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POINTS OF PASSAGE:

An Exploration of the Theme of the Threshold in the Poetry of Jacques Réda, Jean-Claude Renard, Pierre Oster, Philippe Jaccottet and Alain Bosquet

by

Ingrid Harley (née Johnston)

Thesis re-submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Trinity College Dublin, May 2003
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DECLARATION

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May 2003
ABSTRACT

This thesis proposes an investigation of contemporary and near-contemporary French poetry and an exploration of the poetic imagination, using a thematic approach based on a Jungian/Bachelardian concept of imaginary symbolism. I have chosen the theme of the threshold as a way into the poet’s imagination for, whether portrayed in terms of a physical, temporal or spiritual entity, it is a recurring theme and motif throughout contemporary poetry. However, despite the prevalence of the liminal image in contemporary French poetry, there is remarkably little published material concerning this theme and this thesis is an attempt to redress this imbalance in some small measure.

In the introduction, I demonstrate that alterity has been an overriding preoccupation with modern poets and the way in which this preoccupation is commonly expressed through the theme of the threshold. I then outline the principal ways in which the threshold is represented in contemporary poetry and the value of a liminal thematic approach to poetry criticism.

In the five subsequent chapters of the thesis, I employ a thematic analysis of the poetry of Jacques Réda, Jean-Claude Renard, Pierre Oster, Philippe Jaccottet and Alain Bosquet. Basing my research on the evidence found within the texts, I select the most salient examples from each of the poet’s work in order to illustrate the liminal preoccupation that each of the poet’s displays. Starting from the most concrete representations of the threshold, I examine liminal frameworks that range from the transcendental to the linguistic and the gradations therein.

In the conclusion, I outline the main patterns of liminal representation that have emerged from the texts and attempt to determine the value of the threshold image as means of reading contemporary French poetry.
INTRODUCTION

'La poésie est l'expérience d'un questionnement'

Within the poetry published in France over recent decades one finds a broad sweep of poetic styles, subject matters and philosophical positions. In contrast to previous centuries, when the formal rules governing the poetic form had, for the most part, been closely adhered to, poets throughout the twentieth century challenged simultaneously the perimeters that define the stylistic requirements and the imaginative content of poetry. The subsequent diversity is the fruit of a poetic revolution (born of Rimbaud, Baudelaire and other precursors) that flourished throughout the last century, in which the poet explored this new-found creative freedom. Concurrently over the years, an increased interest in contemporary issues and a rejection of versification led to a diminished investment in classical rhetoric and gave rise to a burgeoning range within the genre that has continued to expand up to the present day. However, as the variety of poetic voices in France has diversified and fragmented and many of the traditional rules governing form and content have been reconsidered, there has been a decrease in the poetry-reading population. Thus it would seem that this creative exploration on the part of poets has led to a certain measure of confusion amongst the reading public, as contemporary poetry has earned itself a generally accredited reputation for often being impenetrable. This thesis proposes a

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1 Roger Little remarks that 'in France, poetry had become indissociably equated with verse during the centuries up to the early nineteenth', in The Shaping of Modern French Poetry (Manchester: Carcanet Press, 1995), p.10.

2 Jean-Michel Espitallier, contemporary poet and co-editor of the Java revue, describes contemporary poetry as 'un genre accusé d'à peu près tous les maux: hermétisme chic, cérébralité ennuyeuse, froideur hautaine, inactualité' this statement in his introduction to 'La Nouvelle Poésie française', Magazine Littéraire, 396 (mars 2001).
themetic study as a means of countering this perceived impenetrability and of facilitating a better understanding of contemporary French poetry.

Critical theories over recent decades have exposed the innate problematic with language, challenging both Platonic metaphysical assumptions and the Aristotelean assertion that a word can convey the unmediated expression of something non-linguistic. As a result, language’s role as a natural, transparent medium through which a reader may grasp a solid unified Truth or Reality has been repudiated and instead it is regarded as a system within other systems and subjective processes. The author, having been stripped of all metaphysical status, is no longer perceived as being a priest-like figure expressing Truth. Rather, he is the location where language and references cross and re-cross, and it is the reader who imbues the text with significance. As a result, in Barthesian terms, "l’unité d’un texte n’est pas dans son origine, mais dans sa destination" and therefore "le Texte n’est pas coexistence de sens, mais passage, traversée; il ne peut donc relever d’une interprétation, même libérale, mais d’une explosion, d’une dissémination."

The critical and sociological shift in the perception of the text have had particular ramifications on poetry, a genre that formerly had inextricable associations with expressions of metaphysical truth and revelatory experience. Poetry, a genre that was previously regarded as a romantic space of literature and the grounds for understanding being and culture, is now seen more in terms of a general plane where identity, origin and truth are multiple assemblages. On the whole, contemporary poetry exposes the complications and simultaneity of life without necessarily offering interpretation or embellishment. As Deguy states:

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3 This is argued and demonstrated particularly effectively in Roland Barthes, S/Z (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1970).
6 Barthes, Essais Critiques IV, p.73.
La poésie est l’expérience d’un questionnement. [...] La poésie ouvre l’existence à son être-en-question(s) – «sans réponses». Qu’est-ce qu’être ici, comment y être «vraiment». La passion et la puissance figurative de la poésie portent à l’éclairissement de questions l’aider, le doulour, l’œuvreur, le désirer, le donner, le perdre... Elle met en relation les choses entre elles. 

While these developments in poetry and critical theory have led to a great deal of stimulating debate, they have also highlighted the problematic nature of what was previously regarded as the relatively straightforward process of critical classification and interpretation. Consequently, the reader is faced with the vastly diverse range of contemporary poetry with perhaps only the vaguest of notions of a helpful way in which to approach the texts. Moreover, the lack of obvious stylistic or imaginative cohesiveness within contemporary poetry renders it all the more difficult for the reader to execute an intelligent reading of the texts in terms of general themes and approaches. It is one of the chief aims of this study to demonstrate a useful model of reading contemporary French poetry and to bring some light to bear on a form of literature that is commonly regarded as opaque.

Given the panoply of current poetic voices in France, one can make relatively few overarching statements about contemporary French poetry as a whole. In sharp contrast to movements such as the Romantics, the Symbolists or the Surrealists that were prevalent in previous generations, on the whole poetry over recent decades has eluded broad classification or pigeonholing. Some of the great poets to publish in France in the past fifty years, such as Saint-John Perse, André Frénaud, Yves Bonnefoy and Lorand Gaspar, clearly illustrate the breadth of stylistic expression alone within contemporary poetry. As a contemporaneous body of work, poetry written in the latter half of the twentieth century does not seem to say anything cohesive on an ideological level. Rather, scepticism and conviction, materialism and spiritualism, pragmatism and complexity co-exist and interchange, not only from poet to poet but even from poem to poem.

As literature as a whole underwent great innovations and experimentation during the twentieth century, so the work of poets such as Francis Ponge and Paul...
Queneau testify to the innovative work within the poetic genre. Nonetheless, on the whole, it would be reasonable to claim that poets in more recent decades have produced work that is perhaps far less obviously experimental than earlier movements with such as Surrealism and Absurdism. While displaying a great variety, contemporary poets as a group seem to be less preoccupied with challenging the stylistic and linguistic boundaries of the genre than their predecessors. Rather, their poetry, in style and content, tends to focus both on everyday events and metaphysical exploration, as a means of negotiating an identity in a world. Thus, there are poets such as Yves Bonnefoy, René Char, Michel Deguy and Henri Michaux (to name but a few) all producing work that centres around explorations of identity, belonging and truth, however relative these concepts may be.

‘Interrogation de l’énigme du monde. exploration de l’intime étrangeté du moi’

Since Baudelaire, the philosophic dualistic tradition of Descartes and Pascal has continued to run as a motif throughout French poetry, contributing to what Jean-Pierre Richard refers to as ‘l’expérience générique de la poésie moderne […] celle, double, de l’émerveillement et du conflit[.]’

This ‘caractère dialectique ou contrastant de la mentalité synthétique’ that pervades so much of twentieth-century poetry has been the rich subject of a great deal of critical attention, from studies in texts from post-colonial to feminist writers. While the linguistic and thematic expression of these explorations has manifested itself in a multitude of ways, nevertheless many poets display a deep interest in alterity and l’inconnu (whether this be defined in geographical or metaphysical terms).

Rather than specifically stylistic or idealistic, this awareness of otherness seems to impinge on all aspects of poetic expression and inform the modern imagination:

10 In this thesis, the term ‘alterity’ is to be understood as ‘fait d’être un autre, caractère de ce qui est un autre’, *Le Grand Robert de la langue française*, ed. by Alain Rey, 2nd edn, 9 vols (Paris: Le Robert, 1985), I, p.280. s.v. *altérité*. Similarly, l’inconnu is ‘ce qui est inconnu, ignoré (quelles que soient les formes, les causes et le domaine de cette ignorance)’, *Le Grand Robert*, III, p.289.
[...] il semble que les poètes contemporains privilégient le plus souvent dans leur pratique et dans leur réflexion le pôle de l’altérité: pour eux la poésie se définit notamment comme interrogation de l’énigme du monde, exploration de l’intime étrangeté du moi, confrontation du langage à ce qui le conteste, dialogue avec autrui...[.]

As the poet ventures ‘au fond de l’Inconnu pour trouver du nouveau!’¹² his exploration is often expressed in what Jean-Pierre Richard refers to as ‘des couples d’antinomies concrètes: proche et lointain, instantané et durable, ouvert et clos, expansif et replié, superficiel et profond, opaque et transparent, obscur et lumineux’.¹³ This suggests an inherent awareness, not only of l’autre, but of a force that both links and divides the contrasting elements within his imaginative framework.¹⁴ In the contemporary poetic imagination, negotiations of identity, belonging and truth often appear to be intrinsically linked to an underlying awareness of and fascination with ‘l’autre côté si proche’¹⁵, where the poem is ‘la figure privilégiée de l’altérité.’¹⁶ This fascination with ‘le pôle de l’altérité’ seems to be so widespread and have so many diverse forms of expression that it could be said to be one of the few unifying themes of contemporary poetry.

‘L’Autre, c’est celui ou celle qu’on dit Autre’

As we will see in the following study, the term ‘alterity’ (from the Latin alter) incorporates two main elements that emerge repeatedly in the work of different contemporary poets. Firstly, as an imaginative concept, alterity acts as a pole of reference and therefore it can only be understood in terms of opposition. That is to say, there is no l’autre without l’un or le je, and thus alterity is dependent on both a subject and a referent. Secondly, often this process is not simply a neutral form of categorisation but rather, as Umberto Eco highlights, it stems from the

¹³ Jean-Pierre Richard, Onze études sur la poésie moderne, p.7.
¹⁴ The term l’autre will be used in this thesis to refer to that which lies beyond the self (‘ce qui n’est pas le sujet; Le Grand Robert, I, p.739).
perception of reality divided up into normality and divergences from that reality.\(^\text{17}\) In broad terms, alterity can be most succinctly defined as that which exists beyond the self and textual representations of l'autre can often reveal that this otherness carries with it threatening associations in the poet’s imagination. As the work of the poets in this study demonstrates, poetic alterity combines both these aspects, where and thus 'le poème [...] se construit autour d’une irritation provoquée par la non-assimilabilité de l’Autre'.\(^\text{18}\)

As an expression of the relationship between self and other, the rhetoric of alterity may be presented in myriad different forms, for 'l’altérité n’est pas un attribut qui puisse être fixé objectivement. Elle dépend d’une position, d’un acte de poser. L’Autre, c’est celui ou celle qu’on dit Autre, qu’on fait Autre en le disant.'\(^\text{19}\) Therefore, one of the main difficulties that the critic faces when exploring representations of l’autre lies in its highly non-specific nature and the consequent range and diversity of its possible poetic manifestations. Indeed, cataloguing possible signifiants of alterity in the work of a number of poets would encompass such a range of representations that it would arguably be of little use to the reader who is looking for a useful model for reading contemporary French poetry. Therefore, in order to ascertain the extent to which alterity is an underlying preoccupation in the contemporary poetic imagination, it may be helpful to focus our attention on a specific thematic representation of l’autre.

As a theme and motif, alterity is frequently conveyed in representations of the conflicting forces governing l’intérieur and l’extérieur, le profane and le sacré, le je and l’autre or l’ici and l’ailleurs.\(^\text{20}\) The nexus of this conflict can be located at the point where the subject meets that which is other. Therefore, by identifying an image that contains within it the notion of confrontation between le je and l’autre, one can then use it in textual analysis to ascertain the extent to which alterity appears to inform the contemporary poetic imagination. This thesis

\(^{17}\) For an illuminating study on the processes of exclusion through categorisation as 'other', I refer the reader to Umberto Eco's *The Role of the Reader: Explorations in the Semiotics of Texts* (London: Hutchinson, 1981).


\(^{19}\) Éric Gans, 'L’Autre originaire de la poésie', p.47.

\(^{20}\) Where l’ailleurs is 'le lieu où l'on ne tient pas, où l'on ne se tient pas (l'opposé à l'ici), avec ce qu’il comporte de connaissances nouvelles et d'enseignement', *Le Grand Robert*, 1, p.214. Edouard Glissant remarks on the link between l’ailleurs and the imagination when he notes 'ce mouvement
proposes the image of the threshold as a viable cipher for alterity for, as I will seek to demonstrate in the following chapters, its presence in a text denotes both an awareness of l'autre and the tension that this awareness can also instigate. The literal definition of the threshold is the ‘dalle ou pièce qui forme la partie inférieure de la baie d'une porte’ and the ‘entrée (d'une maison, d'une bâtisse); partie du sol qui entoure la porte d'entrée’. The threshold is the physical boundary that delineates one spatial context from another, signifying simultaneously the point of passage and separation between l'intérieur and l'extérieur. In this way, it represents a point of contact, marking the point of transition between an inner and an outer space. Metaphorically, the threshold is also defined as being the ‘passage à un niveau supérieur (dans une évolution), a definition that contains within it the notion of transformation and progression. Whether used literally or metaphorically, the threshold is not merely an abstract object but rather it is entirely referential and therefore, through a thematic study of textual representations of the threshold, the poet's perception of alterity will necessarily emerge.

‘Les images sortent du propre fonds humain’

Over the course of literary criticism, the terms ‘image’ and ‘theme’ have been used to convey such a broad range of concepts that their meanings have become blurred and often uncertain, and therefore demand clarification. The usage of the term ‘image’, for example, can extend from a mental picture to a metaphor, simile or symbol. For the purposes of this thesis, I have employed ‘image’ as that which is ‘used to refer to figurative language in general or to those elements of literary works to which the word CONCRETE rather than abstract seems suited, and which appear to have a certain sensuousness’. That is to say that the representations of the threshold chosen from the poems for this study must be sufficiently evocative so that they cause the reader 'sensuously to experience the

21 Le Grand Robert, VIII, pp. 741-42, s.v. seuil.
22 Le Grand Robert, VIII, p.742.
taste, feel, smell, sound or appearance of something strongly and in a particularized way.\textsuperscript{24} In addition, the term 'image' connotes a spontaneously expressive significant indicative of a spiritual, psychological, intellectual or metaphysical reality.\textsuperscript{25} It is important to stress that this study regards the repeated use of an image as a means of allowing the poet to give voice to his imaginative vision, 'not as a source of mere ornamental imagery, but as a means of knowing the self and the universe'.\textsuperscript{26}

For the purposes of this study, Roger Fowler's definition of 'theme' is the most apposite, where:

\[
 [...] a theme is not usually thought of as the occasion of a work of art, but rather a branch of the subject which is indirectly expressed through the recurrence of certain events, images or symbols [...] the term is sensitive and useful precisely because it admits of degrees of abstract reference [...] We think of it as a line or thread running through a work, linking features which are un- or otherwise related.\textsuperscript{27}
\]

My work is based on the Bachelardian premise that threads or themes can be traced running through a work by means of noting the repeated use of images that emerge from the text. Accepting the Jungian/Bachelardian concept of imaginary symbolism where 'the practice of art is a psychological activity'\textsuperscript{28} and 'les images sortent du propre fonds humain',\textsuperscript{29} this study provides a possible reading of contemporary poetry by means of exploring the threshold images employed by a number of poets. It is the premise of this thesis that, as the reader engages with the texts and analyses them on a thematic, linguistic and stylistic level, the emerging patterns also reveal something of the imaginative scaffold on which the texts are constructed. Thus, the repeated use of certain signifiants indicates patterns of images that may connote underlying themes in the poems, where

\textsuperscript{24} Hawthorn, p.169.
\textsuperscript{25} For further discussion on the term 'image', I refer the reader to P.N. Furbank, \textit{Reflections on the Word 'Image'}, (London: Secker & Warburg, 1970).
‘l’image poétique, dans sa nouveauté, ouvre un avenir du langage’. These in turn point to the broader preoccupations of the poet and ultimately offer the reader a point of access to the poetic imagination.

This thematic critical approach is perhaps particularly valuable in the study of contemporary poetry, where the hugely diverse range of styles and interests may obfuscate common underlying patterns amongst poets. As the following chapters will make evident, the threshold image does not simply convey physical and metaphysical perceptions of alterity, but forms an intrinsic part of the poet’s imaginative framework. The threshold can be determinate, being so central to the poet’s expression through the text that it structures the work around itself and in this way determines the final form of the work. Therefore, the threshold can be seen both in terms of an image and a theme, for it combines referentiality and metaphor, while also acting as a springboard to the investigation of poetic structure. This thematic study can therefore also be seen in terms of a threshold into the poetic imagination for, as an image, it is not confined to the purely metaphorical, but informs the very structure of a poem.

The thematic approach chosen for this thesis follows in the critical footsteps of Gaston Bachelard, Gilbert Durand and Jean-Pierre Richard. Concurring with Durand that ‘c’est bien l’imaginaire qui apparaît comme recours suprême de la conscience’, this study is based on the supposition that the poet’s imagination acts as a structuring dynamic in the work, revealing itself in the poems with a large degree of homogeneity. This approach also presumes a Bachelardian

31 This link between the image and structure of a poem is described by Broome and Chesters, who refer to ‘the use of the extended image to underpin the whole structural framework of a poem’, p.45.
32 For the purpose of this study, I will be employing Gilbert Durand’s definition of structure as ‘une forme transformable, jouant le rôle de protocole motivateur pour tout un groupement d’images’, in *Les Structures anthropologiques de l’imaginaire*, p.66. Durand provides a thorough investigation of the imagination by means of thematic criticism. Adopting a Bachelardian approach, Durand’s book carries out a comprehensive study on ‘Le Régime diurne de l’image’, ‘Le Régime nocturne de l’image’ and ‘Éléments pour une fantastique transcendantale’.
33 The work of such critics as Roger Little, John D. Price and Jean-Pierre Jossua show that the value of an approach via the threshold has persisted in more recent decades.
35 That is to say that the poet’s imagination is his vital attribute, “la reine des facultés” as Baudelaire said, a kind of sixth sense which commands and binds together all the others’, Broome and Chesters, *The Appreciation of Modern French Poetry*, p.39.
belief in the coherence between significiant and signifié, as the poet’s unity of thought and the symbolic representation in the poem are presented in terms of a perpetual refinement of the constant dialectic within the sign. In Heideggerian terms, I will be tracing the patterns of structures of imagery that are revealed through the interrelation of poet’s Denken (thinking) and Dichten (poetising). My study began by a close reading of the texts, using all the writings available to me (as listed in the bibliography), looking for representations of the threshold and seemingly closely related signifiants. After some analysis, a variety of images and patterns emerged within each group of texts, indicating something of the imaginative framework from which the poems have been crafted. For the purposes of this thesis, I have selected what I have deemed to be the most salient examples from each body of texts, in order to illustrate the various threshold representations to be found within each of the five poets’ work. Given the complexity of the threshold image and its mapping within the landscape of contemporary French poetry, it has been not possible to detail possible evolutions of a poet across the development of his corpus. Therefore, I have focused on the primacy of threshold images, rather than their chronology. While an investigation into the chronology and evolution of the threshold image would undoubtedly prove to be most rewarding, this study has focused on the textual representations of le seuil. This limitation has been imposed upon me by the nature of this research project and by what is possible within the margins of the exercise. Nonetheless, it is hoped that this contribution to the critical studies on contemporary French poetry will enable the reader to return to the poetry with a deeper awareness and, it is greatly hoped, renewed pleasure.

