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THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE LYRICAL SUBJECT IN FRANCIS PONGE'S *OBJECTUAL* POETRY

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Abstract || The aim of this paper is to show how, in the case of the works of Francis Ponge, the lyrical subject of a deliberately non-subjectivist body of work can be constructed, despite – and even because of - the absence of said subject and in opposition to the object which it recreates. Although the disappearance of the subject is a rhetorical strategy to draw attention to the object, both the linguistic features and the communicative intentionality of the texts, serve only to define the subject in question. In the case of the works of Ponge, the lyrical subject coincides with the historical subject Francis Ponge himself. However, putting this fact aside, this paper demonstrates that nothing in language, nor in the reality that it represents, is objective, since every object presupposes a subject.

Keywords || lyrical subject | ponge | Derrida | objectual poetry.

0. Introduction

It is unnecessary to repeat once again the futility of identifying the lyrical subject of a work with its author, with the historical individual that is represented by the voice or voices of this poetical formulation. However, in Francis Ponge's work, this question is not one of trivial importance, given that the poet himself confirms the discourse as Francis Ponge¹. He did not do this, however, with the aim of uncovering all the hidden corners of his biography, but rather as part of a rhetoric strategy; arguing that "le monde muet est la patrie du poète" (Ponge, 1965: 31), the vast majority of his work was focused on things, on mute objects belonging to the domain of empirical reality - although, given that Pongean objects are at once material entities and natural beings, we should be more precise; rather than *mute*, they are "without the linguistic skills of humans". This approach is based on the idea that the poet wanted to rid the language of those conventions, those fossilised expressions that, in his opinion, distorted the nature of the realities that they described. However, this particular objective of Pongean works has always brought about debate about the nature of the lyrical subject that is put forward within. According to Käte Hamburger's in *Die Logik der Dichtung* (1957), for example, Ponge's texts could not be included in the genre of lyrical works precisely because of this objective, since Ponge aimed to describe things by distancing himself from the object of enunciation (Hamburger, 1995: 177). Hence, since the enunciative structure of the lyrical genre, unlike that of other genres, is based upon the idea that this structure is not oriented towards the object of enunciation but rather towards the subject itself, Ponge's work does not fulfil this requirement, drifting away, as it does, from the subject of the object of enunciation². Nonetheless, it is Hamburger herself that provides us with an argument that allows us to justify the existence of a lyrical subject in Ponge's work, since, as the author noted, the objects of Pongean poetics ended up as nothing more than a linguistic expression of the same – that is the word or phrase that, in French, that refers to them. It is this linguistic construction, elaborated by the author in each one of his text that reveals to us the subject – a subject that in this case coincides with Francis Ponge himself. In this *objetual* poetry, in a manner that is deliberately opposed to subjective declarations and even to human affairs³, the space reserved for creation and lyrical personality occupies the *chose* but, it is undeniable that giving the floor "au monde muet" to incite the objects "à se reveller, à s'exprimer" (Ponge, 1965: 73) will do nothing but refer us back to that subject which, in vain, was removed from the enunciation object. This reminds us once again that, in short, and in virtue of the fact that "notre langage implique toute la subjectivité de l'homme, les descriptions ne peuvent que s'humaniser, et la création dire le créateur" (Rieu, 1986: 109). In fact,

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1 | It must be remembered that this link between the lyrical subject and the historical author was particularly common in Romanticism, where the poems content was considered genuinely autobiographical. For more, see Gallegos (2006).

2 | In Hamburger's opinion, in the enunciative structure of the lyrical genre there should be no direct reference to any object at all, given that, according to her thesis, the contents of the enunciations are "expelled from the sphere of the object and dragged within the subject.

3 | Ponge affirmed this throughout his work: "Je choisis comme sujets non des sentiments ou des aventures humaines mais des objets les plus différents possible" (Ponge, 1952: 47); "Les poètes n'ont aucunement à s'occuper de leurs relations humaines" (Ponge, 1971a: 206); "Je sais qu'il y a des poètes qui parlent de leur femme (de grands poètes que j'aime), de leurs amours, de la patrie. Moi, ce qui me tient de cette façon au cœur, je ne peux guère en parler" (Ponge, 1971a: 252).

this same argument is inferred from the interpretation of the Pongean work that was used by Derrida. We can also note here, since it could not be any other way, that Ponge's insistence in the idea of the *difference* – the fact that the definition of an object should be based in those characteristics that distinguish it from similar objects – could not have passed unnoticed by the author of “La différence”⁴, who considered that the *choses* of the Poet revealed, in effect, the mark of the Pongean subject.

