons to Write').

> nous avons observé que la Nature autrement puissante que les hommes fait dix fois moins de bruit, et que la nature dans l'homme, je veux dire la raison, n'en fait pas du tout.
>
> Eh bien! Ne serait-ce qu'à nous-mêmes nous voulons faire entendre la voix d'un homme. (*Proêmes* 195-96).

> we have noticed that Nature, powerful in a different way from how men are, makes ten times less noise, and that nature in man, by which I mean reason, makes none at all.
>
> Well then! If only to ourselves we want to make the voice of a man heard.

Formulating gravity as the law of inverse squares or as a fable of virtue and vice, we miss opportunities to make the voice of practical reason heard, through the hypocritical and ethically empty claim to mastery of the laws to which we are ourselves subjected, on the one hand, or through our attachment to imitation of ethical examples, on the other. In the first case, we overlook ethical responsibility. In the second case, we misplace it. "De l'eau," in figuring two kinds of law (physical behavior of substances and ethical conduct, *physis* and *nomos*) at the same time and incompatibly, reminds us that our form of life does not appear in the examples of the text, nor is its field of action exhausted by the forces that move us and other bodies. The form of life particular to us takes shape instead as our dispositions toward the contradictions of texts (written and read), which arise from our contradictory disposition toward the natural world, to which we are disposed but which we presume to be at our disposal for our practical and moral ends. These dispositions—toward a text's meanings, and toward natural contexts—are regulated and revealed by the same gestures and habits that develop "la notion propre de l'homme: la parole et la morale. L'humanisme" (*Parti* 27), 'the proper notion of man: speech and morality. Humanism,' which is to say, those that reveal our human nature to others and to ourselves. To read the poem "De l'eau" requires not that we choose between figures of the laudable and the contemptible, but that we see the asymmetry between virtue and vice, and the insolubility of the literal and figurative in the poem. "Toujours plus bas: telle semble être sa devise: le contraire d'excelsior" (*Parti* 31) 'Ever lower: so seems to be its motto: the opposite of *excelsior*'. Water seems to have a motto, but appearances, we know from "Le Galet," are deceiving. Twice called a *besoin* 'need' and three times called a vice, in neither case does the behavior of water express an aspiration to be lower, no more than a person's vicious response to lust or lack reflects a commitment to baseness.

The human *excelsior*, on the other hand, expresses the human aspiration to act better and to live better. And this is not an aspiration to be above something else, or to be greater than something else, but to be greater than one was at a previous stage of one's ethical formation, to be, or show, more and more what one is.

As we have seen, at the end of "Le Galet" the narrator measures linguistic expression with respect to nature, reflecting on the too-little accomplished by a text that is too much what it is. However, as the text follows the diminishing size of the stone, which day by day is smaller and smaller, we notice it is only ever measured against—so only ever smaller than—itself: "Enfin, de jour en jour plus petit mais toujours sûr de sa forme, aveugle, solide et sec dans sa profondeur, son *caractère* est de ne pas se laisser confondre mais plutôt réduire par les eaux" (56, my emphasis) 'In the end, day after day smaller but always sure of its form, blind, solid, and dry deep down, its character is to not be absorbed but only reduced by water.' The ethical model of unfolding one's character is figured here as always being one's own "plus petit que soi," becoming 'smaller than one is,' which paradoxically makes one "plus grand" 'greater.'

> Il en sort plus petit, mais entier, et, si l'on veut, plus *grand*, puisque ses proportions ne dépendent aucunement de son volume. (56, emphasis in the original)
>
> It comes out smaller, but whole, and, if you like, *greater*, because its proportions do not at all depend on its volume.

The irony of the stone is that the more eroded it is, the more it shows its resistance, and the more it reveals itself as whole through changes that solidify and affirm its *eidos* 'form', since this process of change and identity is the material behavior that is the stone, the irreducible and unfigurable remainder that neither water nor any poetic endeavor will ever absorb away. It would seem that we have run afoul of contradictions in the rhetoric of example we have noted in Ponge, taking the stone as a metaphor of human self-knowledge (becoming more and more sure) and the enactment of *hexis*, 'one's own state of character,' both changing and not, becoming what one is. Asked by Bernard Groethuysen in a letter whether or not the poem "Le Galet" was less about the stone itself than the stone as a metaphor of the human practice of language, Ponge responded, "Je ne voudrais pas que vous pensiez, et je ne le crois d'ailleurs pas possible, que le Galet tout entier ne soit qu'une seule 'métaphore continuée'" (*OC* I 68) 'I wouldn't want you to think, and moreover I don't think it's possible, that le Galet is wholly an extended metaphor.' Without yielding to Ponge's authorial opinion here, we can nevertheless see that our reading confirms it. Entirely unlike the stone, which remains whole, "Le Galet" is nothing 'wholly.' The text is the contradiction of the words *qui font défaut* 'that

aren't enough,' and that are also *de trop* 'too much,' doubly disclaiming the language that would, as Derrida puts it, "donner à connaître la chose même" (295) 'give the object itself to be known.' More of a double self-effacement, it is precisely not what Derrida calls the *double effacement* (251) 'double erasure' by which metaphor appears as universal truth, the absolute and unlimited currency of the concept, when we no longer see the metaphor and take it for a proper meaning. The story of the stone's *usure*, "Le Galet" sustains both the resistance of stone and the metaphor of its resistance, all at once and insolubly. This equilibrium, between mistaking our traces for nature itself and abject self-effacement, is Ponge's humanism: speech and morality, "la notion propre de l'homme" (*Parti* 27) 'the proper notion of man,' not a proper (i.e. universal) concept but, like other *-isms*, an artistic practice, worthy of pride of ownership even, or especially, when we own up to its artifacts (*propre* 'one's own'). Pride in our contradictory character is the key to achieving "salut" 'salvation,' or well-being (via the Latin "salus" 'welfare'). "Quand l'homme sera fier d'être non seulement le lieu où s'élaborent les idées et les sentiments, mais aussi bien le nœud où ils se détruisent et se confondent, il sera prêt alors d'être sauvé" (*Méthodes* 630) 'When man is proud to be not only the site where ideas and sentiments are elaborated but also the nexus where they are destroyed and confounded, then he will be ready to be saved.' Like the rock-bound task of Sisyphus, who in his relative successes Ponge imagines happy (*Proêmes* 208), 'the art of resisting words,' practiced by the human and the nonhuman, is endless, though ours has as its ethical goal, or end, a human being that we can imagine faring well.

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