‘Un mouvement de l’imagination’

This thesis traces the patterns of representation of a specific image in an attempt to understand the poetic imagination better and in this regard has been influenced by the critical work of Gaston Bachelard. His detailed and thorough investigation of literary images has contributed greatly to the field of criticism and his approach
to poetry has yielded a selection of insightful studies. As can be seen in *L’Eau et les rêves* and subsequent publications, Bachelard’s interest in literary images lies primarily in the circumstances surrounding the textual expression of those images and on ‘des attitudes irréfléchies qui commandent le travail même de la réflexion’. Bachelard based his studies on literary images in the belief that, if closely detailed, they would reveal the imaginative workings of the poet:

The Bachelardian model demands close, repeated readings of the texts in order to establish recurring patterns and motifs. In this thesis, I aim to trace the ‘mouvement de l’imagination’ of five contemporary French poets by means of a close analysis of the threshold image, where the use of the image is seen as a subjective, dynamic process. Illustrating what Bachelard terms ‘une sorte de révolution copernicienne de l’imagination’, this study will highlight the way in which the poet privileges the subjective imagination over objective perception. That is to say that l’imagination n’est pas [...] la faculté de former des images de la réalité; elle est la faculté de former des images qui dépassent la réalité, qui chantent la réalité. Also corresponding with Bachelardian theory, this study is based on the premise that an image can never be classified in absolute terms, due to the highly subjective nature of representation and interpretation. Nonetheless, it is precisely because of the highly subjective nature of a textual image that it can be a rich source of critical analysis, for it is a literary out-working of the poet’s imagination and thus it is placed at the forefront of Bachelardian critical theory.

Accepting that, as Bachelard states, 'une simple image [...] ouvre un monde', in the following chapters I will seek to prove the value of a thematic study of this kind as a point of access, or threshold, into contemporary French poetry.

‘L’ouverture infinie [...] de la conscience poétique’

This thesis has also been influenced by the methodology of Jean-Pierre Richard, whose writings gather together various examples of a particular image and rigorously analyse them in order to illustrate the central presence of a theme, or 'l’invisible architecture' of a text. By exploring the major images and themes, Richard seeks to expose the imaginative framework underpinning a given text, that is ‘l’ouverture infinie – et à la limite mortelle – de la conscience poétique’. Similarly, the following thematic study will seek to prove the existence of a 'concert thématique' running throughout a selection of contemporary French poetry, where 'un thème serait alors un principe concret d’organisation, un schème ou un objet fixes, autour duquel aurait tendance à se constituer et à se déployer un monde.' As Richard points out, a thematic study is much more than the noting of the statistical frequency of a given image, for this is itself does not always indicate relative value. Rather:

Plus importante peut-être est la valeur stratégique de thème, ou, si l’on préfère, sa qualité topologique [...] 

Le thème nous apparaît alors comme l’élément transitif qui nous permet de parcourir en divers sens toute l’étendue interne de l’œuvre, ou plutôt comme l’élément-charnière grâce auquel elle s’articule en un volume signifiant. Toute thématique relève ainsi à la fois d’une cybermétique et d’une systématique.

In line with Richard’s critical approach, this thesis will demonstrate the ways in which, within a wide range of contemporary poetic texts, repeated images reveal

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an underlying preoccupation with the theme of the threshold and how this 'élément-charnière' in turn acts as a structuring force, whereby the poetic theme reveals something of the poets' subconscious.

‘L'image concrète du seuil’

For the purposes of this thesis, I have chosen to demarcate two broad categories of threshold images for, while in no way absolute, they do help the reader to delineate the broad perimeters of a poet’s dominant perception of alterity, or liminal mentality. Throughout the following chapters, an exploration of threshold images will centre on the distinction between representations of horizontal and of vertical autres. Those poets who employ liminal representations that are linked predominantly with physical points of passage, where the threshold is portrayed as leading from one physical space to another, can be said to have an imagination that is principally horizontal in its focus. In contrast, a vertical imagination is indicated in texts that contain a preponderance of images that express the threshold in terms of point of passage upwards. In broad terms, the horizontal imagination will be one that is chiefly concerned with alterity as a physical or geographical force, whereas the vertical imagination will perceive le liminaire in terms of access to a metaphysical ailleurs. In the following chapters, we will see that patterns of representation of the liminal images enable the reader to determine both the direction in which the threshold is approached and the nature of the space on either side of the threshold. These two factors will in turn contribute towards a useful classification of the images by this horizontal/vertical distinction.

The range of threshold images examined in the following chapters will vary from the most literal and concrete forms (such as doors) to more abstract conceptions. At its most literal level, the threshold is a physical demarcation that divides two spatial contexts. It is an entry point that establishes the defining line between le dedans and le dehors, where ‘l’image concrète du seuil [...] dénote le lieu de passage du dedans – un lieu fermé, un enclos – au dehors, un espace non
plus enfermé derrière des murs, mais ouvert vers l’inconnu de l’infini.⁴⁷ As such, it delineates the edge or boundary of two separate, yet co-existing, spaces. From the recurring image of windows, reflective surfaces and doors in Mallarmé’s poems to Gaspar’s perpetual journeying, a preoccupation with ‘la jouissance d’horizontalité’⁴⁸ and with the threshold, as both a physical boundary and a point of access to a geographical ailleurs, is reflected in a great deal of modern poetry. As one would expect, the journeying act in particular is frequently represented in terms of physical (i.e. horizontal) threshold images, as the texts convey movement from one spatial context to another. The association between geographical displacement and physical thresholds may be expressed in a variety of ways, such as Jabès’ Seuil that is characterised by ‘L’absence de lieu’ and ‘de/vaines visions de voyage’⁴⁹ or Saint-John Perse’s awareness of ‘portes ouvertes sur les sables, portes ouvertes sur l’exil/Les clés aux gens du phare, et l’astre roué vif sur la pierre du seuil’.⁵⁰ In Réda’s poetry, the threshold is represented in very concrete terms, with an emphasis on real locations. Réda’s poems are peppered with references to districts and streets as he travels around the French capital and the liminal images are most chiefly expressed in the representation of doorways, windows and journeys etc. In this respect, his work is reminiscent of the Parisian urban poets such as Aragon, who believed that ‘des mythes nouveaux naissent sous chacun de nos pas’ as he sensed ‘le sentiment du merveilleux quotidien’.⁵¹

As the following chapter demonstrates, in this sense Réda’s use of liminal images reveals an imagination that works almost exclusively on the horizontal plane.

‘À toute immanence s’adjoingh une transcendance’

In general, the critical analysis of vertical images can prove more challenging than that of horizontal images, for a poet’s perception of a metaphysical autre, as reflected in the recurring textual representations of the threshold, is often less straightforward and consistent. Jean-Pierre Jossua’s study of the liminal imagination in literature is particularly helpful in this regard, as his work displays a keen sensitivity to the privileging of both spatial and spiritual thresholds in modern poetry.\(^{52}\) His understanding of the threshold image as being applicable to spatial, temporal and metaphysical contexts is based on his findings that ‘une bonne part de la littérature contemporaine vit de cerner cet indicible, de tendre vers l’autre et l’avenir inconnus, tout en les concevant de façons très diverses et avec un rapport au présent et au sensible fort différent.’\(^{53}\) This diversity is also reflected by the fact that a poet’s perception of the threshold is highly subjective (‘certains se trouvent placés sur le seuil ou la frontière par les circonstances; pour d’autres, c’est en vertu d’une nécessité intime, essentielle: ils y sont assignés’).\(^{54}\) Nevertheless, one of the common links that the fragmented impressions of contemporary poetry display is the imaginative association between an ineffable autre and the threshold and Jossua emphasises this link when he states ‘l’inconnu, le mystérieux, appelle tout naturellement un langage du seuil et de l’attente, si diverses que soient les perspectives de nos auteurs’.\(^{55}\) In the following chapters, a broad range of imaginative frameworks will be seen, as contemporary poets seek to convey ‘cet indicible’ by means of a ‘vocabulaire liminaire pour suggérer leur perpétuelle visée d’une transcendance jamais objectivée, point de fuite à la fois nécessaire et par hypothèse inatteignable’.\(^{56}\)

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\(^{52}\) Despite the remarkably scant amount of published material concerning the theme of the threshold, Jean-Pierre Jossua’s highly illuminating thematic criticism of the poetic imagination is primordial in its sensitive and detailed exploration of liminal themes and the notion of vision in primarily nineteenth-century poetry. While Jossua is specifically a religious rather than a literary critic, I refer the reader to chapter 4 entitled, ‘Sur le seuil, dans l’attente – affinités théologiques de quelques thèmes littéraires contemporains’, in *Pour une histoire religieuse de l’expérience littéraire* (Paris: Beauchesne, 1985), pp.101-181.

\(^{53}\) Jossua, p. 109.

\(^{54}\) Jossua, p. 124.

\(^{55}\) Jossua, p.117.

\(^{56}\) Jossua, p.101.
The threshold as a point of passage from a profane to a sacred space is frequently expressed in terms of movement from the horizontal to the vertical plane and denotes what Bachelard calls 'la psychologie ascensionnelle'.

Undoubtedly stemming from the traditional symbolism of heaven as being up above, many religious poets have conveyed a sense that 'toute valorisation est verticalisation' in their poems. This can be seen, for example, in Verlaine's perception of spirituality as involving movement upwards towards 'l'oubli d'ici-bas'; and in Claudel's vision of an absolute fusion of the visible (horizontal) and the invisible (vertical) in a 'monde maintenant total [...] entier des choses visibles et invisibles'. In this study, the portrayal of the threshold as a point of entry to the sacred world is exemplified in the poetry of the late Jean-Claude Renard, where there is an insistence on the vertical axis through the repeated use of spiritual terms and religious vocabulary. In this sense, Renard's poetry epitomises Bachelard's conception of the imagination, where there is an emphasis on the transcendental, the infinite and the pure ('dans le règne de l'imagination, à toute immanence s'adjoint une transcendance. [...] Dans le règne de l'imagination, l'infini est la région où l'imagination s'affirme comme imagination pure, où elle est libre et seule').

Mircea Eliade's illuminating study of representations of the profane and the sacred highlights the importance of the role of the threshold:

For a believer, the church shares in a different space from the street in which it stands. The door that opens on the interior of the church actually signifies a solution of continuity. The threshold that separates the two spaces also indicates the distance between two modes of being, the profane and the religious. The threshold is the limit, the boundary, the frontier that distinguishes and opposes two worlds – and at the same time the paradoxical place where those worlds communicate, where passage from the profane to the sacred world becomes possible.

57 Bachelard, L'Air et les songes, p.17.
58 Bachelard, L'Air et les songes, p.18.
61 Bachelard, L'Air et songes, p.12.
Eliade’s focus on the ambiguity of the threshold as both a point of access and a boundary is highly pertinent to any exploration of liminal representations in twentieth-century poetry. In the poetry of Jouve, for example, the uncertain nature of the threshold is stressed, as he portrays it as something that both unites and divides physical and spiritual existence:

Car maintenant j’ai une autre âme  
Faîte d’un autre paysage.

Dans mon désir il y avait  
Une porte que j’ai franchie,  
Un pont noir qui devient à moi,  
Mais me tient disjoint de moi.*

The ambiguity of the threshold is similarly reflected in works such as Bonnefoy’s *Dans le leurre du seuil*, 64 Jabès’ *Le Seuil, Le Sable* and in du Bouchet’s depiction of:

...seuil –  
à l’extrémité dehors – comme rapporté, lorsque j’entre, au linteau...

... sur moi trouvant, où je me sépare, et avance, appui  
− et moi ... 65

Likewise for Renard, as the chapter exploring his poetry will demonstrate his deeply-held religious convictions and adherence to the Catholic faith aligned with the poet’s use of liminal images reveals a deeply ambiguous attitude towards a spiritual autre.

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Traditionally, a poet’s sensitivity to the vertical axis would have been expressed through articulations of transcendence in poems of an overtly religious nature. Over the course of recent decades, however, the decline and dismissal of much traditional religion has meant that even the small minority of contemporary religious poets that do hold to the tenets of orthodox religion frequently struggle to reconcile their belief system with the world around them. There no longer exists a common set of fixed religious to unite society and thus:

The man whom we can with justice call ‘modern’ is solitary. He is so of necessity and at all times, for every step towards a fuller consciousness of the present removes him further from his original ‘participation mystique’ with the mass of men – from submersion in a common unconsciousness. [...] Indeed, he is completely modern only when he has come to the very edge of the world, leaving behind him all that has been discarded and outgrown, and acknowledging that he stands before a void out of which all things may grow.

Standing before a void, the contemporary poet finds himself in what Jaccottet refers to as ‘Paysages avec figures absentes’, where the previous signposts of orthodox religion are no longer there to guide him. However, it is precisely when the poet finds himself at ‘the very edge of the world’ that awareness of a metaphysical alterity may become manifest in the texts as the contemporary poetic imagination explores and expresses the void. Thus, while the terms with which the poet describes a transcendental autre have become less conventionally religious and homogeneous over the past century, awareness of a metaphysical other is resolutely present in contemporary poetry. Nicolas Castin stresses this aspect of the twentieth-century poetic imagination when he writes that ‘une vaste part de la poésie de notre siècle entre dans le monde par l’émerveillement, et

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66 Collot remarks that ‘la quête du divin dans la poésie moderne s’assortit de modalités qui l’appartiennent au recueillement heideggerien de l’Être. Depuis le détournement des dieux, le divin n’a plus de nom ni de visage’, in La Poésie moderne et la structure d’horizon, p.42.
68 This is the title of one of Jaccottet’s publications (Paris: Gallimard, 1976).
fonde sa constitution sur l'heureux constat d'une présence, d'un «être-là» sensible, antérieur à toute prédication.\(^6^9\)

Portrayal of a transcendental autre is no longer exclusively linked to traditional religious beliefs, but rather ‘l’altérité poétique pourrait être définie comme une familière étrangeté; c’est la réalité quotidienne qui, tout en restant elle-même, se révèle autre qu’on ne croyait’.\(^7^0\) This is reflected in Michaux’s ‘Grand Inexpliqué’\(^7^1\) or Bonnefoy’s ‘l’improbable [...] qui aggrave au lieu de résoudre, qui désigne l’obscur’.\(^7^2\) Similarly, Frénaud, despite the continual use of religious references in his poems, is forced to conclude that \textit{Il n’y pas de paradis}. The possibility of access to this ‘autre qu’on ne croyait’ is often conveyed in the texts through various representations of the threshold, for ‘l’inconnu, le mystérieux, appelle tout naturellement un langage du seuil et de l’attente, si diverses que soient les perspectives de nos auteurs’.\(^7^3\) From ‘La bordure chez Baudelaire’ to ‘La terrasse des princes de Rimbaud’, contemporary poetry consistently portrays a vastly broad range of perceptions of alterity through representations of ‘le seuil encore différé’.\(^7^4\) Indeed, as we will see in the following studies of Oster and Jaccottet, while neither poet chooses to express their verticalité with the strident religious conviction of Claudel or Verlaine, they

\(^6^9\) Nicolas Castin, \textit{Sens et sensible en poésie moderne et contemporaine} (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1998), p.19. This link between imaginative representations of the threshold and the metaphysical can be traced throughout a range of modern poets’ work and it is one that has received increasing (while still minimal) critical attention by some contemporary critics. Mary-Ann Caws makes the point that ‘the threshold in all its forms is the central architectural figure and the thought of the poetry of René Char [...] In a universe where extremes correspond, and dimensions cross over into one another, the image is capital’, in \textit{The Presence of René Char} ([Princeton]: Princeton University Press, 1976). Similarly, Richard’s study on Char highlights the fact that ‘tout l’effort poétique consiste en effet à démontrer ici que l’impossible est en réalité possible [...] à condition d’en interroger l’énigme par les voies de l’imagination’, Richard, \textit{Onze Études sur la poésie moderne}, p.86. Elsewhere, Claude Debon’s critical work on Lorand Gaspar’s poems states that ‘s’il est un motif obsédant de la poésie moderne, c’est bien celui du seuil et de l’absence, des trouées de la parole, de tout ce qu’elle tait, de son irréparable veuvage’, ‘“Tu es pierre...”’, in \textit{Sud: Espaces de Lorand Gaspar}, ed. Roger Little (1983), 208-21 (p.221).


\(^7^1\) Michaux, \textit{Chemins cherchés, Chemins perdus, Transgressions}, ‘Glissement’, p.142.


\(^7^3\) Jossua, p.117.


do convey their individual spirituality through a range of vertical liminal images, where ‘chaque mot est un chemin de transcendance’.76

In this study, we will also see that alterity is not restricted to physical locations or spiritual encounters. Indeed, as Lacanian theory demonstrates, an awareness of other is fundamental to the negotiation of identity, where the subject seeks confirmation of itself in the response of the Other." In Heideggerian terms, the threshold image can be an articulation of ‘the belonging together of man and being’ for it represents ‘the unabridged entry into that belonging which alone can grant a toward-each-other of man and Being, and thus a constellation of the two’.78 Representations of the threshold in poetry can provide the vehicle for this ‘toward-each-other’, whereby the poet may articulate this experience of a fuller self-realisation through interaction with l’autre. Bereft of the powerful structuring force of traditional religion, frequently the contemporary poet uses his texts as a means of understanding and interpreting the world, in a process whereby ‘le poète se sert de la poésie comme interprète’.79 Thus, for the contemporary poet, the poetry itself can provide a medium through which the poet may deconstruct and reconstruct his perception of reality. In the words of Gaspar, poetry functions as the ‘langage inaugural, langage des langages, puissance de liaison et de disjonction, de construction et de dissolution’.80 This function is particularly relevant to the poetry of Bosquet, which draws the reader's attention to the often complex relationship between the poet, the narrative subject and the reader. As this study will explore, in Bosquet’s poems le je projects himself imaginatively into a myriad of personae.81

76 Jean-Paul Sartre, Qu’est-ce que la littérature? (Paris: Gallimard, 1948), p.58.
77 The Lacanian definition of the Other being the locus from which the questions of the subject’s existence may be presented to him. For a detailed study of his theory of the discourse of the Other in psychoanalysis, I refer the reader to Jacques Lacan’s Ecrits.
81 This ability conferred on the poet is referred to by Charles Baudelaire when he describes the way in which ‘il peut à sa guise être lui-même et autrui. Comme ces âmes errantes qui cherchent un corps, il entre, quand il veut, dans le personnage de chacun’, Œuvres complètes, 2 vols (Paris: Gallimard, 1975), 1, ‘Les Foules’, p.291.
This thesis explores some of the individual interpretations and representations of le liminaire in contemporary French poetry and investigates the rhetoric of liminal negotiations as it is revealed in recurring motifs in the texts. The principal aim of this study is not simply a survey of modern French poetry but rather it is to classify, analyse and comment on the use of the threshold image in contemporary poetry. In doing so, I hope to establish the importance of the threshold as a theme and motif in contemporary poetry and to reach a greater understanding of the poetic imagination of five contrasting contemporary poets. Following the Jungian understanding of the imagination and the Bachelardian tradition of critical analysis, this study uses the theme of the threshold as a means of access, or threshold, into the imagination of contemporary French poets. It seeks to establish that the polysemous representations of the threshold provide the basis for a useful critical model and that a thematic study of this kind is both a valid and helpful way of characterising the texts and of approaching contemporary French poetry.

The corpus chosen for this study is restricted to contemporary French poetry or, more precisely, poetry from the latter half of the twentieth-century. The poets were selected specifically both to highlight the broad span of poetic voices in contemporary French poetry and to illustrate the extent of the application of a thematic study such as this. My work examines a selection of poets from the same generation whose writings display the widest variety across the modern range. It focuses on five poets (Jacques Réda, Jean-Claude Renard, Philippe Jaccottet, Pierre Oster and Alain Bosquet) all of whom have produced a considerable corpus over the past fifty years and thus provide material that is sufficient in quantity for a study of this depth. While all five poets have been widely acknowledged for their contribution to contemporary poetry, remarkably little in-depth analysis has been carried out on these particular poets' works as compared to some of the

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82 Where the motif is a 'thematic unit which occurs in various works', Boris Tomashevsky, 'Thematics', in Literary Theory: an anthology, ed. by Julie Rivkin & Michael Ryan (Oxford: Blackwell press, 1999), pp.24-27 (p.25).