We will see in these pages, hence, how these poetics, by trying to move away from the subject that refers back to it, does nothing but define it, through the objects referred to therein. This was indicated, in short, by the title of Ponge's paradigmatic work, which wasn't named *Les Choses*, but *Le Parti pris des choses*; thus we have a choice, and we must take a side, which presupposes a decision of a subject. As a consequence, the space occupied by Ponge's objects is nothing alike to other presumably objective proposals, such as, for example, that of Alain Robbe-Grillet; even though the approach of each claimed to break with the convention of *realist* representation in pursuit of the representation of what is truly *real*, it is truer to say that reality is no longer a subjective space, though it is inevitably conditioned by a series of assertions which credit it as a conceptual space necessarily shared by a whole community of speakers. Ponge's work, hence - voluntarily disconnected from the subject and focussed on empiric reality - offered a *vision du monde*, but as Collot noted about the poet “[v]ision du monde, certes, mais le monde n'est jamais vu que par un sujet. C'est l'objectivité qui est une fiction” (Collot, 1989: 175).

1. The apparent impersonality of the Pongean style: from the objects of the subject matter to the subjective *tactile* space

Ponge's rejection of the intimate and symbolic lyrical form was always evident, since he believed that personal experience and the expression of an author's state of mind could in no way constitute the object of a poetic work. It is for this reason, for example, that he took some inspiration from Malherbe, whose poetic work he considered “un intense combat contre l'effusion, le chaos, la vulgarité lyrique” (Ponge, 1956: 81), and who attempted to capture an impersonal and formulaic writing style: “Parvenir à la formule claire” (Ponge, 1983: 63). As such, he decided to avoid the use of the first person as much as possible:

Il m'est devenu parfaitement impossible, depuis quelque temps, d'employer le *je* (la première personne du singulier) [...]. Je ne m'intéresse plus, c'est un fait, aux auteurs qui emploient le *je*. Ils me paraissent minces et ridicules; naïfs, vains, exagérément prétentieux,

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4 | Derrida addressed the poet's works on several occasions. In his text, *Signéponge*, he participated in the conference on Francis Ponge which was held in the *Centre Culturel International de Cerisy-la-Salle* from the 2nd to the 12th of August 1975. A version of this text was published with the same title in 1976 in the journal *Digraphe* (No. 8 pp. 17-39) and both texts were published together in 1986 in *Francis Ponge. Cahier de L'Hème* (No. 51, pp. 350-370). A new version of all this material appeared in 1984 in a bilingual edition, as *Signéponge/Signsponge* (New York & Guildford: Columbia University Press), and finally, in 1988, it was published once again solely in French: *Signéponge* (Paris: Seuil).

fantomatiques, et sans intérêt comme tels. Je ne voudrais pas perdre *notre* temps avec l'un d'eux (Ponge, 1965: 207-208).

He even harboured the desire that his written works should be viewed as anonymous, akin to those “strophes impersonnelles inscrites dans la pierre”, which he so admired amongst Roman ruins (Ponge, 1965: 187); since his family hailed originally from Nîmes he had always declared that a deep impact had been made upon him by the inscriptions of “la Maison carrée, le temple de Vénus et les odalisques à Arles” (Ponge, 2002: 1411). Nonetheless, it cannot be forgotten that in his text traces of the use of the first person still remained; even though it is not obvious as the subject of the predicate – that is to say, as the protagonist of the enunciated object – it is made clear through linguistic tools. These include the use of deixis of exophoric references, where a direct reference is made to the enunciative object, located outside the boundaries of the text. Ponge, establishes a direct interconnection between the supposed impersonality of his style and the objects that formed the subject matter of his poems, but such an interconnection cannot be presupposed. As has already been said, a work whose theme is an object of enunciation – where this object is enunciated by the enunciative subject - is a very different thing from a subject that will always have sufficient ability to *modalise* its object independently from whatever might be its nature⁵. It would not be wise to simplify this issue, either naïvely or restrictively because neither does all lyric works presume this *effusion subjective* which the author detested⁶, neither can all the works that are – or claim to be impersonal – maintain that they are entirely so. In addition, and despite the fact that Ponge had expressed his wish that should become free of human presence (Ponge, 1965: 73), he never rejected the fact that objects were defined by how they were viewed by man; the only thing that his perspective implied was a change of focus in the manner of describing reality, with the aim that this could be achieved without the bonds and chains of conventional expressions. As such, as Veck pointed out:

La restitution écrite de l'objet par Ponge ne doit pas être considérée comme une recherche de l'objectivité, de la neutralité, etc. Dans la mesure où les choses sont dites, où elles s'inscrivent dans le langage, elles participent de l'humain, qui leur confère une valeur en relation avec lui; c'est cette valeur reçue que Ponge tente d'abolir, pour mettre à jour des qualités ignorées par l'usage commun de la langue (Veck, 1994: 47).

Therefore, the fact that objects were the enunciated thematic matter in Ponge's work does not imply that the subject that was enunciating them could not be found in the work. Although this subject often seems buried under the collective forms *on* and *nous*, the frequent use of *il convient* or *il faut* or the ever present *c'est* (along with recurring use of the infinitive, a paradigmatic impersonal form of the verb), the Ponge's *subject* can still be seem emerging from the page

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5 | Here we stick to the concept of *enunciation* as a linguistic tool logically presupposed by the existence of something enunciated (Greimas and Courtès, 1990: 144). As such, we must not mix up this subject with the subject of the predicate – that is to say, that which, once it has undergone observation and reflexion, appears objectified in an enunciation (1990: 395).

6 | Indeed, Ponge detested everything that he saw as simply the gushing of a poet's spirit: “[Je suis] absolument contraire à la poésie considérée comme une *effusion simplement subjective*... par exemple, “je pleure dans mon mouchoir, ou je m'y mouche”, et puis je montre, j'expose, je publie ce mouchoir, et voilà une page de poésie. Il s'agit évidemment de bien autre chose” (Ponge, 1970: 26-27).

throughout his texts.

Nonetheless, it cannot be denied that Ponge settled upon objects precisely because he didn't feel able to talk about himself, as he stated in *Pratiques d'écriture*, the last book he ever published: "Il s'agit pour moi de faire parler les choses, puisque je n'ai pas réussi à parler moi-même" (Ponge, 1984: 79). However, he was equally motivated by the fact his conviction that expression, *per se*, should constitute the finality of any artistic discipline, that is, not the expression of an idea or a belief, but expression as evidence or proof of an individual. Hence, he considered real objects the ideal tools with which to express himself, and at the same time, to define himself through differentiation, since he believed that the silence of objects could only incite human beings to make use of the linguistic faculties: "la garantie de la nécessité d'expression se trouve dans le mutisme habituel de l'objet" (Ponge, 1952: 47)⁷. As such, he concentrated on objects – things – in order to create an image of himself, given that the poet made use of the objects of his subject matter to ratify his own existence. In consequence, as Leclair notes, in Ponge's work the description of an object:

est plus qu'un prétexte mais elle n'est pas non plus la finalité du poème. Car c'est dans sa relation à l'objet que le *je* se découvre et s'énonce, dans son mouvement d'admiration ou de répulsion face à l'objet, dans les qualités ou les défauts qu'il lui voit, que le *je* avoue ses préférences et ses inhibitions (Leclair, 1995: 140-141).

As such, Pongean objectivity really had nothing in common with that of, for example, his contemporary Alain Robbe-Grillet, one of the greatest authors of the *L'école du regard* which seems at first glance to have some similarities with Ponge's work. Robbe-Grillet's works also claimed to show objects from everyday reality through a perspective that mirrored the frame captured by a camera or video camera's lens. The empiric reality that Ponge wants us to grasp, on the other hand, could never be assimilated into the space that could be revealed to us through a moment captured by an optical instrument, since Ponge made use of a special idea of space: *espace tactile*, a concept devised by the painter Braque. Hence, if conventional "espace visuel sépare les objets les uns des autres", the space that Braque termed "*tactile*" is that which "nous sépare des objets" (Ponge, 2002: 944), since this space inevitably would call for the presence of an object⁸. Because of this, Ponge conceived this space not as an objective place, but as a place which each individual should take as his or her own: "un endroit, pour l'œil même, où se promener, à explorer, des objets à tâter, à étreindre, enfin à interroger. Il y a là (indéfiniment) à *croire s'approprier*. À jouir" (Ponge, 1999: 125). Therefore, despite the fact that a descriptive and supposedly impersonal text should have appeared entirely demodalised (Harmon 1982 : 150), we find Ponge's work plagued with modalisers (valorising adjectives, volitive verbs and

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7 | Curiously, one of the young Ponge's obsessions was with self-analysis. In an enlightening passage entitled "*Premier essai d'analyse personnelle*" which the poet added to a letter to his father in 1919, this idea is revealed to us, along with the fears and insecurities that pushed him to find an original in form of expression: "le contact de grands esprits [...] me jeta dans le désespoir de ma faiblesse de raisonnement, de ma médiocrité d'idées, et c'est alors que je cherchai furieusement l'originalité qui me mit au niveau de ces intelligences; sinon au point de vue logique et puissance d'idées, du moins, en général, dans la balance des facultés, puisque, par l'originalité sentimentale et du style, je leur étais supérieur. Ce souci d'originalité et ma continuelle manie d'analyse personnelle qui s'y ajoute naturellement, m'ont jeté bientôt dans l'incohérence, le désordre, et le désespoir qui naît du désordre logique" (Ponge, 2005: 27-28). We don't possess the reply of his progenitor, but from a new letter to his father, following this reply, we can deduce that the fatherly advice, despite Ponge's reticence to accept it, could well hold the key to what would later become the poet's objective: "j'ai bien reçu hier la lettre de Papa qui m'accuse réception et lecture de ma petite saleté psychologique. Le conseil de Papa "de faire porter mon analyse psychologique sur d'autres sujets que sur moi-même" est plus difficile à suivre qu'il ne peut sembler" (Ponge, 2005: 33).