83 The reader is asked to note that the absence of any female poets in this study is primarily due to the lack of extensive publications by any female poet from the literary generation studied here. For a comprehensive anthology of modern French poetry by women, I refer the reader to Elles: A
The notable exceptions to this general trend are Jean-Pierre Jossua, Roger Little and John D. Price, all of whom exhibit a keen interest in representations of le liminaire in the poetic imagination. While the title does not obviously refer to poetry, Jossua’s *Pour une histoire religieuse de l’expérience littéraire* does carry out a detailed exploration of the liminal representations that are to be found in Hugo’s poetry, while also giving an overview of the imaginative link between the threshold and religious belief that in contemporary literature. John D. Price’s unpublished thesis also adopts a thematic critical approach as he examines the theme of the threshold in a number of modern poets. His investigation of the poetry of Valéry, Jouve, Frénaud, Bonnefoy and Saint-John Perse offers a detailed analysis of the texts while also arguing the case for a moving threshold within the poets’ imaginative framework. Just as these two critics have demonstrated their interest in the threshold in individual studies, Roger Little’s recurrent fascination with the theme of the threshold is reflected in the broad sweep of his literary interests. In particular, I refer the reader to Roger Little’s *Études sur Saint-John Perse, Rimbaud: Illuminations* (London: Grant & Cutler, 1983) and *André Frénaud: entre l’interrogation et le vide* (Marseille: Sud, 1989).

comments about their work have been taken into consideration and it has been my intention to reflect the poets’ individual paradigms in my analysis. As is apparent in the following chapters, these poets are not academics and they display strikingly little interest in current literary or critical schools of thought. Consequently, they prove persistently elusive in terms of critical categorisation and, while varying greatly, the work of each of the poets contains difficulties, ambiguities and contradictions. To a large extent, therefore, an analysis of liminal representations will necessarily be problematic for, as a signifié, the threshold represents a dual-faceted reality and encapsulates much of the uncertainty that an encounter with l’autre frequently seems to elicit. This thesis will explore the multiplicities and ambiguities within a wide variety of representations of the threshold and the ways in which the poets reconcile themselves to this ambiguity, often making a virtue of its potential. While undoubtedly other critical approaches would prove highly rewarding, the usefulness of the threshold image in thematic criticism remains undiminished. The following conclusions are the result of a close analysis of the poetry, while also acknowledging and accepting that, like the image of the threshold itself, poetry will always contain ambiguities that cannot, and perhaps should not, be resolved with ease. Moreover, this study acknowledges that the possibilities of a literary work are never exhausted and that, as Jung states, ‘for all its apparent obviousness it does not explain itself and is always ambiguous. [...] It presents an image in much the same way as nature allows a plant to grow, and it is up to us to draw conclusions’.  

The individual style and artistic expression of these poets who are broadly contemporaneous with each other varies greatly, ranging from the down-to-earth urbanity of Réda to the ethereal otherworldliness of Oster. Nevertheless, despite the diversity of the texts, this study seeks to reveal that an awareness of alterity in each of the poet’s work is conveyed through a variety of liminal representations. My detailed analysis of the poetry begins in chapter one with the most concrete, or horizontal, representation of the threshold, as is found in Réda’s work. Then in chapter two, I examine Renard’s portrayal of an exclusively transcendental threshold that focuses very much on the vertical plane. In chapters three, four and five, I will explore the rather more complex portrayals of liminal representations

87 Jung, The Spirit in Man, Art and Literature, p.104.
to be found in the poetry of Oster, Jaccottet and Bosquet, where the thresholds conveyed exist on both the horizontal and vertical axes. As a starting point, I have chosen the poetry of Jacques Réda because, first and foremost, his work presents the threshold in straightforward terms as a physical and spatial point of division. Of all the poets under analysis in this thesis, Réda portrays *le seuil* in its most concrete form and therefore his *œuvre* provides a clear opening, or threshold, into the poetry.
'Et j'ai longtemps erré'

Moving on to a closer analysis of an individual poet's work, that of Jacques Réda (1929–) is a logical point of departure in this study, for it is here that the threshold is expressed in a particularly literal form. Réda's repeated references to journeying run as a motif throughout the poetry and his liminal mentality is strongly linked in with the notion of travel.¹ His poetry presents evocations of Paris that focus on the marvels of the most ordinary settings:

C'est souvent dans la hauteur qu'une merveille se déclare. Évidemment des ciels, mais aussi parfois de bien curieux couronnements d'immeubles qui n'offrent pour le reste qu'une certaine banalité.

(CC 1)

Réda's work forms a coherent ensemble of lyrical meditations on predominantly urban life, directing the reader's attention away from the more familiar parts of the French capital, towards the overlooked districts and suburbs. The poet takes his time to explore backstreets, garden lofts, small cafés and other corners of the city where 'l'espérance au bout d'une rue appauvrie' (ART 177) may be found. In general, Réda's strolls and Vélo-Solex rides through the bustling Parisian streets have no specific destination and are modest in scale. Réda displays a desire to write poetry that is as accessible as possible, by focusing on everyday scenes and frequently employing a regular rhyme scheme (in particular the rhyming couplet).

¹ Jean-Claude Pinson refers to him as a 'poète en mouvement et poète du mouvement', Habiter en poète (Seyssel: Champ Vallon, 1995), p.197.
It is these *petits voyages* that afford Réda the opportunity to ‘[se] métamorphoser en un marcheur-descripteur’.

Réda’s use of Parisian urban settings and his emphasis on movement through the city follows a strong poetic tradition that dates back to Baudelaire. In *Le Spleen de Paris*, Baudelaire writes of his desire to create an alliance between movement and poetry through ‘une prose poétique, musicale sans rythme et sans rime, assez souple et assez heurtée pour s’adapter aux mouvements lyriques de l’âme, aux ondulations de la rêverie’. Baudelaire found the city to be an intrinsic part of poetic inspiration, for ‘c’est surtout la fréquentation des villes énormes, c’est du croisement de leurs innombrables rapports que naît cet idéal obsédant’. This dynamic created by ‘innombrables rapports’ is one that has been reflected in the broad range of writers who have focused on urban themes over the past two centuries. Many of Réda’s own promenades follow in the footsteps of two great explorers of the Parisian streets, Apollinaire and Fargue. Bestowing themselves with the titles *Le Flâneur des Deux Rives* and *Le Piéton de Paris* respectively, both writers delighted in the beauty and pleasure obtained from everyday experiences:

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Le passant qui, du quai de Passy remarque la rue Berton, n’aperçoit qu’une voie mal tenue, pleine de cailloux et d’ornières et que bordent des murs ruineux, clôture à gauche d’un parc admirable.
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Ma vie a été vécue de telle façon que je connais tous les cafés de Montmartre, tous les tabacs, toutes les brasseries. Quarante ans de voyages à pied dans ce pays formé par les frontières du dix-huitième et du neuvième arrondissements.
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Similarly, the focus of Réda’s poems is continually placed on daily life and there is a strikingly firm but deliberate insistence on everyday experiences. The poet

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6 Richard Blin makes the observation that ‘il est bien rare, dans la littérature contemporaine, ce type d’errance orientée dans les pleins et les déliés de la réalité la plus commune, dans les méandres et les sous-bois de notre plus humble quotidienneté’, ‘La Magie du corps creux ou l’âme de l’intime extérieur’, in *Lire Réda*, pp.117-23 (p.120).
uses the urban environment as the main source of inspiration in his work, always alert to new discoveries as he wanders the streets:

Et j’ai longtemps erré, comme en dormant, […]
De surprise morose en fade enchantement,
Mais toujours attiré plus loin, mis en alerte
Par la proxiïté de quelque découverte
Philosophale

(RU 15)

Réda’s fascination with his surroundings is fed by ‘la proxiïté de quelque découverte’, where every street holds the promise of new possibilities he explores the urban space. The poems reverberate with a strong impulse to travel and many of the titles he has chosen for his poems and prose convey this vagabond spirit (Les Ruïnes de Paris, Hors les murs, Celle qui vient à pas légers, Recommendations aux promeneurs, La Liberté des rues). In the midst of an urban sprawl, Réda often limits himself to nearby locations and yet even these parochial trips still carry strong connotations of the adventure of travel. By exploring the immediately accessible reality of his daily surroundings, Réda is still excited by the prospect of new discoveries:

Du côté de Montmartre, j’arrive tout à coup sur une place d’où se découvre, mais à l’intérieur de la ville, une campagne sans borne et dorée par le soleil du soir. En roulant, j’ai parfois l’impression de prendre, dans la parenthèse, une tangente sur laquelle elle ne se fermera plus.

(RP 136)

Even this brief depiction of a square in the heart of the city employs a number of terms that suggests a poetic imagination that recognises boundaries and borders (‘une campagne sans borne’, ‘à l’intérieur de la ville’, ‘une tangente sur laquelle elle ne se fermera plus’). It also indicates that Réda situates his poems in his locality precisely because he sees it as a place of great adventure and, in this way, ‘Je fondrai dans un pur lointain sans quitter mon quartier’ (CC 30).

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7 This aspect of Réda’s poetry calls to mind Michel Collot’s description of the modern poet, where ‘à mesure qu’il “réalise” ses projets, d’autres possibles se profilent […] à chaque horizon découvert, s’ouvrent de nouveaux horizons à explorer.’, La Poésie moderne et la structure d’horizon (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1989), p.69.
Over the course of Rédâ’s career, the poet’s fascination with travel has been an integral component in his writing and, throughout the texts, one can detect a keen awareness of space, borders and thresholds. This is expressed in the representations of doorways, windows, walls and paths that pervade his writing, which connotes the fact that the poet is alert to potential thresholds at almost every stage of any of the journeys that he undertakes. A thematic analysis of liminal representations is therefore particularly germane when studying the writings of this poète vagabond. In this chapter, I will examine the theme of the threshold as expressed in Rédâ’s portrayal of what he describes as ‘le monde illimité’ (RP 74), using the poems’ various representations of the threshold as a guide. To facilitate this study, the chapter is organised into four sections, beginning with the threshold as represented in the door image and then moving on to the poet’s portrayal of physical, temporal and metaphysical thresholds as conveyed in the images of the window, the wall and the journey.

The Door

‘J’avais franchi la porte et cela s’était laissé surprendre’

The literal definition of a threshold as a ‘piece of timber or stone which lies below the bottom of a door, and has to be crossed in entering a house’ classifies it, first and foremost, as a physical entity that delineates the point between l’intérieur and l’extérieur. Consequently, the threshold image invariably implies a notion of passage, transition and movement and there is an intrinsic link between a journey (however modest in scale) and le liminaire. With each journey, the poet finds himself ‘au seuil de l’inconnu’ (CC 48) whereby he must take the initial step over the physical threshold that mediates between l’intérieur and l’extérieur. This notion of passage is frequently conveyed in Rédâ’s poetry in the image of the door.

As the writer of these ‘chroniques vagabondes’, Rédâ remarks on the doorways in many of the places depicted in his poems and, while these references
are often brief, nevertheless they are a key component in many of the scenes described. Throughout, Réda places a deliberate emphasis on the physical aspect of doorways, often by highlighting the sound they make as they are opened or closed (‘grince la porte d’une armoire’, PLR 26, ‘les portes claquant/On remonta, redescendit l’escalier en spirale’, RC 13, ‘le grincement des portes’, RC 21). The symbolic resonance of the door seems to be very much part of Réda’s imaginative framework, as is portrayed in ‘L’Itinéraire’, for example, in which Réda recalls the significance that the door held for him even as a child of eight years old:

J’avais franchi la porte et cela s’était laissé surprendre. Je ne l’oubliai plus. Il me semblait qu’à tout moment l’étrange allait se reproduire.

(CV 31)

The door is depicted as a threshold to new possibilities (‘l’étrange allait se reproduire’) but elsewhere it prompts other emotional responses in the poet as can be seen, for example, in the poet’s description of the act of closing a door:

C’est simplement l’heure de partir comme si l’on allait à la Poste en claquant derrière soi la porte et sans même emporter les clés.

(RC 23)

The movement here is directed outwards (‘partir’) and the crossing of the threshold marks a new departure rather than a return to familiar surroundings. This poem, entitled ‘Déménagement’, powerfully evokes the scene of a family who is moving house. The internal echo of the door closing (‘porte’/‘emporter’) emphasises the void that has been left by the family, a void that is compounded by the dramatic sound of the door being shut for the last time (‘claquant’). This definitive gesture of the door closing signifies the creation of both a literal and metaphorical barrier, for as the threshold of the house is now permanently closed off, so too is that era of the family’s life. As the above example illustrates, the door can serve as both a mediator and a barrier, rendering it a problematic image throughout the texts.

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The door is the physical point that can mark the beginning or end of a journey and, in Réda’s poems, doors lead both out to the world and into private spaces:

En un clin d’œil entre les murs, par la porte qui s’ouvre,
Le ciel rouge très sombre sous les branches qui veillaient
(RC 111)

Et qu’à la porte de l’église en juin
La présence éclatante et sombre cherchant l’accès du cœur violent comme une torche
(R 45)

In the above examples, the door’s dual-directional focus means it can be a threshold to both the exterior world (‘Le ciel rouge’) and to the interior of ‘l’église en juin’. Not only is the poet’s conception of a physical autre depicted in terms of a dual movement but equally, the door image highlights the fact that Réda sees alterity in highly ambivalent terms. In the above examples, therefore, the poet associates the door with a certain amount of trepidation, as revealed by the fact that it is a threshold to locations associated with the adjective ‘sombre’. Thus, while Réda’s poetry is primarily focused on the physical world, the door is not conveyed in purely spatial terms, for it also suggests the metaphysical boundaries, containing within it ‘une double existence passive, aux limites de l’inconnu et de l’aventure!’ Throughout literature, the door has been used as to represent the possibility of access to another realm. We think, for example, of Hugo’s description of ‘la porte [qui] est inflexible’ from beyond which ‘on entend le trousseau des clefs mystérieuses/Sonner confusément’ or of André Gide’s La Porte étroite, in which the door is an ambiguous symbol that leads to both salvation and damnation:

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9 Aragon, Le Paysan de Paris, p.25.
Many of the references to Hugo’s poetry in this chapter have been prompted by Jean-Pierre Jossua’s insightful reflections in ‘Essai sur la poétique théologique de Hugo’, in Pour une histoire religieuse de l’expérience littéraire.
Similarly, from Réda’s earliest poems onwards, the image of the door is linked not only with physical points of passage, but with enlightenment and revelation:

Approche,
je m’appuie à la porte qui tremble et brûle
De tout le soir oblique en ses vitres [...] Pose enfin ton pied nu au bord du gouffre où tu éclaires
Les racines des racines de l’ébranlement.

(A 30)

Here the liminal image of the door is formidable (‘la porte qui tremble et brûle’), while also being associated with the threshold to a realm that is both unknown and revelatory (‘gouffre où tu éclaires/Les racines des racines de l’ébranlement’). In this way, the door appears to provoke is a dual movement of attraction and repulsion on the part of the poet, emphasising the predominantly destabilising capacity of this particular threshold.

‘Par la porte ouverte au cœur étouffant de septembre’

In the Amen collection (published in 1968), Réda includes a series of poems entitled Porte d’automne, that is particularly pertinent to a thematic study of the door image. The door conveys a physical manifestation of the season, where the sound of the wind in the trees echoes the sound made by a door’s hinges:

Porte d’automne, lente, écluse entre les peupliers; [...] Souffle du haut vantail sur les gonds criants des forêts ;
Espace enfin, démarrage de tout l’espace à travers un espace vrai

(A 62)

11 Matthieu 7. 13-14.
The autumn wind not only produces sounds but it also carries odours that evoke the season. As a threshold that mediates between the interior and exterior space, the open door grants access to this 'cœur étouffant de septembre':

Et, par la porte ouverte au cœur étouffant de septembre,
Voici le vent couleur d’averse du matin qui rentre
Avec son odeur de terrier, de bois mouillé, de gelée blanche,
Et sa statue d’autrefois dressée comme une promesse.

(A 61)

In the Porte d’automne sequence, the titles suggest that a melancholy atmosphere is associated with the autumn in Réda’s imagination (‘Dernier dimanche de l’été’, ‘Distance de l’automne’, ‘Pluie en octobre’). Whereas the door image can represent access to an enticing adventure (‘Et qui brille à présent comme une porte ouverte’, HM 31), here it is a point of passage opening out to a rather bleak scene, where ‘le ciel/Très pâle se réserve et ne touche plus l’herbe ni les eaux/Qui se retournent vers la profondeur oblique’ (A 64).

In these poems, the liminal function of the door is expressed not only in physical but in temporal terms, as the door signifies the passage of time from one season to another. Autumn is a season of dramatic change in the natural world, when abundant signs of life and growth are replaced by ones of sleep or death. Therefore, autumn represents the crossing of a threshold between the long, bright days of summer and the dark winter months when, in the words of Baudelaire, ‘nous plongeons dans les froides ténèbres; Adieu, vive clarté de nos étés trop courts!’

Réda situates the Porte d’automne sequence in autumn (‘Je suis ici à murmurer la poésie d’octobre!’, A 62), focusing on the transition it marks from summer to winter. The link that Réda establishes between the changing seasons and the passage of time echoes Apollinaire’s perception of autumn, which the latter refers to as ‘mon automne éternel ô ma saison mentale’.

In ‘Automne malade’, Apollinaire makes an explicit connection between the falling leaves and life’s inevitable demise:

Les fruits tombant sans qu'on les cueille
Le vent et la forêt qui pleurent
Toutes leurs larmes en automne feuille à feuille
Les feuilles
Qu'on foule
Un train
Qui roule
La vie
S'écoule\textsuperscript{14}

Similarly for Réda, autumn acts as the door to winter and subsequently to death and it is therefore a threshold that marks the relentless passage of time. The final poem in Réda's \textit{Porte d'automne} series is aptly entitled 'Amen', for it marks the poet's own acceptance of the uncertainty within death:

\begin{quote}
Nul seigneur je ne nomme, et nulle clarté je ne vois dans la nuit.

[...]

Le degré le plus bas, la séparation intolérable
D'avec ce que je saisirai, terre ou main, dans l'abandon sans exemple de ce passage —
Et ce total renversement du ciel qu'on n'imagine pas.
\end{quote}

(A 69)

The poet resolutely refuses to comfort himself with the notion of religious experiences that he has not undergone himself ('Nul seigneur je ne nomme, et nulle clarté je ne vois dans la nuit'). Nevertheless, his sense of 'la séparation intolérable' and 'ce total renversement du ciel qu’on n’imagine pas' indicates a belief in the absolute otherness of that which lies beyond the grave. This is also seen elsewhere in the \textit{Porte d'automne} sequence for, despite the absence of religious belief, Réda does not see the approach of death (as represented by the autumn) as an absolute end:

Je tends les bras dans ce retour de milliers d’ailes
Vers ce qui fut promis par la cloche aiguë du collège sous le brouillard,
Vers les anges dépossédés qui guidèrent mes pas parmi les bogues de l’allée,
Et la gloire d’octobre à genoux dans les feuilles mortes.

(A 61)

Réda’s attraction to the possibilities of an afterlife are qualified by a degree of uncertainty (‘Vers ce qui fut promis [...] sous le brouillard,/Vers les anges dépossédés’). Nonetheless, the association between the dead leaves and triumph rather than defeat (‘la gloire d’octobre à genoux dans les feuilles mortes’) suggests that, in this instance, Réda does see death as the door to life.

‘Par quelle porte encore entrouverte?’

In the texts, the poet oscillates between fearing and welcoming the opportunities he perceives in the threshold and there is often a sense of tension associated with the unknown that lies beyond the door. In ‘Dans la maison’, the poet’s depiction of l’inconnu highlights its destabilizing capacity:

De quoi pouvons-nous avoir peur ici, puisque c’est la maison?
Dehors nous entendons le ciel comme le souffle d’une bête
Chercher cet autre ciel en nous qui s’écarte sans fond.
L’inconnu marche, on voit ses pas marqués dans les touffes d’étoiles, [...] 
Quand notre misère interroge, une détresse lui répond
Ainsi, comme à la porte basse où heure la prière.

(A 66)

In this poem, Réda is protected physically from the unknown by seeking shelter inside from ‘la saison seule et dure’. Significantly, the door is mentioned only in a figurative capacity, and the poet denies any real and immediate point of passage between the interior and exterior. In this way, the threat of the unknown is kept at a distance from ‘nous qui sommes toujours au centre, avec/Nos bras posés sur le cercle de l’horizon’. By creating this protective centre, the poet can remain ‘dans la demeure/Où tout nous est donné’ and thus avoid any need to cross the threshold. Within the safe confines of a house, Réda feels protected from the
elements outside. On a metaphysical level, the door functions as mediator between the corporeal and spiritual plane. Significantly, Réda resists the traditional notion of the spiritual realm existing above the physical one. Instead he depicts prayer as moving on a horizontal plane (‘à la porte basse où heurte la prière’) and challenges the assumption that the heavens exist above. Repetition of the phrase ‘en nous’ emphasises the fact that Réda relocates ‘le ciel’ and ‘celui autre ciel [...] qui s’écarte sans fond’ within man, rather than without. Nevertheless, there is still a sense that access to the spiritual world is problematic. While Réda is aware of the possibility of crossing some type of threshold in order to experience the spiritual world, it is clear that this is not an easy transition to make. Indeed, it would seem that the threshold in this instance is almost impassable, as conveyed by the sense of violent desperation in the verb ‘heurter’. The contrasts set up in these lines focus on reciprocal relationships that are simultaneously united and divided by a threshold (whether that threshold be a geographical (‘ici’/‘dehors’) or relational one (‘interroge’/‘répond’)).

Many of the references to doors in Réda’s poems draw particular attention to their liminal function by stipulating whether the door in a particular scene is open or closed. The half-open door is portrayed in terms of its function as a unifying and separating force between two realms and is linked with the concept of a spiritual au-delà that is both enticing and intangible:

Je prends ces visions du petit jour (pour fausses
Qu’elles semblent, après un court moment d’espoir)
Comme le seul accès à des métamorphoses
Qui permettraient enfin de comprendre, de voir

Ce que la nuit, le jour, même, nous dissimulent,
Et le temps qui les fait tourner obstinément
Comme une porte: le signal du crépuscule
Qui brille sans bouger dans l’entrebâillement.

(RC 146-47)

The poet’s belief in any form of spiritual revelation is qualified by the adjectives employed, where ‘ces visions’ may be ‘fausses’, and the ‘moment d’espoir’ is ‘court’. Equally, Réda emphasises the ephemeral nature of this experience through the reference to ‘le signal du crépuscule/Qui brille sans bouger dans l’entrebâillement’.
If the image of the ‘porte entrebâillée’ is charged with ambiguity then that of the ‘porte battante’, one of the most frequent representations of the door since Réda’s earliest collections, is particularly problematic.15 Here, the door is neither fully open nor closed, and is in a perpetual state of indeterminacy. Thus its full ambiguity is made evident (for it is acting neither as a form of protection nor as a point of passage). This is reflected in the fact that Réda expresses feelings of confusion or trepidation when confronted with the ‘porte battante’ (‘on entend battre des portes,/De terrains envahis d’un confus attirail’, *HM* 35). For the poet, the indeterminate liminal function of the ‘la porte battante’ is especially unsettling, as it fulfils neither the role of a passageway nor a of form of protection. ‘La porte battante’ moves backwards and forwards, granting only brief glimpses of l’au-delà:

Il m’aurait englouti. Par exemple je me souviens d’une porte: elle battait au fond d’un couloir et j’ai vu beaucoup d’autres portes, mais c’était donc celle-là.

\(\text{(ART 153)}\)

As the door oscillates between its function as mediator and barrier, it reveals its fundamentally unstable nature and compounds the poet’s own conflicting emotions (‘au fond des petites maisons les portes battent et claquent, un frisson de crainte et d’espérance court jusqu’à l’horizon par les jardins’, *PLM* 10).

The ‘porte battante’ is used frequently by Réda to convey not only a physical threshold between two spatial contexts, but also a metaphysical seuil. The profound uncertainty that the poet associates with the image of the door is brought to light in a poem entitled ‘La Porte’, in the *Amen* collection:

Et pourtant c’est ainsi: l’on voit, par la porte battante,
Une lumière qui s’approche, hésite puis s’éteint.

\(\text{(A 15)}\)

There is a very direct link between this poem and the other poems in this collection, as the opening words (‘Et pourtant c’est ainsi’) echo the sentiments of the title’s collection (the Hebrew word ‘amen’ meaning ‘ainsi soit-il’). This

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15 Maulpoix makes reference to the fact that ‘l’une des images les plus insistantes d’Amen, [est]
immediately sets the overall tone of the texts, communicating an acceptance of the status quo and a certain resignation, where any glimmer of hope has been extinguished (‘une lumière [...] s’est éteint’). In this way, the collection begins with its own conclusion and so prompts a redefinition of the reader’s perceptions as it challenges the notion of logical progression. Réda therefore destabilises the reader’s expectations by opening the collection with these apparently concluding remarks (‘Amen’, ‘c’est ainsi’). Here, Réda constructs poetry that functions like the ‘porte battante’, as opposing forces are held together by the same ambiguity that divides them (where, in this instance, the beginning of the work is marked by an end). The poem’s regular line length (fourteen syllables throughout) contrasts with its irregular rhyme scheme, serving to emphasise the feelings of doubt and uncertainty experienced by the poet. Réda employs both short sentences and enjambement as a means of disrupting the traditional line rhythm, the general flow of the poem and, consequently, the reading of the text. Just as Réda is unsure as to ‘ce qu’on ne peut pas dire ni comprendre’, so this is represented textually where the regular line length contrasts with the vers libre and irregular punctuation:

Souvent l’attente se prolonge. Et seul, à qui sourire
En silence? Personne. Et qui nous répondrait de loin
Si l’on criait? Personne encore. Un jour on croit rêver,
Un autre jour mourir — et vraiment c’est un songe, et c’est
Aussi la mort.

(A 15)

Réda stresses the communal nature of this experience by using the first person plural (‘Et qui nous répondrait de loin/Si l’on criait?’), while the feeling of insecurity that ‘La Porte’ instils in the poet is mirrored in the text by the fact that the lines of poetry have been disrupted by the punctuation. The ‘porte battante’ calls to mind both the potential of imaginative possibilities and the end of that potential in death (‘et vraiment c’est un songe, et c’est/Aussi la mort’). Both the dream and death are presented as intermittent realities and are therefore partially true, but Réda is haunted by the lack of consistency brought about by the swinging door. This is emphasised by the numerous references to time made
celle d’une porte entrebâillée sur l’horizon qui n’autorise que d’improbables échappées’, p.16.
throughout the twelve lines of the poem. Réda sets up a chain of events that are all linked temporally ('puis', 'souvent', 'un jour [...] un autre jour', 'parfois', 'enfin'). The swinging door denies the onlooker a sufficient view of the other side, for one is only ever granted fleeting glimpses of l'au-delà. As a result, the images themselves remain resolutely insubstantial and intangible. This condition is compounded by the solitude he feels, for there is no-one else to act as witness or interpreter. An acute sense of loneliness pervades the text ('Et seul', 'En silence?', 'Personne [...] Personne encore'). The repeated questioning and use of the subjective 'croire' all exacerbate this sense of loneliness and insecurity. In this instance, the threshold fills Réda with fear as he begins to suspect that 'le sens de la vie' is a joyless discovery ('timides', 'soucieux'). In the final lines of the poem, the source of Réda's anguish (namely the door) stops swinging. It is interesting to note that the poet does not specify whether the door finally closes shut or whether it opens fully, but simply that 'incidemment, la porte cesse/de battre'. As soon as the door ceases to be in this ambiguous state, the anonymous on assumes a new active role in the scene ('et l’on dresse en criant plus fort dans le noir'). Moreover, the confusion that has gone before is alleviated for a new clarity is brought to bear on the situation ('Ou bien la clarté s’établit'). Finally, one is granted a fleeting glimpse of l’autrui in the form of an indefinable, momentary, yet undeniable epiphany:

[...] et l’on distingue enfin,
Pour un instant, ce qu’on ne peut pas dire ni comprendre.

‘De l’autre côté de la porte’

In general terms, the sense of perpetual movement in Réda’s poems imbue the texts with a sense of restlessness that betokens a sustained disinterest in dwelling on metaphysical questions:
Et même en paix, d'ailleurs, puis-je, indéfiniment,
Me garder en ce point presque métaphysique
Où, comme sous l'effet puissant d'une musique,
M'élever à travers un vague firmament?

Non. Tôt ou tard il faut s'éveiller de ce rêve
Et reprendre un chemin qui mène quelque part.

(RP 188)

The temptation that Réda feels to stay 'en ce point presque métaphysique' is firmly resisted through his resolute pragmatism, as emphasised by the definitive 'Non.' at the beginning of the stanza. Instead, the poet senses an inevitability about returning to 'reality' ('il faut s'éveiller de ce rêve') and continuing his travels, despite the fact that his destination seems vague ('reprendre un chemin qui mène quelque part'). This privileging of the physical over the spiritual can be seen throughout the texts, even when the door image is linked to a spiritual autre and portrayed as a threshold to revelation:

Peut-être aussi, au fond du jeu solitaire des portes, une messagère distante et fidelè qui ne cesserait plus de venir et qui, dans l'intervalle heureux dont nous avions la garde, accordait la parole.

(CV 33-34)

Here, the poet's belief that 'la parole' may come is fleeting, and any hope in spiritual enlightenment is tempered with uncertainty:

Pourant je me trompais. Celle qui vient à pas légers, inexplicablement peut se retirer de l'espace habitable où nous nous tenons dans la faveur de son souffle.

In another poem, situating himself on the 'Seuil du désordre', Réda uses the image of the half-open door to convey the destabilising power of this particular threshold, as he wonders if he is 'plein/De la présence où je ne fus que porte battant sur le noir?' (A 14). The poet is tormented by the chaos that surrounds him and by the potential threatening presence that the door may conceal:
Par là se sont glissés les yeux d'une nuit dégoûtante
Et qui n'était pas moi mais poussait toujours cette porte.

Rédé is aware of his own ambiguous liminal state, as he feels himself ‘battant sur le noir’ and the helplessness he feels is emphasised by the negative qualifier ‘ne [... que’’. The swinging door is portrayed as having no control over itself but as being utterly controlled by external forces on either side that push or pull it. In this instance, the threshold image is associated with helpless confusion and disorder, as it serves as a point of passage through which threatening forces may gain access. The sinister aspect of the darkness (‘une nuit dégoûtante’') is compounded by its persistence in trying to gain access by the door (‘mais poussait toujours cette porte’).

The door’s capacity to be open, closed or swinging between these two states indicates a variety of perceived functions of the threshold in Rédé’s poems, rendering it a particularly rich image. In a thematic study of representations of the threshold, it is important to note that the door is not always conveyed in terms of a point of passage, for sometimes the doors are closed or closing in the texts. In one particularly striking example, the slamming door is employed to express division and isolation, where the liminal potential of the door has been curtailed:

Oui, beaucoup de désordre dans la tête et dans ce cœur [...] Trop d’amour ressemble au sursaut d’une porte qui claque, Et toujours de l’autre côté de la porte je parle

Here, the door image is used to highlight the separation that the poet experiences, where the door has been firmly shut and is acting more as a barrier than as a point of passage. The liminal function of the door has been subverted and physical access to the other side is denied, prompting a sense of exclusion as the poet resigns himself to his isolation (‘toujours de l’autre côté de la porte je parle’).
The Window

‘Et chaque fenêtre est un œil de ciel indifférent’

As a natural progression from the threshold of the door, the window is another significant marker in Réda’s liminal landscape, bringing with it its own possibilities and restrictions. Although not normally a physical point of passage, the window acts as an important visual threshold and provides the poet with a source of creative inspiration. The specific visual aspect of the window is one that is highlighted throughout Réda’s work and there is a close associative link established between the window and its function as a visual threshold to another spatial context. When situated in front of this particular threshold, the poet’s role is predominantly one of a bystander and observer. In this respect, the window inspires the same reaction from Réda as it did from Hugo, who stood ‘à la fenêtre, pendant la nuit’ and observed that ‘la création vit, croît et se multiplie, l’homme n’est qu’un témoin.’ Frequently in the texts, the door image is linked with an emotionally charged response from Réda, where the door’s portrayal either as a point of passage or as a barrier is indissociable from the poet’s perception of the unknown that lies beyond. In contrast, the window grants Réda visual access to the other side and so encourages a less introverted approach to l’au-delà.

Réda displays an insatiable curiosity about life in the everyday scenes that he portrays, of which landscapes, street scenes, and people are all a part. The frequency with which the window image recurs in the texts indicates its importance and close imaginative link is established between the poems’ subject matter and the performative role of the window as a visual threshold to l’ailleurs. For example, a number of poems are based on images or scenes observed by Réda as he is sitting inside, by a window (whether that be by a window on a train, in his

16 For one such example, I refer the reader to a selection of poems entitled ‘Coin fenêtre’ in La Course.
 Positioned inside, Réda nonetheless may still see beyond his current spatial context by means of the window:

De la fenêtre ouverte juste au milieu d'un érable,
À travers le feuillage on peut encore distinguer
Quelques arbres

(PLR 15)

Ma fenêtre ouvre au nord: jardins de mousse et de ciment;
Des arbres japonais y dessinent avec talent
Jusqu'à midi contre l'hiver doré.

(HM 24)

As the above examples demonstrate, the window has a strong outward directional force, for it draws the poet’s attention beyond l'ici (‘De la fenêtre [...] juste au milieu’, ‘A travers’, ‘Ma fenêtre ouvre au nord’). In this sense, while the window is not a threshold that permits physical displacement, Réda does portray it in terms of a point where two worlds converge:

Et le dé lbrille et bat comme au vent comme une vitre ouverte
Par où sans bouger je m'enfuis vers l'espace, vers toi

(CC 29)

Here, the window image allows the poet to experience movement without displacement (‘sans bouger’) and is associated with freedom rather than restriction (‘je m'enfuis vers l'espace’). Elsewhere in the texts, the poet’s restricted physical access to l'au-delà would seem to be counterbalanced by the fact that the window appears to move towards the world outside (‘Et la fenêtre penche au travers la nuit’, R 29). Throughout the poems, the window is very much portrayed as serving a threshold function, for it allows Réda to occupy l'ici while also granting access to l'ailleurs:

Par les fenêtres sans volets des dortoirs, il m'arriva de retrouver à l'aube un ciel devenu tout entier semblable aux sanctuaires.

(CV 33)

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18 Indeed, Réda’s comment that Pierre Reverdy’s poems ‘sont exactement, vitre après vitre, des coups de poing dans la fenêtre qui nous coupe de la réalité’ would seem equally applicable to his own poetry. ‘À l’envers’ (SV 106).
The window not only grants visual access to the poet who is inside ("Par les fenêtres [...] il m'arriva de retrouver à l'aube un/ciel") but it also allows l'ailleurs to penetrate the interior space:

Mes fenêtres donnent à présent sur des jardins aux essences diverses [...] Vers six heures, le soir, un soleil discret pénètre dans la cuisine.

(CC 12)

As a threshold viewed from within, the window allows Réda to remain in one space and yet interact with the outside world. When placed beside a window, the poet is poised on a threshold, as he occupies one space and yet directs his attention towards the other side:

L’étable qui frémit devant notre fenêtre
Est comme une autre chambre où nous ne pénétrons
Qu’au moment de dormir [...] Alors nous devenons peu à peu ce feuillage

(RC 138)

This function of the window as a threshold is reminiscent of Balzac’s Sarrasine, the opening paragraphs of which describe the narrator seated by a window:

Assis dans l’embrasure d’une fenêtre, et caché sous les plis onduleux d’une rideau de moire, je pouvais contempler à mon aise le jardin de l’hôtel où je passais la soirée. [...] Ainsi, à ma droite, la sombre et silencieuse image de la mort; à ma gauche, les décentes bacchanales de la vie.19

As the narrator gazes through the window, he can see the snow-covered trees and the dark emptiness of the world outside. Meanwhile the ball continues inside and the narrator is aware of the women who, bedecked in all their finery, continue to dance. On one side of the window, therefore, is coldness and death, while on the other side there is life and warmth. Seated beside the window, the narrator remains on the threshold between these two worlds (‘Moi, sur la frontière de ces deux tableaux si disparates’). It is the particular features of the window as a threshold that permit this state of indeterminacy. For Réda, a poet who is preoccupied with ‘les charmes d’ailleurs’ (RP 11), the window allows him to
participate in both this interior and exterior space. Yet, as we have seen in the
door image, this dual participation that is so central Réda'a perception of the
threshold can also contain an inherent tension, as the poet seeks to reconcile *l'ici*
and *l'ailleurs*.

'Des portes vitrées'

In 'La Vie de la famille', Réda’s description of a domestic scene draws the
reader’s attention to the role of the window as a transparent barrier and highlights
the emotions and tensions within family life. The father busies himself with his
work in the study, while his children observe him from the other side of a pane of
glass. They can see their father and thus are visually invited into his presence.
However, the glass also acts as a barrier, denying physical access to the children.
In the scene that Réda depicts, the contexts of the father and children differ
greatly and are connected only by a glass door. This visual connection is a
significant one, for it renders the familial division all the more acute and the
visual quality of the window-threshold is emphasised throughout the poem. The
children’s excitement and the father’s immersion in his own affairs are clearly
portrayed as being incompatible, although they remain inextricably linked by the
window. While the transparent barrier remains, neither reality can be ignored
satisfactorily:

Voici: les deux pièces donnaient, par des portes vitrées,
Sur un couloir plus sombre

\( RC\ 19 \)

Despite the fact that the father is aware of his children’s presence, he cannot
allow them into his world where ‘la terreur/Régnait’. The father is lost in his work
(‘perdu dans cette tornade/Inerte’) and the atmosphere in the study is one of
‘silence’ and ‘vigilance/Anxieuse’. In contrast, the children arrive home from
their walk ‘voulant entrer, me raconter leurs jeux, vaille que vaille’. Undoubtedly,
their excited mood is an unwelcome disruptive force in the quiet atmosphere of
the father’s study. Equally, the children soon tire of their father’s sombre and

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enclosed world. However, their fascination with the study is heightened by the window-threshold, through which the father appears enticingly close, and yet remains at one distance removed:

\[\ldots\] je vis les deux enfants, retour de promenade,
Poser sur la vitre la plus basse un nez tout rond,
Voulant entrer

A closed wooden door would establish a definitive point of passage between the two worlds and exclude the children utterly. In contrast, the window sustains a certain ambiguity, for it displays the very world into which the children are not allowed to enter. The transparent barrier therefore encourages the children to be transfixed by their father’s activity and by the space from which they are banished:

Et je les ai laissés dehors (allons, papa travaille),
Et pleurer, partir.

Thus, a minimal form of communication is sustained through this glass threshold and it is significant to note that the window affords a view to both parties. The children are upset at being excluded from their father’s world and are taunted by his continued visual presence. Likewise, the father is a witness to his children’s distress. Inevitably, the children tire of the situation, accept that they cannot enter into their father’s study and go to play elsewhere. In contrast, the father remains enclosed in his study, as ‘des portes vitrées’ serve to isolate him in his ‘fureur muette’. Again, it is the transparent quality of the door that exacerbates the situation. The father resolutely refuses to give in to his children’s wishes, despite the fact that he can see the upset he is causing them. In a very real sense, the window hinders him from ‘turning a blind eye’ to the situation, and so his own sense of guilt is compounded (he compares himself to ‘un égoïste qui se fout/De tout’). Ironically, one of the consequences of this scene is that the father, having banished his children from the study door, is left experiencing feelings of abandonment and of isolation (‘je sais qu’ils n’entreront/Plus jamais’). While initially in control of the situation, the father has subsequently become a passive
figure in the poem. Réda conveys this helplessness by emphasising the fact that, rather than the father looking out at the sky, it is the dispassionate sky that observes the father through the window (‘le ciel qui me surveillait à travers la fenêtre’). Having asserted ‘des portes vitrées’ as a barrier between himself and his children, the father becomes aware of his own isolation. In this poem, the liminal awareness of the protagonists brings about unforetold emotional consequences, where physical barriers signify familial rifts. The transparency of this particular threshold highlights potential conflicts between the two worlds, rendering reconciliation between the two almost impossible.

‘Derrière des rideaux’

At times within the texts, there is a significant shift of focus as the poet moves from an interior space looking outwards to an *exterior* space looking *in*. The window is now seen from outside, becoming the medium through which Réda may look into private spaces. As part of this shift, there is strong emphasis placed on the physical appearance of the window (an aspect of the window that does not feature in scenes when the poet’s gaze is directed outwards). The window is no longer portrayed as an utterly transparent threshold, as Réda now focuses on the glass and curtains that frame and delineate it. For example, the poet describes the scene of a deserted house from the outside as if it were an orphan. Left without anyone to take care of it, the abandoned building has grown dirty and shabby with ‘les rideaux sales’ (RC 20). As the poet’s focus is directed inwards from the exterior space, the emphasis placed on the curtains and frame of the window highlights the role of the window as a barrier, rather than a threshold, to l’au-delà. In the poem ‘Hôtel des Deux Ponts’, Réda focuses on the appearance of the windows from without, rather than on the scenes that are occurring on the other side of the window panes. The hotel is described as having ‘ses fenêtres (dix-huit obscures sans rideaux)’, leading the poet to conclude that:

L’Hôtel des Deux Ponts n’a pourtant qu’assez peu d’existence,
Car il est rempli des sommeils du cœur inhabité.

*(HM 29)*
As an onlooker, this emphasis on the exterior conveys a sense of exclusion, for the threshold between the subject and the world on the other side of the window now appears impassable. In the same way, windows with drawn curtains or with no curtains suggest exclusion and isolation:

Les gens passent devant les rideaux baissés des boutiques, devant les magasins qui n’ont pas de volets et paraissent encore plus tristes, encombrés jusqu’au fond dans l’ombre où suffoquent des chaises.