8 | As such, Braque, according to Ponge, managed to get man to return "à l'origine du regard. Au lieu de reculer, dans la perspective, les choses avancent vers le regardeur. Les forces naturelles sont rendues à leur ancien mystère, avant leur décryptation.

verbs that express feelings, invocacions, exclamations of all kinds and more besides), since, as Rieu writes:

[b]ien que la présence du *je* (*nous*, *on*) rappelle déjà à tout moment une subjectivité, celle-ci se manifeste encore de façon plus engagée, plus interprétative dans l'emploi constant d'adjectifs ou d'adverbes qui contiennent un jugement et imposent une vision très originale (Rieu, 1986: 88).

In addition, the voice that the discourse takes on defends with some passion the organisation of textual material, since the majority of Ponge's poems dedicated to the description of things indicate to the reader that the text is coming to a conclusion through the use of linguistic formulae which clearly signpost the enunciative subject, like the adverb *enfin* or the conjunction *mais* which, rather than providing its usual function as a conjunction of opposition "déjoue l'attente du lecteur dans la mesure où elle coupe brusquement court à la description qui était en train de se déployer" (Leclair 1995: 79). It must not be forgotten, furthermore, that the subject will even make us participants of these ruminations, when we consider the difficulty of verbally translating things, as the following example – a description of *le palet* demonstrates: "Je n'en dirai pas plus [of *le palet*], car cette idée d'une disparition de signes me donne à réfléchir sur les défauts d'un style qui appuie trop sur les mots" (Ponge, 1967: 101)⁹. In consequence, the enunciative structure of these Pongean texts become, themselves, thematic material, because, according to Ponge, the factual existence of these objects – that which the subject perceives through its *tactil eyes* – should be considered an individual¹⁰. Ponge aimed to define himself through things; through otherness and difference. As such, and inevitably, his work piqued the curiosity of Derrida, who examined it in relation to his concept of *différence*.

2. Identity and difference: the characteristic of the subject in the writings of the Pongean object

It is quite possible to consider the construction of the subject of Ponge's poetics from the Derridian point of view of *différence*; given that the Pongean object is *otherness* - "La chose est l'autre" (Derrida, 1988: 17) – we can define the subject, since, in effect, "l'un n'est que l'autre différencié" (Derrida, 1972: 19). Indeed, the poet himself intuitively saw it as such, asking himself if it might not be the "mise en compagnie de quelque autre (être ou chose), enfin de quelque objet, qui permettrait à quiconque de concevoir son identité personnelle? [...] De se signifier?" (Ponge, 2002: 416). But let us briefly remind ourselves of Derrida's concept of *différence* and the interpretation that could be applied in conjunction with Ponge's text-subject-object perspective:

NOTES

Il s'agit [...] d'un nouvel encombrement tactile et manuel de l'espace, de ce nouvel espace que depuis toujours, a-t-il dit, il [Braque] sentait" (Ponge, 2002: 1310). In fact, Ponge's admiration for Braque goes right back to the first memories that the poet had of the painter's work, in which he noticed the particular manner that Braque presented objects in space. It should be added that Ponge set great store by the tactile sensations and its ability to impart knowledge.

9 | In *La Rage de l'expression*, for example, these considerations are very common, since the author continually includes the reader in his writings "décidément, il faut que je revienne au plaisir du bois de pins" (Ponge, 1952: 83); "je n'arriverais pas à conquérir ce paysage, ce ciel de Provence? Ce serait trop fort! Que de mal il me donne! Par moments, il me semble que je ne l'ai pas assez vu, et je me dis qu'il faudrait que j'y retourne, comme un paysagiste revient à son motif à plusieurs reprises. Pourtant, il s'agit de quelque chose de simple!" (Ponge, 1952: 144); "à noter que j'éprouve les plus grosses difficultés du fait du nombre énorme d'images qui viennent se mettre à ma disposition [...], du fait de l'originalité de mon point de vue [...] —de mes scrupules excessifs (protestants)— de mon ambition démesurée, etc." (Ponge, 1952: 156).

10 | Indeed, Alain Robbe-Grillet criticised Ponge, saying that his objects were nothing but a mirror on man: "l'anthropomorphisme le plus ouvertement psychologique et moral qu'il [Ponge] ne cesse de pratiquer ne peut avoir au contraire pour but que l'établissement d'un ordre humain, général et absolu.

La *différance*, c'est ce qui fait que le mouvement de la signification n'est possible que si chaque élément dit «présent», apparaissant sur la scène de la présence [en nuestro caso, el texto], se rapporte à autre chose que lui-même, gardant en lui la marque de l'élément passé [el sujeto] et se laissant déjà creuser par la marque de son rapport à l'élément futur [el objeto] (Derrida, 1972: 13).