(CV 39)

Conversely, Réda emphasises the liminal function of the illuminated window by drawing our attention to its role as a point of contact between the exterior and interior space:

Le solitaire qui s’en va, sur le coup de cinq heures,  
Par les rues calmes et déjà sombres sous un ciel gris,  
Aime voir s’allumer sur la façade des immeubles  
Et comme au hasard les fenêtres. [...]  
Il croit pouvoir redevenir lui-même, ou s’éveiller  
Un autre à la lueur secrète où baigne chaque chambre,  
Et s’y confondre avec tous ceux dont bouge à peine l’ombre derrière des rideaux qu’agit un souffle de chaleur

(RC 124)

Moreover, the window also seems to act as a threshold whereby le solitaire may ‘redevenir lui-même [...] Et s’y confondre avec tous ceux dont bouge à peine l’ombre/derrière des rideaux qu’agit un souffle de chaleur’. However, the window as a point of contact is problematic, for it does not permit a reciprocal relationship between the exterior and interior space. While the figure studies the illuminated windows, those on the other side of the glass remain anonymous. Thus, reciprocal communication remains a desire rather than a reality (‘Il croit pouvoir’). The contrast set up between the dark streets outside and the light coming from within only serves to highlight the barrier that exists between the two spatial contexts. The glimpses of ‘la lueur secrète où baigne chaque chambre’ is made all the more tantalising by ‘l’ombre/derrière les rideaux’ and yet the window, as perceived from without, continues to deny the onlooker any access to the interior space.
Elsewhere in the poems, the window as a visual point of passage is also controlled and restricted by curtains or blinds. These may either reveal or conceal life à l’intérieur, and so they can be seen as being an instrument of power for those within who may open or close them at will. It is perhaps for this reason that the outside onlooker often finds the view through a window particularly intriguing, as ‘ce qu’on peut voir au soleil est toujours moins intéressant que ce qui se passe derrière une vitre. Dans ce trou noir ou lumineux vit la vie, rêve la vie, souffre la vie’. The curtain or volet acts as a protective barrier and is a means of containing or hiding. The window’s function as a visual threshold can thus be subverted, becoming instead a barrier that conceals ‘un monde obscur derrière les rideaux/Qui bougent’ (HM 55). Yet from within, the curtain can serve as a form of protection, masking the threatening transparency of the window:

Faire autrement je ne peux pas, non, il faut que je sorte. [...] Je l’ai vu qui me souriait derrière la fenêtre. J’ai tiré les petits rideaux sensibles – rouge et blanc. (R 69)

‘Le reflet des vitres dans les vitres étire à l’infini’

Closely linked to the visual aspect of the window is the representation of light in Réda’s poems as references to light are often juxtaposed with those of windows. On a purely aesthetic level, Réda is attracted by the visual quality of sunlight playing on windowpanes. The window also serves as both a threshold and a barrier to light, acting as a vehicle for and protection against the rays of the sun. The poet often chooses to describe interaction between the light and a windowpane as seen from outside. Rather than focusing on the light that comes through the glass, Réda describes the window as it reflects the light:

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Et je me souvenais des soirs où la lumière
D’un bond s’arrache encore à l’abîme et l’on voit
Brûler contre l’angle d’un mur, au fond d’une fenêtre [...] 
Les outils qu’elle pose avant de disparaître [...] 
Et par l’obscurité devenue éclairante 
Sans faste ni déclin dissipant ses rayons.

(T 32)

C’est par le reflet dans les vitres d’en face
Que le soleil illumine le fond
De cette cour, chaque matin

(PLR 61)

As the sunlight rebounds off the windowpane, the darkness is dispelled (‘la lumière [...] s’arrache encore l’abîme’, ‘le soleil illumine le fond/De cette cour’).

By highlighting the reflective quality of the glass, Réda focuses on outward movement, as the light is denied access to the interior space (‘N’est de nouveau que reflet d’un reflet/Répercuté de fenêtre en fenêtre’, PLR 61-62).

From inside, the window serves as a threshold to the outside world and Réda links this with a sense of self-discovery:

Je ne sais plus quel est le sens de cet instant
Où, par l’étroite fenêtre de l’auberge,
Le ciel pâle éclairait en moi cette certitude:
Voici le vrai visage de ma vie.

(A 40)

There is a parallel drawn between the view of the sky through the window and the view that the poet is granted of ‘le vrai visage de ma vie’ (emphasised by the repetition of ‘c’ in the third line of the stanza and of ‘v’ in final line). There is a sense that Réda’s revelation is made accessible through the window and thus the text hints at the familiar association between light and enlightenment. 21 In the same way that the window acts as a point of passage for light and dispels the...

21 Durand argues that ‘il est normal que l’œil, organe de la vue, soit associé à l’objet de la vision, c’est-à-dire à la lumière. [...] Quoi qu’il en soit, œil ou regard sont toujours liés à la transcendance, c’est ce que constate la mythologie universelle aussi bien que la psychanalyse.’ Therefore there exists an ‘arsenal oedipien pour associer l’œil et la vision au schéme de l’élévation et aux idéaux de la transcendance’, in Les structures anthropologiques de l’imaginaire, p.170.
darkness inside, so it may also be associated imaginatively with a possible point of access to a metaphysical revelation.\(^{22}\)

Conceptually, there are strong imaginative links in the texts between the window and the mirror, for both are portrayed as having the ability to reflect back an image of the self. Paradoxically, the mirror conveys both reality and a distortion of that reality, offering an exact reflection where every detail is à l’envers:

Malgré l’effroi de se rencontrer face à face,
L’homme inventa son double inverse des miroirs.
Et dans la profondeur impénétrable et fausse,
Il se connaîtrait demi serf, à demi roi
De lui-même, reflet de sa propre figure

\(\text{PLR 17}\)

While acknowledging man’s impulse to search for ‘son double inverse’, Réda regards self-reflection as deceptive (‘la profondeur impénétrable et fausse’) and something to be feared (‘l’effroi’). Offering only ‘l’espace illusoire d’un salut’ \((R\ 38)\), Réda’s mirrors are often portrayed as being false representations of reality:

– il me reste que mon portrait

Dans la fictive profondeur d’une vitre que zèbre
Et hache la lueur convulsive ou la dure algèbre
Des gares, d’un triage.

\(\text{C 136}\)

The window becomes a mirror as it reflects a portrait of the subject and yet this reflection is qualified by the fact that it is in its ‘fictive profondeur’. This sense of deception that the mirror instils in the poet can be found elsewhere in the texts, where the image in the mirror is nothing other than a cold reflection:

Un seul baiser dans un miroir, ciel de ce travesti
Où mes lèvres n’auront touché que ma glaçante image.

\(\text{RC 31}\)

\(^{22}\) Jean-Louis Ezine comments on this aspect of Réda’s poems, remarking that ‘quelquefois, au coin de nulle part, dans un faubourg oublié des horloges, c’est le seul reflet du flâneur dans la vitrine qui absorbe tout entière la mortelle et insaisissable morsure du présent’, ‘Jacques des villes et Jacques des champs’, \(\text{Le Nouvel Observateur, } 12-18\text{ mars }1998, pp.114-115.\)
However, this is not always the case, for the mirror is also depicted as offering much more than a straightforward reflection:

[...] la glace s’envoie à une jeune femme l’image brève de sa nudité et tire obliquement de la pénombre l’image d’un ancêtre

(PLR 26)

In the above example, the mirror projects an image back to the subject that it much more than a ‘glaçante image’, for it appears to also be a temporal threshold. Thus, the mirror is seen as having the power not only to reflect the present reality (‘l’image brève de sa nudité’) but to summon up the past. This power is highlighted by the fact that, spatially, the mirror reflects both that which stands exposed in front of it and that which is obscured (‘obliquement de la pénombre’). This link between reflection and a temporal threshold is reiterated elsewhere, when Réda writes that ‘le reflet des vitres dans les vitres étire à l’infini’ (PLM 38). Here, the repetition of the short [i] ‘mirrors’ the reflection in the windows, where the reflective property of the glass assumes an atemporal quality. Significantly, in both these examples, Réda undermines the potentially limiting capacity of the mirror. That is to say that in these rare instances when the mirror image is used in the poems, while it may not offer visual access to l‘ailleurs, it does act as a temporal threshold.

As compared to the window, the references to mirrors in Réda’s work are considerably less frequent and generally the focus is placed on the window as it reflects light (rather than on the mirror that reflects an image). It would seem reasonable to suggest that the poet is attracted to the reflective quality of the window, rather than the mirror, because the former can both reflect and project light à l’extérieur. As a poet who focuses most of his attention on the world around him rather than on introspection, it is the window’s more obvious liminal capacity that draws him. Moreover, the lack of mirror images in the texts may also be attributable to the fact that the parallels between physical and metaphysical reflection are perhaps all too apparent to a poet who openly rejects
what he perceives to be narcissistic introspection (‘Que ce soit l’Extérieur enfin qui parle’, CV 16). 23

The Wall

‘Les murs blancs d’une forteresse’

In Réda’s earlier collections, there is a preponderance of door and window images that frequently are imaginatively linked with the notion of passage from one space to another, suggesting the poet’s desire to cross over any perceived thresholds. However, Réda’s journeys are repeatedly hindered in the poems by the boundaries and borders that he perceives in his surroundings. This marks one of the recurring dialectics in Réda’s work arises, when the point of passage is blocked, whether that be represented by a locked door, a shuttered window or by a wall (‘Sur le seuil obscur je m’arrête’, CC 15). In particular, the wall (that first appears forcibly in Hors les murs and that has been sustained throughout the texts) obstructs points of access (both in physical and visual terms) and, in contrast to the door and the window, its purpose is antithetical to the threshold. Réda’s representation of le mur denotes an inherent tension in the poet’s liminal framework, where the threshold is undermined by forces that obstruct. Time and again, the boundaries that Réda perceives in the world around him come in the physical guise of the wall:

Alors, diminuant toujours le long du mur morose
Qui disjoint du chemin de fer la rue Castagnary
(CC 30)

23 Pierre Mabille’s study of the mirror as a literary image explores this link between physical and metaphysical reflection, where Mabille comments that ‘devant le miroir, nous sommes amenés à nous interroger sur la nature exacte de la réalité, sur les liens qui unissent les représentations mentales aux objets qui les provoquent [...]’. Placée devant l’expérience du miroir, la pensée s’engage dans une suite interminable d’interrogations inquiètes. Entre les objets de leur reflet, le jeu des échanges dialectiques ne cesse plus’, Le Miroir du merveilleux (Paris: Éditions de minuit, 1962), pp.24 & 29.
In this example, the wall is attributed with a sullen appearance ('morose') and it is associated with destructive energy ('disjoint'), highlighting the fact that the wall not only blocks any potential threshold, but it utterly separates two routes. Thus, the wall's primary function of enclosing and excluding seems to destabilize Réda's depiction of doors and windows, where an awareness of barriers is privileged over the crossing of thresholds.

In contrast to the door and window, the physical structure of the wall forbids almost any contact between l'ici and l'au-delà, for, 'le mur est massif, de pierre pleine, dur, fini [...]. Le mur accomplit son rôle, il borde, il bouche, il sépare, il dérobe, il obstrue'). Réda's poetry reflects his primary preoccupation with 'le monde horizontal' (RC 70), a focus that is necessarily challenged by the structure of the wall, as it rises up vertically from the horizontal axis. The physical barrier that the wall creates stops the poet in his tracks and obliges him to look upwards, and therefore it forces the poet's gaze from a horizontal to a vertical view. In contrast to the door, which is portrayed in terms of a potential passageway, the wall is conveyed as a non-negotiable barrier that clearly divides two spatial contexts:

Quand tout-à-coup se dressent
Les murs blancs d'une forteresse
Dans un bleu saharien.

(BS 21)

Here, the impenetrable nature of the wall is epitomised by the image of the fortress, the walls of which seem forbidding and threatening (as conveyed by 'se dresser' and 'murs blancs'). The wall is built with the express purpose of blocking physical and visual access, frustrating the poet's desire to move beyond his present physical context. In the main, the wall is portrayed as a powerful force:

J'éteignais et j'apercevais en bas les arbres noirs
Se ranger comme des fourgons pleins de nuit prisonnière
Le long des murs méchants qui rapetissent.

(RC 18)

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Walls dominate the landscape, delineating a border alongside which the trees are lined. The adjectives employed create a sense of sinister enclosure (‘noirs’, ‘prisonnière’, ‘méchants’), highlighted by the fact that these ‘murs méchants’ dwarf all that surrounds them. Far from being a threshold, the wall becomes a malevolent force, closing in on the poet’s world.

This imaginative link also plays a part in human relationships, where the wall forms the backdrop to sinister machinations:

Donc le temps est venu de les rassembler, tous les autres,  
Tous ceux que j’ai perdus dans les coins obscurs de ma vie  
Ou qui d’eux-mêmes détachent leur ombre de mon ombre  
Attendent là butés sans comprendre ce qu’ils attendent  
Contre un mur au fond d’une chambre où nul ne les saura.

(ART 200)

Here Reda depicts a scene in which individual identity and freedom have been denied. Having collected these people from ‘les coins obscurs’, the narrator then brings them ‘au fond d’une chambre’, an anonymous place in which they are unknown and kept unaware of what is happening. It is in this setting that the narrator hatches his plan:

Il faut pourtant les retrouver l’un après l’autre  
Et les convaincre avec des mots précipités presque inaudibles  
De me suivre: en bas au tournant je leur dirai pourquoi

(ART 200)

The wall plays a significant part in the scene, for it serves as the physical barrier that prevents escape. The reader’s attention is drawn to this feature of the wall by the emphasis placed on the vertical lines created by the characters. In the scene imagined by the narrator, the anonymous ‘tous les autres’ are gathered up one by one and lined against a wall. Once in this position, they are robbed of any individuality, for now they are referred to only in relation to their position in the row against the wall (‘le plus proche’, ‘le plus lointain’). The subject imagines himself walking along the line of people who have been forced into this immobile state. The impenetrable nature of the wall means that they have no means of escape and are rendered utterly vulnerable. In contrast, the narrator displays his
unrestricted freedom of movement (and, symbolically, his power). While the
unwitting victims of this plan are emprisoned against the wall, they are also kept
in ignorance and therefore are mentally walled in by the narrator.

Elsewhere, the notion of entrapment is juxtaposed with the wall image,
suggesting an association in the poet’s imagination with confusion and isolation:

[...] vous iriez à votre tour la nuit sans moi, perdue
entre les murs et les couloirs quand tout l’obscur remue
et remonte pour respirer timide à la surface

(R 61)

Even when the wall is not linked with darkness, figuratively it is still a structure
that obscures, as Réda depicts it in terms of being a secretive force:

Entre les quatre murs aussi blancs que des ravisseurs
Qui n’espèrent plus, qui s’endorment,
Comme l’unique enfant de l’erreur et de l’amertume

La séparation est restée, elle oublie, elle joue
Avec une épingle, avec rien contre le plancher nu.

(T 17)

For Réda, the walls are seen as being as anonymous as ‘des ravisseurs’ for they
forbid any form of personal identity (‘l’idée même de mur bientôt s’efface’). As a
barrier, the wall is synonymous with separation and it divides space definitively
(‘elle oublie’, ‘une masse de brouillard’). By extension, the wall is associated
with feelings of uncertainty and failure (‘pourquoi/ce long cheminement par
l’obscurité des matrices,/si c’était pour finir, au mur, sanglotant comme un con’,
ART 135). Consequently, everything that lies beyond the wall assumes an air of
mystery:

Et derrière un mur rose un parc oublié s’abandonne

(PLR 16)

Rue Santos-Dumont ce mur pâle et pacificateur
Comme l’oubli

(HM 24)
In the above two examples, the wall comes not only to signify a spatial barrier, but a temporal one. The image of the wall is juxtaposed with the idea of memory loss (‘un parc oublié’, ‘Comme l’oubli’), whereby the wall represents an absolute separation of present and future. This association with l’oubli suggests that the wall is a structure beyond which the present is forgotten and thus it is one that the poet associates with freedom (s’abandonne’) and harmony (‘pacificateur’).

‘Ces murs qui nous ont si longtemps contenus’

In the texts, there is a continual tension between the poet’s desire to move Hors les murs and his awareness of walls at every turn. This would suggest that Réda’s seemingly carefree vagabondage is more problematic than it would first seem, for his pathway is often blocked by the impenetrable structure of the wall. The wall denies any possible passageway to l’au-delà and, as such, it is used frequently by Réda to express denial, confusion and fear. Nonetheless, it is important to note that the wall is not always employed in negative terms in the poetry. Paradoxically, although it is a barrier, its impenetrability and strength can also provide a source of security. This aspect of the wall is one that Deguy remarks on when he comments that ‘pourtant, est-ce à lui de le faire, il protège, il soutène l’insecte à 100%, il se lamente, il adosse la décision, il est compté jusqu’à l’os, il transperce les eaux’. Similarly, for Réda there is a certain attraction to the comforting stability that the wall-image offers and he states that ‘J’aimais l’absolu contre un mur’ (T 25). The walls of a house, for example, function as a protective barrier, taking on the marks of the lives of those who lived within:

[...] voir le vide à travers ces murs qui nous ont si longtemps contenus,
avec les traces pâles des souvenirs, l’empreinte des habitudes.

(RC 22)

In this instance, the ‘vide’ of the walls is created when the inhabitants vacate the premises. The walls are portrayed in terms of strength and security (‘ces murs qui

25 Deguy, Poèmes II, p.42.
nous ont si longtemps contenus’), and they bear the marks of the inhabitants. Thus the wall’s function of enclosing and containing is not always a negative one:

Dans l’évidence et l’indicible était cette simplicité:
L’angle du toit d’aluminium, le mur blanc perpendiculaire
À l’horizon de granges basses, de boqueteaux rouillés,
Étroit segment de paix dans une profondeur active et lumineuse

(A 43)

The wall can offer protection from the world beyond, creating an ‘étroit segment de paix’, while enclosing the poet in a safe space:

[...] Je vais avec ma solitude
Entre des murs s’ouvrant parfois sur un gazon

(RC 149)

‘Les parois de verre’

As a threshold, the door is a physical point of passage and thus is principally linked with the language of movement. The window grants visual access to another space and so is linked with the notion of light and sight. Walls, however, prohibit both physical and visual access:

Et les murs, ses doigts bleus d’aveugle cherchant la différence
Avec douceur, disant: comme je t’aime, comme je t’aime,
Écoute, est-il pour nous d’autre distance que l’amour [...]? 

(R 18)

If, in Lacanian terms, ‘l’image spéculaire semble être le seuil du monde visible’, then the wall is the antithesis of ‘l’image spéculaire’ for it is a barrier to that world, blocking the poet’s visual point of passage to l’ailleurs. In the above example, abstractions have assumed the threatening power of immediacy through the use of concrete modifiers. The walls are personified, becoming an image of blindness itself for they block visual access (‘les murs, ses doigts bleus d’aveugle’). The references to speaking and listening (‘disant’, ‘Écoute’) emphasise

the fact that sound offers one of the only means of sensing that which lies on the other side of the wall. Accordingly, Réda often privileges the sense of hearing when employing the wall image. By foregrounding the sounds that come from the other side of the wall, Réda chooses to focus on possible communication with l’ailleurs and, in this way, it is as of he is attempting to undermine the wall’s function as a barrier. It is a strong indicator of Réda’s liminal mentality that he refuses to accept the absolute impenetrability of the wall, but instead uses any means possible to find a point of access. By using the sense of sound as a springboard, the poet is able to project himself beyond the wall and therefore even the apparently impenetrable nature of the wall is converted into a threshold image in the poet’s imagination:

J’ecoutais le trop-plein de bleu brûler dans les orties
Et le souffle animal d’une locomotive
Veiller sur la solitude des dieux.
Alors en haut d’un arbre ou dans l’ombre d’un mur,
Je fus le moyeu, les rayons et le bord de la roue
Accélérant.

(RC 15)

The texts draw an unlikely link between the wall image and communication with that which lies beyond, as Réda refuses to accept that all forms of access to l’au-delà have been denied. However, despite this insistence on the liminal capacity of the wall image, the texts do suggest that the wall may even distort the sound that comes from the other side:

Le crissement léger des pas qui ne résonnent plus
Contre les murs

(RC 88)

Et les voix de l’autre côté reviennent, restent prises
Dans l’épaisseur des murs appuyés à l’été

(T 57)

The wall continues to conceal and muffle (‘des pas qui ne résonnent plus', 'les voix de l’autre côté [...] restent prises'), a fact from which the poet cannot escape (‘À peine les murs s’ils endiguent l’affreuse monotonie/Mais peu de cris les
traversent, peu de sanglots’, T 64). Yet the privileging of the sense of sound still permits the poet to see the wall in terms of a threshold, however problematic it may be.

In the same way, Réda’s imaginative proclivity for thresholds rather than barriers is revealed in the texts in the clear distinction that is drawn between le mur and la paroi. In general, Réda describes le mur in terms of its solid structure, highlighting its impenetrability. In the poems, the portrayal of ‘les murs sombres’ (RC 143) contrasts with that of les parois, where the latter appears to be a much less threatening presence. While le mur is a barrier, the function of la paroi as a partition or inner wall suggests borders rather than barriers:

Nous dévalerons sans fin le long des parois vaporeuses, sous le poids de ce que nous aurons abandonné.  
(RC 23)

La paroi marks out and divides space and, unlike le mur, it is an image that does suggest the possibility of access to the other side:

Et pas l’ombre d’une vapeur sur les parois de verre  
Qui renferment l’espace et qu’on voit sans arrêt frémir  
(RC 68)

There is no shadow cast on la paroi and it is a structure associated with transparency (‘de verre’). The wall is no longer a dominant force, but one that is fragile (‘vaporeuses’, ‘frémir’). The distinction that Réda makes between borders and barriers is of particular significance in relation to this exploration of the threshold. Le mur is expressed in terms of being a threatening force because it is a barrier that impedes the poet and obscures his view. In contrast, la paroi is a less substantial wall that may be negotiated, and is expressed more in terms of a delineating border.

‘De ce côté des murs’

For the travelling poet, the wall represents a threatening force, impeding physical (and, by implication, creative) exploration. However, despite the obvious
limitations it imposes, this does not render it devoid of liminal potential. Rather, while it is true that ‘le mur est là, d’abord, opaque, inécutable, innommé’, Réda’s description of his introduction to poetry depicts the wall image in positive terms, as a signifier of new possibilities:

Ce qu’il faut prudemment appeler en moi: vie de l’esprit, a été éveillé très tôt par d’interminables murs de casernes, oh magnifiques, du blanc de chaux immaculé qu’exigeait encore en ce temps la superbe de la cavalerie, et dont les ressources d’adaptation aux nuances du jour se montraient infinies. Un peu plus tard, la poésie est arrivée comme un événement inépuisable.

(CV 17)

The ‘murs de casernes’ mark an absolute and seemingly endless barrier between life within the walls and the poet’s existence, a division that is emphasised by the formidable impression of the walls’ whitewashed appearance. However, rather than instilling feelings of isolation or intimidation in Réda, these walls are seen as being ‘magnifiques’ as the colour, size and scale of their structure allow them to reflect an infinite and subtle play of light. Thus, once again the poet focuses on the liminal quality of a potential barrier, where the reflective quality of the wall shows it up, literally, in a whole new light. The revelatory aspect of this experience is juxtaposed with the poet’s first encounter with poetry as ‘un événement’ where, in the same way that the wall reflects a myriad shades of light, so poetry is portrayed as having a dynamic quality (‘inépuisable’). The poet then elaborates on this association between the wall and poetry, with more explicit reference to alterity:

Les murs m’ont enseigné qu’ils étaient là et qu’en même temps, par ce fait même, ils témoignent pour une autre insistance perdue en eux, inaccessible. Ainsi parle la poésie, et je m’en tiens à cette énigme, sans prétendre l’approfondir comme font les théories et les béatitudes.

(CV 17-18)

27 Jossua remarks on a similar phenomenon in Hugo’s poetry, where ‘les images liminaires les plus fréquentes chez Hugo sont celles, assez hostiles, du mur ou de la porte fermée — mais en général, […] cet obstacle n’est pas si compact, élevé ou verrouillé qu’il ne permette aucun coup d’œil ou aucun espoir d’ouverture’, p.80.
28 Jossua, p.80.
The wall’s sheer physical presence renders it undeniably present and yet signifies the existence of an unapproachable autre. Likewise, Réda regards poetry as being both ‘là’ and yet signalling something that lies beyond the immediately tangible. It is precisely because the wall functions as structure that delineates and obscures that it proves to be such a fascinating (while albeit threatening) presence for, like poetry, it represents an incontrovertible and inaccessible other. Thus, the wall provides Réda with an image in which he finds space to voice his contradictions and confusions in relation to poetry:

Maintenant, dans mes intermittences, de quelque certitude qu’elle m’ait effectivement comblé, il m’arrive de considérer la poésie avec le même désenchantement que le football et les prières: elle m’a laissé de ce côté des murs.

(CV 18)

The Journey

‘Je ne suis qu’un humble rôdeur/Du monde connaissable’

Réda’s keen interest in travel forms the basis of a great deal of his poetic expression and, as every journey must begin by negotiating a threshold of some description, it constitutes an important aspect of the poet’s liminal framework. One of the particularly striking aspects of Réda’s vagabondage is the fact that it is concerned primarily with the poet’s immediate locality, rather than exotic locations. In the main, his interest in travel is limited to modest Parisian suburbs and his poetry is based largely on observations made during unremarkable journeys around Paris. The scenes he depicts are often those that unfold as he waits for buses, sits in train stations or ambles around backstreets. This contemporary poet feels little compulsion to venture beyond an immediately accessible environment, and displays none of the exotic imaginings often typical of the travel poem genre. This attitude stands in sharp contrast to that of a travel poet such as Rimbaud, who sees movement as being bound up integrally with a sense of the exotic:
Je rêvais croisades, voyages de découvertes dont on n’a pas de relations, républiques sans histoires, guerres de religion étouffées, révolutions de mœurs, déplacements de races et de continents: je croyais à tous les enchantements.29

In Réda’s poems, little attraction or interest is displayed in arduous journeys to far-flung destinations:

Là-bas vagabondent sans doute
Les passants étourdis [...] 

Ils allaient. Sait-on si l’on sort 
de cette mosaïque
Où ma nature prosaïque
Me préserve du sort 

D’errer dans un désert de sable
Sans fin ni profondeur?
Je ne suis qu’un humble rôdeur
Du monde connaissable. (BS 21-22)

Here, the poet’s use of a traditional rhyme (‘sort’, ‘sort’, ‘sable’, ‘connaissable’) is thrown into relief by the use of unusual rhymes (‘mosaïque’, ‘prosaique’).30 Réda’s overall preference for localised travel is one that is evident from his first collection of poems. Even at this early stage in his career, the titles of Réda’s poems suggest the overwhelmingly commonplace nature of his travels (‘Personnages dans la banlieue’, ‘Le soir sur la Charente’, ‘L’automne rue Rousselet’, ‘Le ciel à Villaroche’). This trend is one that continues throughout the texts, where place-names run as a common thread from one collection to the next. Similarly, his poems are full of references to the various modes of transport that the poet takes, whether by foot, solex or train. In Hors les murs an outwards motion can be traced as the poet’s attention radiates out along the ‘périphérie’ to the Eaux et forêts in ‘Versailles’, ‘l’Ourcq’, ‘l’Orge et l’Yvette’. In L’Herbe des Talus, Réda’s focus shifts perceptibly as he directs his gaze much further afield


30 Other noteworthy examples of highly unusual rhymes in Réda’s poetry include ‘il/Rejoue infatigablement Blueberry Hill’ (SD 15), ‘dans le regard [...] made in Zanzibar’ (SM 33), ‘tels quels [...] Book of Kells’ (SD 14), ‘personnel [...] O’Connell’ (SD 16).
with poems entitled ‘Le Siège de Vienne’, ‘L’Air de Londres’, ‘Les Ananas de Prague’ and ‘Le Chat de Budapest’. With the passing years, Réda’s poetry continues to explore familiar and unknown territory alike, where the most banal of scenes can be a source of poetic inspiration:

Ainsi dans toute ville on connaît des instants
Donc chacun vous atteint comme une flèche douce. [...]

Rien ne signale ces refuges inconstants:
N’importe quel endroit en détient la ressource;
Souvent le plus banal, en travers de la course,
Les projette et les fait s’ouvrir à deux battants.

(ND 21)

Whatever the destination or the mode of transport described in Réda’s poems, the poet’s desire for movement (and, by implication, for crossing new thresholds) remains undiminished:

Maintenant je sors à nouveau d’une maison du temps.
Faire autrement je ne peux pas, non, il faut que je sorte. [...]
Tantôt vous comprenez c’est plus fort que moi, [...]
Je m’en vais sans tourner la tête, car on m’attend.

(R 69)

‘Déjà immobile devant le ciel’

Réda’s poetic career begins with a retrospective tone in the Amen collection, where the poems focus on the passage of time and autumn landscapes in which ‘vous piétenez sans fin devant le mur de l’étendue’ (A 22). There is a significant change in tone in Récitatif, in which the poet’s focus is re-directed forwards (‘Je m’en vais sans tourner la tête, car on m’attend’, R 69). Having moved beyond his immobilité, Réda portrays both himself and others (as a non-specific ’nous’) as being ‘dans ce mouvement qui toujours nous emporte./Nous pouvons croire sans arrêt passer par une porte’(LU 85). As a poet who focuses so intently on movement, the comparatively few references that Réda makes to the stationary state, such as the three below, are particularly striking:
Ici; ne bougeons pas; le souvenir de cet instant
Qui vient se penche sur nos fronts et nous sommes perdus [...] 
Nous voici là, debout dans la lumière de l'exil,
Interrogeant en vain notre ombre au soleil qui décroît.

(A 46)

Étroit segment de paix dans une profondeur active et lumineuse,
Interrompu à l'opposé par le cadre où je me tenais
Depuis longtemps déjà immobile devant le ciel

(A 43)

Je tourne entre le milieu du fleuve et le parvis blond de l'église,
je suis comme le démon variable de l'immobilité.

(HM 12)

In these examples, there is a strong awareness of delineation that is brought about by the motionless state. The stationary poet is aware of a system of contrasts and divisions (‘lumière’/‘ombre’, ‘une profondeur active’/‘déjà immobile’), in which he may also be caught (‘Interrompu à l’opposé par le cadre où je me tenais’, ‘Je tourne entre [...]’). In contrast to Rimbaud’s appreciation of both ‘le charme des lieux fuyants’ and ‘le délice surnaturel des stations’, Réda’s poetry suggests a tension between these two states. Indeed, elsewhere the texts reveal the poet’s frustration with the immobile state, as these moments for reflection and contemplation offer little or no appeal, but rather instil feelings of restriction:

Il est tard maintenant. Me voici comme chaque soir
Claquemuré dans la cuisine où bourdonne une mouche. [...] 
Alors comprendra-t-on pourquoi les jours se sont noyés 
L’un après l’autre, jours divers, mais c’est toujours le même,
Hier, demain, qui réapparaît aujourd’hui
Et qui me voit rôder de la cuisine aux chambres vides, [...] 
L’illusion que tout aurait pu de quelque autre manière
Conduire à d’autres seuils — mais la même ombre m’attendait.

(R 29-30)

When movement is restricted, Réda’s perception of time is also affected, with the result that he feels that any sense of progress is merely an illusion (‘L’un après l’autre, jours divers, mais c’est toujours le même;/ Hier, demain, qui réapparaît aujourd’hui’). The poet has the sensation that he is trapped in ‘chambres vides’, where he feels he is not simply killing time, but that the days are drowning (‘les
jours se sont noyés’). The sense of expectation and hope that ‘d’autres seuils’ may bring is overshadowed by this enclosure from which he is unable to escape. For this reason, the poet claims that ‘ce n’est pas travailler qui nous fatigue, mais/Attendre dans la rue’ and it is the passivity of this motionless state that seems to lead to a sense of hopelessness:

Demain
Sans doute arrivera mais n’a pas d’existence
Et nous ignore.

(PLR 43)

‘Je suis sûr que le monde avance avec mes jambes’

In contrast to the negative feelings often associated with the motionless state, Réda’s poetry conveys the pleasure he takes in his walks around the French capital. As Réda ambles through the quiet side streets and hidden corners of the city, an impetus to explore reveals itself as one of the underlying sources of inspiration in the poems. The poet’s enquiring nature denotes a pervasive awareness of alterity and is therefore particularly relevant to a study of his perception and representation of the threshold. Réda’s underlying awareness of thresholds is reflected in the many and varied references made to the unremarkable journeys of everyday life. It is around these everyday events that Réda scaffolds his poems, as he delights in the potential adventure that these humble trips afford (‘Porter cette lettre à la poste est ma seule aventure’, CC 29). Even the simplest of trips to the café or record shop affords the poet an opportunity to interact with his surroundings and thus becomes ‘une sorte d’odyssée moderne, mineure, discrète’.

Réda is intrigued by the most mundane of journeys and his tireless fascination with travel means that he is constantly exploring new routes:

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S'il s'agit simplement d'aller à la poste, j'y vais à pied. C'est un de mes buts favoris de promenade. Et, bien que j'aie sans doute épuisé toutes les variantes de ce trajet, j'y découvre encore quelques charmes.

(RP 37)

The poet's ongoing exploration of his *environs* is prompted by what he refers to as 'ce perpétuel élan vers le départ' (RC 59). This ceaseless movement necessarily involves an awareness of thresholds, as the poet is constantly seeking out new journeys to embark upon and, consequently, new thresholds to cross. The texts are filled with linear patterns of departure and arrival, where every destination in turn becomes a point of departure:

Tourné vers l'étroite fenêtre,
J'interrogeais des yeux le ciel tranquille,
sachant que la réponse était déjà perdue
Et que, mon verre vide, il me faudrait partir encore

(ART 44)

Réda's poems are charged with references to comings and goings, entering and leaving buildings, streets and towns, thus communicating 'un mouvement fait de départs et de retours':

*Nous entrons au matin dans un monde inconnu,*
*Nous le quittons le soir pour un autre plus trouble.*
*Entre les deux nous franchissons souvent le double*  
*Du parcours qu'un peu de sagesse aurait fixé.*
*En est-on, comme on dit, beaucoup plus avancé?*

(RP 39)

In the above example, the sense of movement is illustrated by the second rhyming couplet, where the contrast between 'fixé' and 'avancé' is highlighted by their position in the lines. This is reiterated by the temporal references ('au matin', 'le soir') that draw attention to the continuous nature of the process.

Elsewhere in the poems, we see that Réda's fascination with travel is counterbalanced at times by a certain sense of frustration ('il y a toujours encore une marche à descendre/et à quoi bon?', ART 159) and resignation ('Et j'avançais

33 Maulpoix, p.15.
de mon côté, de rue en rue—/Ainsi ce qui devait arriver arriva’, RC 42). Nonetheless, while sensing the underlying similarity of every trip, he is determined to continue exploring and crossing new thresholds (‘Je marche inattaquable’, RP 82) and to undertake these ‘petits voyages’:

Mais tout s’accomplit à son heure, on décide peu. De nouveau j’entrepris des petits voyages. Humbles, oui, et parfois de trois quatre kilomètres aux alentours [...] Puis d’autres plus considérables mais guère différents pour le fond.

(ART 149)

The way in which Réda describes his travel experiences indicates his imaginative sensitivity to the threshold and to alterity, where the first step of any trip marks ‘l’ouverture de tous sentiers pour l’approche inconnue’ (ART 121). In the poems, the journey seems to involve not only the crossing of a physical threshold, but also a metaphysical experience:

Il suffit d’avancer alors encore un peu
Pour passer sans produire un déplacement d’onde
A travers la substance impalpable [...] 
Le monde obscur et vide est éclairé.

(BS 26)

Physical movement is linked with revelation and a deeper understanding of the world, thereby allowing the poet to experience a type of intimate communion with his surroundings:

Mais je vous aime ainsi, chemins, déserts et libres. 
Et tandis que les rails me tiennent à l’écart, 
Vous venez vous confondre au réseau de mes fibres.

(RC 59)

This idea is particularly prevalent in Recommandations aux promeneurs, a collection of poems in which Réda takes a lighthearted look at the joys and

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34 Ezine attributes this to a distinction he makes between journeying and wandering, stating that ‘la flânerie, à la différence du voyage proprement dit, ne laisse aucun répit à celui qui s’y adonne.”
frustrations of travelling. The act of walking involves immediate physical interaction with the *environs* and thus, for Réda, it is perceived as being a means whereby the poet may feel an affinity with the outside world:

> Je suis sûr que le monde avance avec mes jambes,  
> Pense avec mon cerveau, regarde avec mes yeux.  
> *(RC 122)*

On foot, all of the poet’s senses are stimulated, and he can submerge himself in his surroundings. The poet *à pied* is engaged in a rhythmic communion with his environment, an act of motion that Réda perceives as holding a certain purity:

> Entre-temps toutefois, seule une profonde indétermination peut nous plonger au cœur de la promenade, à soi-même son but. [...] Comme d’autre part l’idée de promenade se prête mal à une rigoureuse définition, le choix d’un but précis n’altère pas forcément la pureté de sa nature.  
> *(RP 36-37)*

For Réda, the act of walking is inextricably linked with poetry, as the former acts, not only as a vehicle to creative inspiration, but allows the poet himself to be the medium for that inspiration (‘la vraie poésie de la route, qui surgit du pas du marcheur’, *CCA* 99). Similarly elsewhere, the physical experience of the *promenade* and the patterns created by footprints serve as a form of writing, as the poet refers to ‘des phrases que nos pas écrivent quand nous circulons’ (*C* 11). Significantly, Réda does not designate the creation of this type of poetry to poets alone, but rather it is expressed as a phenomenon to be experienced by all those who walk (‘marcheur’, ‘nos pas’, ‘nous circulons’). Indeed, the strong reciprocity depicted between physical movement and poetic creation is portrayed as being somewhat involuntary and inevitable (‘surgit’, ‘quand nous circulons’), rather than deliberately premeditated, thus highlighting the intimate relationship that Réda perceives between the two activities.

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Voyager suppose en effet un but dont le flâneur se prive par l’incertitude même de sa navigation.’, *Le Nouvel Observateur*, p.115.

> 35 Jacques Plessen comments on the general association between walking and poetry, stating that *promenade* et *poésie* ne forment pas seulement un couple parce que avec une prédilection certaine, les poètes ont fait de l’expérience de la marche le sujet de leur œuvre: dans leur esprit la poésie elle-même tend à devenir une promenade, une marche à travers un monde plein de merveilles ou une excursion dans l’inconnu, *Promenade et poésie: l’expérience de la marche et du mouvement dans l’œuvre de Rimbaud* (The Hague: Mouton, 1967), p.4.
Significantly, Réda seems to be much more aware of the threshold as a phenomenon than of precise physical realities, with the result that geographical destinations often appear to be almost immaterial to the poet. Throughout the poems, Réda focuses on the activity of walking itself rather than the goal ('je ne choisis que très rarement la ligne droite', *RP* 52) and he is seemingly content to circumnavigate the same familiar scenes over and over again and, in this sense he is a 'promeneur paradoxal'. On one level, this type of *flânerie* grants Réda the freedom to wander at will and thereby to perhaps happen upon the unexpected even in the most common settings. However, the apparent aimlessness of his journeys is not simply an indicator of an ambivalence on the part of the poet towards setting goals. Rather, despite Réda's interest in the tangible world, there is a fundamental awareness of a metaphysical destination through an imminent revelation, made possible through 'ce vagabondage':

Une fois de plus, j'ai bien peur de n'avoir rien appris. Mais demain je saurai peut-être. Et ensuite à nouveau l'oubli. Donc plutôt ce vagabondage, plutôt cette maladie. [...] Ainsi un jour ça va, un autre ça ne va plus. A chacun son petit pas de danse vers sa limite, son dieu, son précipice.

*(CV 21)*

Certainly, the way to this encounter with a transcendental other is seen as something that must be endured rather than actively sought out ('plutôt cette maladie') and is highly qualified ('j'ai bien peur', 'peut-être'). Nonetheless, while the ultimate nature of this encounter is non-specific, it is portrayed as inevitable, as each individual moves inexorably towards this metaphysical threshold.


[37] In contrast to Ezine, John Taylor argues the importance of the Réda's directionless journeys, stating that 'it is precisely because his wanderings are “aimless” that he inevitably comes across “un de ces prodiges modestes mais incontestables”', ‘Jacques Réda’, *Times Literary Supplement*, 1 August 1997, p.22. In the light of Réda's consistent attraction to *la flânerie* and its relatively few negative connotations in the texts, Taylor's positive reading of Réda's apparent lack of direction seems to be more in keeping with the poet's own priorities as regards travel.
In the same way that the wall can impede the poet's travels, so the recurring image of the labyrinth denotes difficulties that Réda associates with his travels. In sharp contrast to a normal road, the labyrinth distorts a straight and direct path, forcing the traveller to find his way in and then out again. In this way, the labyrinth blurs the distinction between points of departure and those of destination. As Bachelard comments, within the poet's imaginative framework, the maze's purpose is antithetic to that of the threshold, for it represents 'un passé bloqué et un avenir bouché. Il est emprisonné dans un chemin. Enfin, étrange fatalisme du rêve de labyrinthe: on y revient parfois au même point, mais on ne retourne jamais sur ses pas.' This is clearly seen throughout Réda's work, where the labyrinth is frequently employed metaphorically to convey uncertainty:

Encore, il pourrait croire appartenir lui-même
À l'un de ces miroirs innombrables tirant
Du jeu de leurs reflets un parfait stratagème
Pour l'égarer dans un dédale transparent. [...]
Il entend le mirage où la nuit l'a bouclé
Se remplir de sons crus et creux qui le replongent
Dans un autre univers dont il n'a pas la clé

(RC 60)

Here, the confusing choice of paths in a maze is reiterated by the emphasis on bewildering multiples ('ces miroirs innombrables', 'leurs reflets', 'un autre univers'), while the subject's feeling of entrapment are highlighted by the rhyme 'bouclé' and 'la clé'. The scenario that is described in the above example stands in contrast to Réda's overall textual representations of travel, as the subject is no longer wandering aimlessly, but has been deceived ('Pour l'égarer dans un dédale transparent'). The maze image appears to be inextricably linked with a more sinister portrayal le liminaire, where access to l'autre is no longer a matter of choice and thus the individual finds himself in another existence from which, rather like the labyrinth, he cannot escape ('dont il n'a pas la clé').