Ponge had also said that, if “les objets sont en dehors de l'âme”, since “l'âme est transitive”, it would be necessary to have “un objet qui l'affecte, comme son complément direct”, and that “rapport à l'accusatif” would imply a projection of the ego towards otherness (Ponge, 1981: 150). It is worth adding that the poet justified this projection of the ego through one of his frequent word-plays; he pointed out that within the term *subjectivité* one must put emphasis “sur le *sub* (ce qui me pousse du fond, du dessous de moi: de mon corps) et sur le *jectif*: il s'agit d'un *jet*: d'une projection” (Ponge, 1971b: 19-20f). And it is just this process of *transitivity*, essentially analogous with *orientation* in logic and *intencionalidad* in philosophy, that can be assimilated into the Derridian space of *différance* – into the space where identity is found in otherness. This is not, however, a question of reductive or simplified *identification*, since in the domain of *différance* – a dynamic process that integrates both spreading and dilation¹¹ – a factual identification between a subject and an object could never be completely satisfactory. Only in virtue of this *differing* was Ponge able to announce that “l'être... n'est que de façons d'être successives” (Ponge, 1981: 151).

In the same way, it is worth noting that, according to Derrida, the concept of *différance* should be linked with that of the *trace* or *trail*, since, in order to account for the differentiation-identification process, a clear trail is necessary: “Les concepts de trace (*Spur*), de frayage (*Bahnung*) [...] sont [...] inséparables du concept de différence. Il n'y a pas de frayage sans différence et pas de différence sans trace” (Derrida, 1972: 19)¹². The Pongean text, hence, can be seen as the clear trail leading to the dissemination of the subject. The poem is sign that, while describing the object, leaves aside the enunciative subject; the way in which the subject renders itself absent – the track or trail – leaves itself empty for the object, and once again, the words of Ponge coincide with this Derridian idea of the *track* or *trail*. The can be justified through the following quote, where he describes his work as akin to that of a mole, digging out a tunnel between words:

Je travaille [...] un peu à la façon d'une taupe, rejetant à droite ou à gauche les mots, les expressions, me frayant mon chemin à travers eux [...] l'oeuvre elle-même parfois comme le tunnel, la galerie, ou enfin la chambre que j'ai ouverte dans le roc (Ponge, 1965: 229).

Ponge also stated that, even though each of his texts was an “*imprégnation*... venant du fond de mon corps”, his writing was “une

NOTES

Affirmer qu'il parle *pour* les choses, *avec* elles, dans leur *cœur*, revient dans ces conditions à nier leur réalité, leur présence opaque: dans cet univers peuplé de choses, celles-ci ne sont plus pour l'homme que des miroirs qui lui renvoient sans fin sa propre image. Tranquilles, domestiquées, elles regardent l'homme avec son propre regard” (Robbe-Grillet, 1961: 62).

11 | Derrida founded the idea of *différance* in the double sense of the Latin verb *diffère*: the first refers to “l'action de remettre à plus tard [...] dans une opération qui implique [...] un détour, un délai, un retard, une réserve [...] : la *temporisation*” and the second to the meaning of *différer*, of “ne pas être identique, être autre, discernable [...] : *espacement*” (Derrida, 1972: 8).

12 | In this case Derrida writes “différence”, without “a”, since he is taking it from Freudian theory.

espèce de trace de ce qu'il y a de plus profond en moi, à propos de telle ou telle notion" (Ponge, 1970: 72). In much the same way this trail is supported by the evidence of material nature of writing – a fundamental dimension for Ponge: "Mais *écrire*, pourquoi? pour produire (laisser) une trace (*matérielle*), pour *matérialiser* mon cheminement, afin qu'il puisse être suivi d'une autre fois, une seconde fois" (Ponge, 1971b: 19). As such, we find the presence of the *ego* in the space of difference, and in opposition with the evidence of the object, that is to say, the poetic construction that, based upon this object, will be brought into being by the enunciative subject:

Les objets sont [...] ma seule raison d'être, à proprement parler mon prétexte; et *la variété des choses est en réalité ce qui me construit*, [...] ce qui me permettrait d'exister dans le silence même. [...] Et si j'existe à partir d'elle [de la chose] ce ne pourra être que par une certaine création de ma part à son propos. Quelle création? Le texte (Ponge, 1971a: 12-13).

The creation of a trail would often be explicitly mentioned in the poems themselves, particularly in those whose enunciative object was a living creature. In "L'Araignée", for example, the fine string of secreted liquid that the arachnid uses to weave its web (*son ouvrage*) is compared to the saliva of the author; a carefully constructed web used to capture readers:

[L'araignée] secrète son fil, bave le fil de sa toile... le fil de son discours [...]. D'où la définition par elle-même de sa toile aussitôt conçue: DE RIEN D'AUTRE QUE DE SALIVE PROPOS EN L'AIR MAIS AUTHENTIQUEMENT TISSUS —OÙ J'HABITE AVEC PATIENCE— SANS PRÉTEXTE QUE MON APPÉTIT DE LECTEURS (Ponge, 2003: 109-110).