As Réda explores the lesser-known quartiers of Paris, he is aware of the labyrinthine quality of these areas. It is significant to note, however, that the maze
image is used primarily in conjunction with the poet’s remarks on poetry and the creative process. In *Retour au calme*, he compares his wanderings around the maze of Parisian streets with his writing experiences:

> Je ne sais qui ou quoi m’attends dans ce dédale  
> À vrai dire sans grand mystère où j’aime aller  
> Le dimanche ou le soir [...]  
> Mais c’est toujours la même histoire que j’éreinte,  
> Page à page quand tout en est depuis longtemps  
> Connue, comme le plan de ce faux labyrinthe  
> Où le soir me rappelle et cache qui j’attends.  

*(RC 121)*

There is a heightened sense of expectancy as the poet explores the streets (‘Je ne sais qui ou quoi’) and yet this is counterbalanced by a familiarity with his *environ* (‘sans grand mystère’) that has been brought about by repeated trips (‘où j’aime aller/Le dimanche ou le soir’). This familiarity takes on a more negative aspect is when related to poetry, as Réda feels that all creative possibilities have been exhausted (as emphasised by ‘toujours la même’, ‘j’éreinte’, ‘depuis longtemps/Connue’). Elsewhere, the comparison between the labyrinth and language is reiterated, where both can deceive and mislead:

> Au cœur du labyrinthe enfin dans la sournoiserie  
> D’une phrase sans verbe en rond au hasard de ses mots  

*(C 39)*

Here, the confusion brought about by the maze is re-enacted by the text, where the lack of punctuation and the stream of prepositions (‘Au’, ‘du’, dans’, ‘D’, ‘sans’, ‘en’, ‘au’, ‘de’) serve to confuse rather than clarify, functioning in a manner similar to that of the series of detours and dead ends to be found in a maze. The feelings of isolation and anxiety that Réda experiences as a poet are somewhat akin to the labyrinthine experience, where ‘on est poète toute sa vie, mais en négatif le plus souvent, dans l’attente et dans l’inquiétude. Il aurait fallu ne jamais commencer’ *(CV 13)*. Equally, this sense of uncertainty and a lack of direction that the poet seems to associate with the writing process causes him to compare poetry to a detour, where the poet is forced to take a long and circuitous route before

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reaching his desired destination ('Ce fut un long détour ce murmure de poésie', \( R \) 25). Yet, in the same way that Réda's seemingly aimless wanderings cause him to happen upon unexpected discoveries, so he believes that poetry must contain this element of detour ('il y a dans la poésie [...] un éclatant ou au contraire imperceptible et humble mais nécessaire détour' \( CV \) 75).

‘Un jet d’acier’

Réda’s interest in travel is not limited solely to strolls by foot and his poems take the reader on various excursions both in the Parisian environs and further afield. One of the poet’s preferred modes of transport is the train, and it is portrayed in the texts as encapsulating the exhilaration and excitement possible in travel:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Si doux, ce glissement du train de banlieue à l’aurore} & \\
\text{Que c’est lui qui m’éveille aussi le dimanche et me mène} & \\
\text{Jusqu’à l’enclos où j’ai mes tomates et mes tulipes.} & \\
\end{align*}
\]

\( (R \ 30) \)

Whereas the promenade is frequently leisurely and localised, the train is expressed in terms of movement and release (describing a journey on the Dublin rail system, Réda states that ‘je voulais voler vers l’espace’, \( C \) 113). However, Réda’s enjoyment of trains is not based on their efficiency and speed. Rather it is based on the fact that train-travel provides uninterrupted time to observe and reflect on what ‘j’aperçois, lorsque je passe en train’ \( (RC \ 59) \), as can be seen in the everyday details that he provides in his descriptions of train journeys, as the following example illustrates:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{De gare en gare un jour d’automne doux et coi} & \\
\text{Sous un ciel croulant d’or et d’orageuses grappes,} & \\
\text{Je monte vers le nord à petites étapes,} & \\
\text{Toujours indifférent aux comment et pourquoi [...]} & \\
\text{Voici la Basilique, ensuite l’Hippodrome,} & \\
\text{Le Lac qui vaut en pittoresque un plat d’étain,} & \\
\text{Eaubonne, et l’or de Montmorency qui déteint} & \\
\text{Jusque dans un canal boueux [...]} & \\
\end{align*}
\]

\( (HM \ 90) \)
The network of steel tracks dissect the countryside as the trains themselves create a ceaseless pattern of arrivals and departures and for Réda, the rail tracks form ‘un jet d’acier sans défaut’ that penetrates the landscape:

Au sommet, un train de soleil halète sur la voie
Qui, dans les bois, des deux côtés, aussi loin que l’on voie,
D’un seul jet s’enfonce en tremblant vers des pays perdus.

(RC 58)

The act of travelling between two points, however close in proximity they may be, is both the mediation and separation of two distinct realities and the train becomes the means of passage between l’ici and l’ailleurs (‘vers des pays perdus’). The complex network of steel lines cutting across the landscape reveals no clear beginning or end (it is ‘sans arrivée et sans départ’, HM 25), as every destination may become a point of departure. Thus, the process of rail travel prompts Réda to reflect on the nature of movement, as he conveys a sense that the train suspends the traveller between departure and destination, with the result that ‘on en vient à ne plus même concevoir de départ, d’arrivée: on ne voit qu’une multitude de points qui sont l’une et l’autre à la fois’ (HT 129).

The experience of train-travel demands a certain amount of preparation and forethought and can even assume a ritual significance in the poetic imagination (Roubaud notes that ‘les voyages en train, disais-je, demandent une préparation minutieuse. Il ne suffit pas de monter bêtement dans un wagon.’). When travelling by foot, the individual must take a step across the threshold from the interior and into the exterior. When travelling by train, one must step back into an enclosed space and thus, having crossed this threshold, one has relinquished autonomy within a new space, in which one is no longer in control of the journeying act. Paradoxically, while the train speeds through the countryside, the traveller is forced to assume the passive role of a passenger, for ‘le voyageur ne voyage plus: il est le centre immobile et hors du temps mesurable d’un espace en

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mouvement qui s’organise autour de lui'. For this reason, when the poet travels by train, the emphasis is not on spatial displacement, but rather it is on to the crossing of a temporal threshold. Rather than directing his focus on a specific destination, Réda feels himself to be the focal point of the experience ('il est le centre immobile', 'qui s’organise autour de lui'). Looking outside the train window, one can see the outside world flash by in seconds whereas, inside the train, the correlation between space and time seem to follow a different order. That is to say that, inside, the traveller finds himself in a type of cocoon, in which his immediate physical surroundings remain largely unchanged and, in this way, the train assumes a timeless quality. Réda’s awareness of this shift is expressed in terms of access to an atemporality, where the train is portrayed as being both a form of protection and a weapon as it penetrates time (instead ‘on y est comme accoudé à une sorte de barrière mobile, scellé dans une torpille d’éternité qui transperce le blindage du temps’ (HT 128).

The endless interweaving of departures and destinations has its nexus in the train station, where there is a constant movement of anonymous multitudes of passengers (‘Les autres partent, arrivent, s’appellent sous les voûtes translucides qui ne retiennent aucun mot’, CC 103). The poet’s fascination with la gare is reflected in the texts, for example Châteaux des courants d’air contains an entire section entitled ‘Les terminus’ that is dedicated to the description of Parisian train stations, their architectural history and their function in the capital. The train station is not a destination in itself (‘Mais on séjourne en principe assez peu dans les gares’, CC 102) but it marks a preliminary threshold to, not only the journey itself, but to ‘la voie à l’abandon’ (RC 51). In this sense, Réda believes that ‘la grande gare constitue un passage métaphysique’ (CC 102), providing a point of passage to another view of the world (both physically and even spiritually).

Car le train reste à présent ce qu’il fut d’emblée, c’est-à-dire religieux et collectif: mythologique. [...] L’aventure du chemin de fer s’intériorise et relaie à sa façon une nouvelle vue relativiste des choses, en particulier du voyage sans point de départ ni terminus.

(CC 100)

42 Maulpoix makes reference to this aspect of the poet’s representation of train-travel, coining it a ‘religion des rails’, p.62.
Rédâ's train journeys, as with those on foot or by Solex, are prompted by a seemingly irresistible impulse to see what lies around the next corner, and lead him perpetually down 'un chemin qui mène quelque part' (RP 188). Generally, more interested in the process of travel rather than the destination, the poet delights in embarking on new journeys (‘j’arrive, je m’éloigne’, R 42) and he is continually seeing new thresholds to cross (‘je commence, je commence toujours, mais c’est aussi toujours une/suite’, T 7). The texts resonate with a series of liminal encounters, as Rédâ encounters alterity in everyday events and trips and thus experiences what he describes as ‘des métamorphoses ordinaires’ (CC 58). The poet’s insistence on the marvels to be found in the exploration of his environs (‘j’éclate parce que le monde est vaste, parce que le monde est beau’, RP 175), coupled with his rejection of any eternal spiritual truths (‘Et je m’abandonne à ce monde transitoire’, HM 86) focus the reader’s attention on ‘l’absolu horizontal’ (HM 85). The concrete representations of the threshold (through the images of doors, windows and stages on a journey) which characterise Rédâ’s imagination may be thrown into even sharper relief by contrast with a poet predominantly preoccupied with the immaterial. It is for that reason that we now turn to consider the threshold as represented in the poetry of Jean-Claude Renard.
'Chaque seuil est une clé'

Whereas Réda’s liminal mentality is conveyed principally in terms of tangible entities, Jean-Claude Renard’s awareness of the threshold is expressed in predominantly metaphysical terms. Renard (1922–2002) primarily is one of the few contemporary French poets who openly express orthodox Christian beliefs throughout his poetic career. In direct contrast to Réda’s emphasis on ‘l’absolu horizontal’, Renard is a poet whose understanding of the threshold is expressed almost exclusively in vertical terms. Rather than wishing to explore the world around him, Renard uses objects and situations as a springboard to metaphysical reflection. References to everyday objects, places and occurrences are rarely found in Renard’s work but rather there is a strong focus on *le spirituel* through the consistent use of the language of abstractions and contradictions. The threshold plays a pivotal role in his poetic expression precisely because of its own ambivalent role as the force that both binds and separates the tangible and the spiritual. Thus, for Renard, it is the force that attributes meaning to either side (‘Le relatif et l’absolu, comme le fini et l’infini, n’ont de sens que l’un par l’autre. Mais le mystère loge au-delà’, *SG* 146). This chapter will outline the principal threshold images in the poetry and illustrate the verticality of the language he uses, as a means of establishing Renard’s perception of alterity and patterns in his imaginative framework.

Throughout the texts, the liminal images employed by Renard draw on the idea of a point of passage between the profane and the sacred, as the poet reveals his preoccupation with the problematic relationship between man and God. In contrast to the other poets in this study, Renard’s paradigm is overtly Christian and he is involved in a constant process of striving to reconcile concepts such as Truth and

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1 Roger Little remarks on this feature of the threshold, stating that ‘nous prenons quotidiennement conscience de sa [le seuil] nature éminemment ambivalente: car il constitue à la fois une limite au monde extérieur qui échappe à notre possession et à notre contrôle immédiat, mais aussi un moyen d’accès à ce monde’, in *Études sur Saint-John-Perse*, p.29.
God with the tangible world. In one of his publications, Renard outlines what he believes, echoing the title of Gauguin’s celebrated painting, to be three ‘questions fondamentales’ of existence:

D’où venons-nous? Qui sommes-nous? Où allons nous? Car chacune apparaît désormais comme une part de la Vérité totale et absolue: parts qui s’ajoutent les unes aux autres pour constituer la plus large image possible de l’unique divinité sans fond et toujours plus que connaissable.

(EIF 76)

Throughout Renard’s poetry, the language employed marks an attempt on the part of the poet to answer these three questions. Renard’s repeated use of a variety of liminal images provides the means whereby he can articulate his relationship with ‘l’unique divinité sans fond et toujours plus que connaissable’. First and foremost, Renard envisages his faith in terms of a point of passage between the profane and the sacred, as he continually struggles to reconcile daily existence with ‘l’Au-delà de la foi’ (LV 136). The link between le liminaire and spiritual transcendence is one that is broadly accepted in expressions of faith, where ‘all forms of cosmos – universe, temple, house, human body – have an “opening” above [...] the opening makes possible a passage from one mode of being to another, from one existential situation to another. Passage is predestined for every cosmic existence.’

In this sense, the threshold is pivotal to the poet’s imaginative framework this process, as it serves as an expression of transcendence, signifying the possibility of access to something beyond tangible reality, for ‘chaque seuil est une clé’ (DN 165). In the following chapter, I will examine Renard’s recurring depictions of the threshold under the four main categories into which they seem to fall, namely the spatial/spiritual threshold, the temporal threshold, the inner journey and the role of language.

The Spatial/Spiritual Threshold

‘Ce qui est ici avance vers ce qui est ailleurs’

One of the most striking features of Renard’s poetry is the repeated references to his religious beliefs, for it is an element of his work that sets it apart from the vast majority of contemporary French poetry. Stating that ‘je ne suis ni théologien, ni

exegete, ni philosophe, mais simple croyant et simple poète' (AN 100), Renard’s preoccupation with spirituality is the dominant theme of his work, whether this is made manifest in the form of ambiguous questions or evangelical affirmations. An underlying liminal framework can be found throughout the texts, as Renard tries to balance tangible reality with spiritual hope, a process that involves a perpetual set of comparisons and contrasts which are inextricably bound together by the faith act. Thus the poet engages in a form of strategic straddling of boundaries, as he is enticed by ‘une possibilité de surmonter les limites humaines, l’angoisse ontologique et hypothèse du néant’ (El 121).

For Renard, access to le sacré is made possible only through an understanding of le Mystère, for it is through le Mystère that a point of passage between the profane and the sacred is made possible. As Renard states, faith is inextricably linked to le Mystère, as ‘toute croyance et toute incroyance sont relatives dans leurs options et ne prennent un caractère absolu que par rapport à celui du Mystère’ (LV 61). Renard uses the term le Mystère to signify God, describing it as ‘ce que d’ordinaire l’on appelle «Dieu» [...] l’énigme d’une réalité partout immanente mais en même temps sans cesse transcendantale’ (El 9). As such, le Mystère is associated in the poet’s imagination with the force that both delineates and unites man’s earthly and spiritual self and therefore it represents movement through the threshold from the profane to the sacred. In an interview in May 1986, Renard outlines his perception of le Mystère in the following way:

La mystique est, selon moi, une expérience de ce qui nous dépasse tout en nous habitant et de ce qui n’a de sens que pour qui vit cette expérience, plus intime en nous que nous-même, comme un saut plus ou moins profond dans le Mystère irréductible que l’on nomme Dieu ou l’Absolu.

This notion of crossing from a profane into a sacred space is conveyed as a leap of faith (‘un saut’), whereby Renard attempts to straddle the boundary between man and God (or between the horizontal and vertical axes). The above example typifies Renard’s form of expression, in which experience of the divine is expressed emphatically in spatial terms (‘en nous habitant’, ‘en nous’, ‘un saut plus ou moins profond dans le Mystère irréductible’). This section will explore the ways in which

3 For the purposes of this study, I am using the Biblical definition of faith as being ‘the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen’, Hebrews 11. 1, New International Version (Tennessee: Broadman & Holman, 1986).
4 This process is one that is also to be found in Frénaud’s work, where he seeks to ‘participer à la violence des contradictions dans l’Unité’, Frénaud, Il n’y a pas de paradis, ‘Le Château et la quête du poème’, p.234.
Renard reveals his liminal mentality through the poems, as they express a constant movement from the spatial to the spiritual plane in an attempt to enter 'au seuil du Mystère' (*OM* 19).

Throughout the texts, a perpetual sense of the division between *l'ici* and *l'ailleurs* can be traced, demonstrating what the poet terms as 'la pulsion naturelle qui semble universellement orienter l'homme vers le sacré, la transcendance, l'absolu' (*EI* 13):

\[
\begin{align*}
Ta \text{ vie n'est présente qu'ailleurs.} \\
Maïs où réside ailleurs? \\
Ta \text{ vie n'est absente qu'ici.} \\
Maïs où réside ici? \\
\end{align*}
\]

(*SG* 46)

Here, the two statements are counterbalanced by the questions that follow, highlighting the relationship between spatial contexts ('ailleurs', 'ici') and metaphysical concepts. This example is highly representative of the overriding preoccupation that Renard gives voice to in his poems, namely the continual tension between tangible reality and spiritual hope, where 'le dehors informe alors le dedans' (*EI* 10). In contrast to Réda, Renard’s understanding of alterity is inextricably bound up with movement towards a spiritual threshold, as he seeks something that is both immanent and transcendent. Thus, while Renard’s poems are replete with references to spatial contexts (for example, 'ici', 'là-bas', 'ailleurs', 'au-delà', 'nulle part', 'partout'), the poet does not share Réda’s interest in geographical locations and explorations. Indeed, Renard’s use of spatial terms indicates a predominantly metaphysical liminal mentality and so, for example, the poet encapsulates the notion of merging the spatial and the spiritual by referring to man’s experience of the divine as ‘ailleurs ici’ (*CP* 183). Thus, Renard employs the seemingly simple spatial terms of *l'ici* and *l'ailleurs* in such a way that they assume a metaphysical significance. Elsewhere, the poet’s reference to ‘cette fascination de la profonde source là-bas, derrière l’aube et derrière la mort’ (*CP* 131) refers to access to the divine in terms that are both spatial ('là-bas') and temporal ('derrière l’aube et derrière la mort'). Throughout the texts, Renard’s focus on the threshold that exists between man and a spiritual other is conveyed in this way:

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À peine la porte entrouverte,
la merveille est que sur le seuil se tiennent quelqu’un et personne
et qu’avidement comme une racine
l’être de n’être point m’invite à m’inventer.

(CP 179)

Here, the image of the half-open door is not used to set a scene (as is often the case in Réda’s poetry), but rather it betokens a crossing over into a new existence where metamorphosis is possible. Nonetheless, this 'merveille' is not without a problematical element, for the self-contradictory terms he employs ('quelqu’un et personne', 'l’être de n’être point') suggest the paradoxes that Renard associates with this primarily spiritual threshold. It would seem that, for Renard, it is only through an acceptance of le Mystère that the paradoxes of a spiritual autre may be understood:

Le Mystère m’a donc enseigné, sans enseignement, à rester constamment disponible à ce que je vois parfois sans le voir, ce que j’entends parfois sans l’entendre.

(LV 232)

Renard makes clear the intimate nature of his relationship with le Mystère (‘Le Mystère m’a donc enseigné’), claiming that it is this power that has allowed the poet to believe in something that defies logic or reason (‘je vois parfois sans le voir [...] j’entends parfois sans l’entendre.’). Le Mystère is conveyed as being the very embodiment of the spatial/spiritual threshold and as having the power to unite apparently opposing forces, being ‘le dieu immobile et le dieu mouvant/est celui qui est au-delà de Soi [...] qui n’est nulle part et qui est partout’ (CP 66). For the poet, God is not simply portrayed as a force that exists on a spiritual plane beyond the hic et nunc. Instead, God is expressed in terms of a reciprocal movement between the temporal (l’ici) and the eternal (l’ailleurs): ‘je conçois le Mystère divin comme étant à la fois éternel en soi et cependant toujours à naître dans le temps, en nous et par nous’ (AN 100):

l’attentif amour qui incante et qui lie; [...] ce qui est ici avance vers ce qui est ailleurs et ce qui est ailleurs s’avance vers ce qui est ici, et que l’un par l’autre le fruit se prépare

(CP 134)

Renard’s vision of this reciprocal movement between l’ici and l’ailleurs has, as its ultimate goal, an all-encompassing unity in le Mystère (‘l’un par l’autre le fruit se
prepare'). In this way, the poet perpetually challenges spatial and temporal barriers, as he claims that there is ‘rien à l’origine et au terme, ni dans l’éclatement du silence, que le mystère de l’Amour’ (CP 135). While both Renard and Réda display a fascination with l’au-delà in their poetry, the language that Renard employs emphasises the spiritual (and often inaccessible) nature of this representation of alterity:

Dieu [...] se situe toujours au-delà de l’au-delà de son inscription dans le monde et, par suite, dé passe sans cesse sa propre expression comme il dé passe sans cesse toute parole parlant ou voulant parler de lui.