Also, when writing about a shell (in "Notes pour un coquillage"), Ponge refers to the "secretion" – the tongue (or *langue*) – of the "mollusc-man" - : "la véritable sécrétion [...]: je veux dire la PAROLE" (Ponge, 1967: 77)¹³. In the same way the secretions of snails (in "Escargots") are revealed to be exemplary, given that their trail – as the lines of a pen in cursive script – is something very much inherent to them. The very existence of these animals, hence, could be considered a work of art; this is one of the lessons that, according to Ponge, gastropods can teach us¹⁴, since he would never have written this trail – his *work* – if he had not done so "en obéissant précisément à leur nature":

Et voilà l'exemple qu'ils [les escargots] nous donnent. Saints, ils font œuvre d'art de leur vie [...] 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, à leur œuvre. Rien de disproportionné —d'autre part— à leur être physique. Rien qui ne lui soit nécessaire (Ponge, 1967: 54).

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13 | In "Des raison d'écrire", Ponge would once again refer to the "man-mollusc" although, this time, its words would not be a "secretion", but its blood: "O hommes! Informes mollusques, foule qui sort dans les rues [...]. Vous n'avez pour demeure que la vapeur commune de votre véritable sang: les paroles" (Ponge, 1967: 162-163).

14 | Ponge frequently took a lesson from each one of the objects that he described; a lesson on how best to adapt oneself to life: "chacun de mes objets, qui persiste dans la vie, propose une façon d'être, donc une morale, donc un art de vivre. Si la morale c'est l'art de vivre. Il y a une morale de l'escargot, une morale de l'huître, etc." (Ponge, 2002: 1431).

In addition, occasionally, springing from the idea that there should be no distance between the life of an individual and his work, came a wish formulated by Ponge that his writings should be read as a kind of autobiographic novel, an idea that he took from the title of a work by Ungaretti “il y a un très beau titre de Ungaretti pour ses poèmes: *Vita d'un Uomo*... et, en effet, pour un artiste... la vie et l'œuvre ne font qu'un” (Ponge, 1970: 106)¹⁵.

Both the *shell* and the snails testify to this symbiosis between art and life, given that the protective shell will live on – in the guise of the literary production of an author – for a much longer than the individual: “cette coquille, partie de leur être, est en même temps œuvre d'art, monument. Elle, demeure plus longtemps qu'eux” (Ponge, 1967: 54). Snails, hence, would be a suitable example for man, and more specifically for writers; for this reason the text that is dedicated to their description concludes with two very clear sentences; the first, “les grandes pensées viennent du cœur. Perfectionne-toi moralement et tu feras de beaux vers”, is a variant on Quintilian's classic definition of the *orator*: “*Vir bonus dicendi peritus*” (*Institutio*, XII, I, I); and the second, “connais-toi donc d'abord toi-même. Et accepte-toi tel que tu es” pays clear homage to “*Gnosti te auton*”, from the frontispiece of the temple of Apolo in Delfos, one of the paradigmatic mottos of Greek thought. As such, as Pellet notes, “Ponge est à la recherche d'une écriture éthique, qui porte en elle-même sa fin et sa justification. L'œuvre doit être, comme la coquille des mollusques, le produit naturel d'une nécessité interne, la matérialisation de l'activité d'une vie” (Pellet, 1992: 55). These ethics, that brings forth a *leçon* from each of the objects, defines for us very clearly the *ethos* of the poet. Similarly, another manner of defining a subject through the object is through assimilation, by the lyrical voice, of the characteristic of the object that is described in the poem. An excellent example can be found in the text dedicated to *La Seine*, where the lyric subject demonstrates a desire to mix with the liquid material of its subject in order to take on its fluidity: “je suis assuré de ne cesser de couler en toi, cher ami [...]; pourquoi coulerais-je encore, sinon pour m'étendre et me relâcher enfin?” (Ponge, 1999: 297). In other cases quite the opposite occurs; instead of trying to embody the object, the subject endows it with human characteristics. Curiously, this phenomenon can be noted in other of Ponge's texts dedicated to water, “De l'eau”. The subject confers upon this element the human emotion of humiliation for the fact that, in its liquid state, it is a substance that flows freely across any and every surface: “elle s'effondre sans cesse, renonce à chaque instant à toute forme, ne tend qu'à s'humilier [...]. On pourrait presque dire que l'eau est folle, à cause de cet hystérique besoin de n'obéir qu'à sa pesanteur” (Ponge, 1967: 61). For this reason, despite his focus on objects and not on people, Ponge was not infrequently branded an anthropocentrist (Ponge, 1970: 110-113). It must be made clear, however, that the humanisation of the objects can only be seen

NOTES

15 | In 1969 a collection of Ungaretti's entire poetic production was published: *Vita d'un uomo. Tutte le poesie*. In 1974, year years after his death, an edited version of all his critical prose was produced: *Vita d'un uomo. Saggi e interventi*. But what stood out for Ponge was that Ungaretti was the only *subjectivist* poet worthy of admiration: “Gonflée d'un sentiment profond, l'une des seules (peut-être la seule) poésie subjective supportable —et non seulement supportable— mais exemplaire et admirable [...]. Sans recours à aucune transcendance, ni à aucun système idéologique encombrant. Sans idéologie. [...] Sans recours à la chanson au chant. Sans autre recours, du point de vue du rythme, qu'à celui des battements du cœur” (Ponge, 2002: 1340-1341). In fact Ponge translated some of Ungaretti's text into French, and in his turn, Ungaretti produced Italian version of Ponge's poems. For more on this question, see Violante (1998).

as a consequence of his *parti pris*, since, given that “la description ne peut passer que par le langage fait pour l’homme” the appearance of “la tendance à l’animisme ou l’anthropomorphisme” was inevitable (Rieu, 1986: 97).

On the other hand, this trace or trail of the subject in the object – or in the text about the object – can also be linked with the act of *naming* things, which was so characteristic of Ponge; the poet aspired to a linguistic ideal which could be assimilated into the naturalist thesis of *Cratylus* in the dialogue penned by Plato. Indeed, one of the objectives that Ponge put forward was that the names of things should look like the things that they designate; a correlation based on resemblance which, in his opinion, probably took an important role in the original naming of all things (Ponge, 1971*b*: 22-23)¹⁶. The very act of naming, indeed, must involve the subject that is being named:

si la chose ne peut être que la chose-pour-l’homme-en-tant-qu’elle-est-dit, l’entreprise de nomination ne concerne plus la chose mais la subjectivité qui est en contact avec elle. La nomination rend alors compte de notre être dans le monde, explore notre subjectivité dans ses réactions envers le plus de situations étrangères possibles (le plus d’objets possibles), qui façonnent notre *être en avant*, enrichissent notre subjectivité (Rieu, 1986: 109).

Therefore, since the text is the space for the dissemination of the subject, and given the importance that Ponge placed upon the naming of things, Derrida claimed that Ponge’s entire production could be seen as an overspill of his signature, the “débordement de sa signature”¹⁷. Because of this overspill caused by the “spongistique pharmacopoétique” of the poet – the “Ponge-éponge” – according to Derrida, the works also become the signature of “la chose même, c’est-à-dire, signature d’autre chose” (since, let us remember, “l’un n’est que l’autre différencié”), meaning that the poems become a type of *contrasignature* (Derrida, 1988: 105). Once again, the poem “De l’eau” corroborates this hypothesis; the subject meddles in the text, leaving its trail or trace (“L’eau *m’échappe, me file entre les doigts*” [Text in italics is ours]), so does the object itself leave its own: “elle [the water] échappe à toute définition, mais laisse dans mon esprit et sur ce papier [the paper one which the poem is physically written down] des traces, des traces informes” (Ponge, 1967: 63): *traces* which can only be the writing itself, the space where the object is written down.

The exact same thing occurs in the text “Les Hirondelles ou dans le style des Hirondelles” (it should be noted that the word *style* in the title does not refer only to *writing style*, but also to *stylo* as an instrument of writing – the “stylographic pen”, the quill, or *la plume*). In this case, the birds are the true *plumes*, who, with the inky sky, sign the space, and write for themselves: “Hirondelle... Plume acérée, trempée dans

NOTES

16 | Indeed the act of naming was, for Ponge, of fundamental importance: “Sans doute suffit-il de *nommer*... d’une certaine manière”; (Ponge, 1981: 167); “Il s’agit de la nomination de choses du monde sensible” (Ponge, 1965: 137), y de ahí que su poética pueda considerarse *cratilliana*. For more, see our previous work (Capllonch, 2011).

17 | During the conference in Cerisy that was dedicated to Ponge, Derrida was questioned on the importance that he conferred on this concept of the signature. On this question he insisted on the unique aspect of proper nouns, in relation to their meaning: “On rencontre alors le problème du nom propre, en tant que vocable, appellation, la question de sa place dans le système de la langue. Un nom propre comme aléa devrait ne rien signifier, devrait être une référence pure. Mais comme c’est un vocable pris dans un réseau linguistique, ça commence toujours à signifier. Le sens contamine le non-sens” (Derrida, 1977: 146). In fact, Derrida himself often engaged in wordgames with the name of the poet, considering it something of a marriage of words *Francis et Ponge*. “Francis et Ponge forment un couple hétérosexuel harmonieux. Francis tranche par sa virilité, il introduit la décision dans l’indécidable éponge, et Ponge la féminité —l’épouse— en prend son parti” (Derrida, 1977: 140). Other critics have also highlighted the singularity of the poet’s name, showing the same interest in names that Ponge himself showed. Jean (1986: 38) for example, noted that the name *Francis Ponge* is a “curieux mélange d’éponge et de pierre ponce”; after all, both sponges and stones are abundant in Ponge’s texts. However, the poet himself said the following about the name

l'encre bleue-noire tu t'écris vite! ” ; what is more, in their nests they are waiting for their young, who are nothing more than *short words*: “les mots piaillent: la famille famélique des petits mots...” (Ponge, 2003: 164-165).

The expression of the poet is once more embodied in the image of “Le Lézard” (Ponge, 2003: 83-87); the small reptile who, forever advancing along a stone wall – the blank page – suddely stops (“Arrêt brusque”), and changes direction, just as does the subject who, in that instant, appears in the text in order to announce a change of focus (that is to say, a change in the direction of the linguistic definition of the description of the lizard): “Il se prolonge. Profitons-en; changeons de point de vue”. This creature who is forever appearing and dissapearing through the cracks in the wall, “toujours cherchant furtivement sa route”, will undertake this route, well supplied with “arguments, de ressort dialectique”, since his weapon can be none other than his tongue or *langue* (“une langue très longue et fouchue”), and at the end of the text (literarly written with the tongue – or *langue* – of the reptile), in case any reader had become distracted, Ponge states that this wall is representative of a page; a page on which the poetic concience of *le lézard* becomes visible: “un petit train de pensées grises, —lequel circule ventre à terre et rentre volontiers dans les tunnels de l'esprit”.

Finally, in one of the pieces from the series *Le Soleil placé en abîme* we see how the object can become the writing itself. Here the *soleil*, once it has emerged from the *horizon du texte*, follows its trajectory until arrives at its zenith – the title of the poem – before once again becoming hidden at the conclusion of the written text. This is why this section is entitled “Le Soleil titre la nature”, since the sun gives a name to nature as if nature was its text:

[Le soleil] il paraît à l'horizon du texte, s'incorporant un instant à sa première ligne, dont il se détache d'ailleurs aussitôt. [...] S'élevant peu à peu, il gagne alors au zénith la situation exacte de titre, et tout alors est juste, tout se réfère à lui selon des rayons égaux en intensité et en longueur. Mais dès lors il décline peu à peu, vers l'angle inférieur droit de la page, et quand il franchit la dernière ligne... [il replonge] dans l'obscurité et le silence (Ponge, 2003: 158).

Consequently, as in the rest of the examples, this object, about which one writes, is the counterpoint to the subject, which is projected through the object. Hence, although Ponge as an individual places himself outside the text, he nonetheless remains within, leaving the trace or trail of his absence – as a sign, indeed – which allows us to construct,- or rather, reconstruct – his *persona*. We can see, hence, these object-based poetics in no way diminish the lyric subject that enunciates them, since, through various channels (from linguistic tools like deixis to creation strategies such as antropocentrism), the

NOTES

of an artist and its relationship with his works: “On ne reconnaîtra plus grand-chose sinon... nos initiales briller comme épingles ferrées sur un monument de toile” (Ponge, 1967: 110). Indeed, the initiales of Francis Ponge can even be found in the titles of some of his works, for example, *La Fabrique du Pré* (1971).

ethos remains present, or can be reconstructed. It is possible that Ponge's approach – a focus on things – was simply “una pregunta por el sujeto —no hay objeto sin sujeto— siempre aplazada, siempre rehusada incluso, pero no por ello menos presente y nítida” (Casado, 2007: 14). Consequently, we find ourselves disagreeing with the opinion of Hamburger, who calls for the exclusion of Pongian poetics from the genre of lyric enunciation; even in Ponge's work the enunciative object is drawn towards the domain of the enunciative subject. Everything that is said about the object by the subject is simply the result of his experience with the object in question, without which the subject itself could not define its own identity, since this occurs in the tactile space which separates humans and things – the space of difference where, in short, the individual becomes conscious of himself. Therefore, although Ponge chose to describe objects from his daily surroundings in order to remove himself from his own creation, this rhetoric strategy did nothing but turn him into a true object of his poetics; his *parti pris*, indeed, was revealed to be *prise de parole*, and every *prise de parole* always provides us with the image of a subject.

Toute prise de parole implique la construction d'une image de soi. À cet effet, il n'est pas nécessaire que le locuteur trace son portrait, détaille ses qualités ni même qu'il parle explicitement de lui. Son style, ses compétences langagières et encyclopédiques, ses croyances implicites suffisent à donner une représentation de sa personne. Délibérément ou non, le locuteur effectue ainsi dans son discours une présentation de soi (Amossy, 1999: 9).

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