(LV 234)

The absolute otherness of God is conveyed by the fact that he existst both outside of the world and of language, and therefore spatially and linguistically he is beyond man’s reach.

‘La verticalité de l’expérience religieuse’

In the same way that Réda’s texts focus on the world around him, so Renard’s insistence on the spiritual is predominant throughout the poetry. Renard’s use of liminal images centres around the language of transcendence, whereby the poet envisages a movement upwards towards le spirituel. Thus, we can say that Renard’s understanding of the threshold is resolutely vertical in its textual representation.  
Throughout his poetic career, Renard continually employs vocabulary that emphasises the spiritual, in an attempt to convey what he refers to as ‘la verticalité de l’expérience religieuse’ (AN 116). This association between the metaphysical and images of verticality carries a resonance of the Romantic tradition and is one that is particularly prevalent in a poet such as Lamartine:

Ce réveil d’un être qui s’ignore,
Cet espace infini s’ouvrant devant ses yeux,
Ce long regard de l’homme interrogeant les cieux,
Ce vague enchantement, ces torrents d’espérance,
Eblouissent les yeux au seuil de l’existence.

Here, we see the way in which Lamartine directs the reader’s gaze to a spatial and temporal _autre_ (‘cet espace infini’) that is linked with a movement along the vertical axis, where ‘les cieux’ are associated with revelation and the ‘seuil de l’existence’. Equally, Renard’s imaginative framework expresses itself in terms similar to that of Pierre Emmanuel. In _Jacob_, for example, Emmanuel demonstrates a deep awareness of the vertical axis in the images he employs, referring to ‘la verticale du Tout Un’ and ‘l’altissime Hauteur’, while also claiming that ‘celui qui lève vers les astres sa face, dans cette coupe il recueille son cœur’. Similarly, Renard’s poetry consistently directs the reader’s focus upwards rather than outwards:

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[...] le sang descendu des montagnes de Dieu[...]
Car il n’est plus que peu de temps, de profondeur et de silence
Devant la haute éternité
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(_CP 116_)

This exemplifies Renard’s portrayal of spirituality, wherein his interaction with _le sacré_ is described in overtly vertical terms (‘descendu des montagnes de Dieu’, ‘la haute éternité’). Renard’s paradigm is almost directly opposed to Rédâ’s, for the former consistently contextualises the immediately tangible in a spiritual _ailleurs_:

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pour être ailleurs ce qu’il faut être ici,
pour être ici ce que je suis ailleurs
je m’en irai le feu que je suis.
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(_CP 65_)

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Car si l’_ailleurs_ vit ici
et l’_ici_ vit ailleurs
un sens sera donné
au destin.
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(_CPR 41_)

In Renard’s poems, his predilection for a vertical interpretation of the threshold can be seen in the way in which there is a strong insistence on privileging the metaphysical:

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À Marseille, entre l’achèvement et le commencement de la mort,
La Brésilienne était belle.
Elle nommait ta tête, tes épaules.
Je ne savais pas si loin ses mains vides comme l’escalier de l’hôtel
Où j’attendais l’ordre de mer.
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(_CP 147_)

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À Niagara Falls, à travers l’orage, les chutes paraissaient faites d’une brume caillée, remplie d’éclats de cristal.
Elles s’irisèrent au soleil.
Les frontières révèlent l’infini.

As the two examples above illustrate, Renard’s poetic vision is continually being redirected from le concret to the metaphysical, where the former’s importance rests primarily in its function as a springboard to spiritual revelation.

However, while Renard’s fascination with the notion of a threshold to a spiritual autre prevails throughout, the texts suggest that the poet’s positive affirmations of faith are not unequivocal:

quelqu’un m’a retiré du Christ,
quelqu’un l’a retiré de moi,
je suis absent du haut esprit.
Je suis absent du haut amour.
Je suis absent des hauts pays

Here we see that there is a tension inherent in the poet’s work, stemming from the conflicting forces at work on the horizontal and vertical axes. The force of the vertical images (‘haut esprit’, ‘haut amour’, ‘hauts pays’) is undermined by the poet’s feelings of isolation, as highlighted by the repetition of the phrase ‘je suis absent’. In contrast to Réda’s predominantly insouciant privileging of everyday events and le concret, Renard’s awareness of a metaphysical autre is fraught with a sense of conflict. Paradoxically, the texts suggest that it is the poet’s very faith that prompts a sense of division and tension between the horizontal and vertical axes.

That is to say that, while he may be a poet of faith, Renard is keenly aware of the inner tension that faith prompts (‘Croire n’est point trouver/- mais vivre en même temps l’écart et l’alliance’, DN 186). This sense of conflict is openly expressed in the poems through the language of negation and contradiction:

Qu’est cette pure essence indicible, insondable, irréductible à tout dehors d’elle-même – et qui pourtant, parfois, m’est plus présente ici que mon propre mystère? [...]
Où est-ce en moi, moi seul qui m’ouvre et me projette en un autre que moi mais qui reste moi-même?

Here, the reader’s attention is drawn to the three adjectives by the repetition of the privative prefixes starting with the letter ‘i’ at the beginning of each and by their
juxtaposition in the line, underscoring the ineffable otherness of ‘cette pure essence’. There is also a deep dualism communicated as the self is fragmented (‘un autre que moi mais qui reste moi-même’) and expressed in terms of spatial displacement (‘tout/dehors d’elle-même – et qui pourtant, parfois, m’est plus présente ici’). This sense of tension and division is present throughout the texts and connotes the poet’s sense of trepidation as he attempts to reconcile a physical and spiritual realm:

je suis comme une chair si profondément prise
dans sa propre sueur
qu’elle a peur de chercher, même quand j’agonise,
à respirer ailleurs

(M 89)

The contrast between ‘une chair si profondément prise dans sa propre sueur’ and the possibility of ‘respirer ailleurs’ is stressed by the phonetic similarity of the two phrases (created by the repetition of the consonants [s], [p] and [r]). This contrast is all the more striking because of the end rhymes ‘sueur’ and ‘ailleurs’, where the former signifies the highly corporeal aspect of man while the latter is less tangible and much more vague.

While, on the whole, Renard avoids terminology such as good and evil, nevertheless the tension between the corporeal and the spiritual self is clearly in evidence in his work. Indeed, a strong Biblical resonance can be detected throughout Renard’s poetic career and the poet consistently draws on his Christian faith as a source of creative inspiration. This inspiration necessarily impinges on Renard’s liminal mentality, for he adheres to a meta-narrative that proclaims the establishment of a threshold between life and death, between sinful man and divine forgiveness, as encapsulated in Jesus’s claim that ‘I am the way, and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me’.

Yet while Renard declares his belief in ‘la résurrection du Christ – qui est l’ouverture de l’être’ (CP 134), his experience of reality often conflicts with these declarative statements of Truth. For this reason, at times Renard finds himself in a paradoxical situation whereby, in Frénaud’s words, ‘J’affirme sans preuve./Je tiens le contraire’. The tension between the profane and the sacred is mutually interdependent, whereby the poet must anticipate (rather than experience) an absolute union of flesh and spirit. As such, Renard’s perception of access to the spiritual realm is dependent on an act

More specifically, one is reminded of the apostle Paul’s expression of a dualism within the self: ‘So I find this law at work: When I want to do good, evil is right there with me. For in my inner being I delight in God’s law; but I see another law at work in the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin at work within my members. What a wretched man I am!’, Romans 7. 21-24.

10 More specifically, one is reminded of the apostle Paul’s expression of a dualism within the self:

11 John 14. 6.
of faith, rather than on experience. As the following section will demonstrate, this is reflected in the texts, where an ongoing process of reconciliation appears to be taking place as Renard seeks to redefine his temporal life within the context of an eternal reality.

The Temporal Threshold

‘C’est temps d’être FUTUR’

Renard’s liminal framework is not only expressed in spatial, but also in temporal terms in the texts. In the same way that *le spirituel* supersedes *le concret* in Renard’s poems, so the poet chooses to privilege the atemporal plane rather than chronological time.\(^\text{13}\) For the poet, all events are redefined within the context of eternity, an act of redefinition that Renard believes to be encapsulated in the salvation act of Christ, which he refers to as ‘un miracle futur et pourtant déjà fait’ (*CP* 132). The poet maintains that ‘le mystère demeure éternel’ (*TI* 35) and that through a temporal/spiritual point of passage, Renard may enter into a deeper experience of God (‘À l’intérieur du temps/Je reçois de son règne ma mort et ma naissance’, *CP*131). The poet declares that ‘l’instant [...] possède sans aucun doute la vertu de donner l’existence immanente une intensité particulière et de la donner aussi à cette sorte d’éclair foudroyant de la transcendance, en quoi consiste parfois simplement l’expérience mystique’ (*El* 69). This encompasses an understanding of the world that extends far beyond the hours on a clock face and, by implication, necessarily negates the limitations of ‘les heures qui s’achèvent’.*\(^\text{14}\) Renard’s poems reflect a constant tension between ‘un ineffable état qui nous fait plus ou moins soudainement sortir de nous [...] hors de l’espace et du temps’ (*AN* 105) and the restrictions of a temporal experience. For Renard, entry into the eternal, spiritual realm is made possible by the revelation granted by the most everyday objects (‘Un coquillage suffit à l’infini’, *DN* 147). In this way, the everyday becomes a springboard to metaphysical reflection, so that the poet is continually redirecting his focus from the physical world to philosophical matters. Thus, for example, it is


\(^{13}\) Y.-A. Favre makes a valuable distinction between the temporal and atemporal plane, stating that ‘le temps profane, temps voué à l’utile, s’écoule inexorablement; mais le temps sacré où l’homme s’accorde au cosmos, vient l’interrompre et lui redonner sens et valeur’, ‘Lyrisme et sacré: Jean-Claude Renard et Pierre Oster’, in *La poésie au tournant des années 80*, pp.87-99 (p.94).

highly typical in one of Renard’s poems to find the juxtaposition of statements such as ‘Les beignets du sucre d’érable ont plus de saveur cette année [...] L’histoire n’a lieu qu’en son contraire/et l’abîme détourne sans fin toute fin’ (DN 141). The poems consistently point to a link between temporal reality and an eternal existence, for Renard believes that ‘l’âme fonde alliance avec la chair qui veille’ (CP 124). A perpetual redefinition of the hie et nunc within the context of a spiritual atemporality can be traced throughout the texts, as a belief in the afterlife underscores his understanding of the temporal threshold. This section will examine the way in which Renard privileges l’éternel throughout the poems and the tension that arises from this process.

Renard’s poetry repeatedly insists on an eternal perspective, as the hope in things to come acts as a contextualising force for present reality and the concept of chronological time is thereby undermined. Renard’s declaration that ‘c’est temps d’être FUTUR’ exemplifies this emphasis on the future, where the typography illustrates a subordination of the present (‘c’est’, ‘FUTUR’). This perception of time carries strong echoes of Lamartine, a poet who claims that:

Je lis dans l’avenir la raison du présent:
L’espoir ferme après moi les portes du néant,
Et, rouvrant l’horizon à mon âme ravie,
M’explique par la mort l’énigme de la vie.

For Renard, however, difficulties arise from the fact that his particular frame of reference and the language that he employs are intrinsically bound up in the very chronology he wishes to undermine. As Renard’s poetic gaze gravitates towards an atemporal divinity (‘Celui qui est’, CP 67), he is nevertheless fully aware of the restrictions imposed upon him by the limitations of his own chronology. His sense of helplessness when confronted by the relentless passing of time is strongly reminiscent of Baudelaire’s claim that:

[...] le Temps m’engloutit minute par minute,
Comme la neige immense un corps pris de roideur;
Je contemple d’en haut le globe en sa rondeur
Et je n’y cherche plus l’abri d’une cabale.

Avalanche, veux-tu m’emporter dans ta chute?

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15 Referring to Cantiques pour des pays perdus, Pierre Brunel highlights this superimposing of the future on to the present tense, commenting that ‘c’est en effet le futur bientôt qui devient le temps fondamental du poème [...] Tout le paradoxe du recueil est là: la conquête à venir de ce qui a déjà existé, l’expression future d’un passé.’ Métamorphose du monde précédé de Origines ([Paris]: Orphée & La Différence, 1991), p.14.


The Baudelairian notion that ‘le Temps mange la vie’ is one that runs as a central theme in Renard’s work. Significantly, the place where Renard perceives a possible triumph over the ravaging force of time is in poetry, which he regards as having an atemporal quality (‘Car il [le poème] dépasse le temps tout en s’y inscrivant à tel ou tel moment simultanément présent et futur’, AN 220). Therefore, it is through the medium of the poem that Renard envisages a possible alliance of past, present and future

La poésie comporte en fait les sens passés, présents et futurs des mots [...] Vous nourrissez vous-mêmes, le poème, vous y mettez ce que vous êtes et ce qui, par conséquent, s’y trouve comme déjà présent à l’avance.

(QP 25)

Renard claims there to be ‘une interaction constante’ between ‘ma vie temporelle’ and ‘ma poésie’ (AN 179) and this is reflected in the poems, where he frequently explores the concept of time grammatically and thematically:

Quels livres l’ont écrit, l’écrivent, l’écriront?

(SG 128)

Et pour éviter d’y tomber un jour, par sorts ou magies émanant de toi, veille à devenir quel dernier futur deviendra l’enfer qui commence ici.

(SG 11)

In the above examples, the reader’s perception of time and understanding of chronology is undermined as past, present and future are merged together (’écrit, l’écrivent, l’écriront’, ‘dernier futur deviendra [...] commence ici’). Textually, this draws our attention to the fact that, for Renard, the atemporal plane is not merely a plausible concept, but a reality. In a sense, the texts enact Renard’s anticipation of the crossing of the threshold between present and future and of entrance into a realm wherein past, present and future merge. Having crossed this temporal threshold, Renard conceives of an ultimate unity, where there is a fusion of the temporal and the eternal, l’ici and l’ailleurs:

18 Baudelaire, Les Fleurs du mal, ‘L’Ennemi’, p.44.
19 We are reminded here of Claudel’s plea to God: ‘Délivrez-moi du temps’ in Cinq Grandes odes, ‘L’Esprit et l’eau’, p.41.
While Renard strives to attain this fusion in the poems, he also acknowledges that it is one that will only be fully realised in death. In the poems, death is portrayed as being the ultimate threshold between man and God. The poet’s anticipation of death and of an after-life embues his poetry with an evangelical zeal which he directs towards the reader (‘Ne laisse pas ta mort/te tuer’, SG 43, ‘Ne sois pas de ceux qui ne meurent/qu’après leur propre mort’, SG 60). The power of death lies in the fact that ‘à partir d’un seuil fatal, inconsciemrnent traversé et qu’on ne refranchit pas, la mort s’immisce dans la vie et étend son ambivalence’. Unsurprisingly, faith has a profound influence on Renard’s understanding of death and he claims that ‘la foi m’engage donc dans la voie d’une destinée singulière qui se façonne ici même mais semble également, bien qu’énigmatiquement, en mesure de dépasser le temps et la mort.’ (LV 20). The verb ‘dépasser’ is particularly telling here, for it betokens a sense of the possibility of moving beyond the restrictions imposed by time and death and passing over into an eternal realm. This idea is one that we see expressed time and time again in the poems, indicating that his perception of the threshold is inextricably bound to his belief in an afterlife:

Même au plus clos  
reste une porte  
– même au plus bas, même au plus noir,  
même au plus mort!  

(SG 95)

As this example illustrates, Renard’s Christianity means that he sees death as being, first and foremost, a means of access to a spiritual ailleurs, for, like Claudel, he believes in a God that has power over life and death (‘Je sais que vous n’êtes point le dieu des morts, mais des vivants’). This belief gives Renard hope and an assurance of something beyond l’ici:

La mort étaye la vie.
Mais, derrière elle,
même le néant
n’annule pas le dieu.

(SG 10)

In the texts, death is not portrayed as being a permanent state, but as ‘l’instant d’une
venue et d’un départ’ (TT 28), as it marks a beginning and not an end (‘À chaque
mort, nulle part et partout, débute quelque chose’, TT 30).

Nonetheless, while Renard’s religious beliefs as regards an afterlife are
constantly being asserted, his poems openly acknowledge the mysterious nature of
death (‘C’est la mort même qui défend de comprendre/ce qu’est la mort’ (DR 12)
and the paradox of ‘l’immortel secret de la mort’ (LS 60):

Tout commence en ce lieu où l’un se change en l’autre. [...] 
Toute mort est ouverte à l’être essentiel présent dans toute mort. 
(CP 164)

The texts are therefore charged with a sense of hope and of mystery as Renard
acknowledges that ‘la mort acquiesce au mystère’ (SG 85):

Le corps, dans le tombeau, change-t-il d’histoire [...] 
On dirait cependant que derrière le deuil
Une lampe, parfois, s’allume et nous conduit
............................................. au bord d’un autre seuil. 
(M 32-33)

Here, the intrinsic link between death and the threshold is illustrated in the full
rhyme (‘deuil’/ ‘seuil’), yet access to the threshold is still qualified by a measure of
uncertainty (as represented by the punctuation of the last line and the use of
‘change-t-il’, ‘on dirait’, ‘parfois’). Consistently over his poetic career, Renard tries
to reconcile his faith in l’éternel with the inevitable obstacle of death, a force that
seems to undermine any notion of the infinite. The poetry has reflected this conflict,
where references to life are regularly counterbalanced by those to death, as the
following example typifies:

La vie attendait au fond de la mort. 
Mais je n’ai pas su comment l’y saisir. 
(DR 52)

Having embraced the Christian theology of an afterlife, Renard must still struggle to
overcome the tension that arises between his faith and the doubts that assail him.
The poet is confronted with the difficult task of reconciling his belief system with
the mystery of death and with the isolating experience of ‘une mort inconnue qu’il faut traverser seul’ (CP 154).

From a Christian perspective, the deity’s absolute otherness is conveyed through a subversion of man’s perception of time.\(^{22}\) Within this spiritual context, there exists neither beginning nor end and so ‘l’éternel IL Y A est absolu rien d’autre’ (SG 147). Renard, however, faces the perpetual challenge of reconciling this assertion with his experiences as a mortal in a temporal world. In the same way that Claudel claims that ‘je veux la vie même sans laquelle tout est mort!/ La vie même et tout le reste me tue qui est mort!’,\(^{23}\) so Renard’s religious assertions are frequently tinged with the reality of death. While Renard’s theology insists on the immortal status of man’s spirit and on ‘une pérennité possible’,\(^{24}\) there is an undeniable preoccupation with mortality as he asks ‘mais que suis-je et que puis-je et qu’ai-je de vivant qui n’ait un goût de mort’ (D 94). The emphatic internal rhyme of this series of three questions encapsulates Renard’s awareness of the power of death and his difficulty in overlooking the obvious limitations of his own mortality. Elsewhere, this tension between life and death is expressed through a series of contrasts and comparisons:

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Je meurs ici de n’être dans la mort
que le malheur de celui que je suis,
mourant ailleurs de n’être que le corps
de celui-là que je suis dans l’esprit.
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\((M 77)\)

The alternate rhyme (‘mort’/‘corps’, ‘suis’/‘esprit’) highlights Renard’s theological conviction that death is merely corporeal while man’s essence is spiritual. Yet the dominant force of death is made clear by its appearance three times (‘meurs’, ‘mort’, ‘mourant’) and is linked semantically by the ‘m’ alliteration and its consequent association with ‘malheur’. The personal impact of death is also highlighted by the repetition of ‘je’, which appears three times.

At times, in a manner similar to other poets preoccupied with spiritual matters, a certain fatalism can be detected in Renard’s tone that seems to contradict his religious zeal.\(^{25}\) The anguish felt by Renard is apparent in his declaration that ‘moi je suis dans le temps mort’ (M 76). The ambiguity of this phrase and its possible interpretations suggest a number of elements that may contribute to Renard’s

\(^{22}\) The New Testament states that ‘with the Lord a day is like a thousand years and a thousand years are like a day’, 2 Peter 3. 8, New International Version.


\(^{24}\) This phrase is taken from Peter Broome’s preface to Frénaud’s La Sorcière de Rome suivi de Depuis toujours déjà (Paris: Gallimard, 1984), p.7.

\(^{25}\) One is reminded, for example, of Frénaud’s question ‘et à quoi bon […] si la mort va et vient partout où je respire?’ in Il n’y a pas de paradis, ‘Dans l’arbre ténébreux’, p.141.
unease. At its most literal level, time is considered ‘mort’ because it renders all things finite and acts as a limiting force that brings everything to a conclusion (‘le destin de chacun, ce sont les allées de sa mort, les tournants de sa vie, mais c’est pareil.’)²⁶ However, there is also the inference that Renard regards this life as a type of metaphysical injury time and that, in a sense, he sees himself in the uncertain limbo between the main part of the game and the moment when he may stop playing. This exemplifies the strong dualism found throughout Renard’s writing, as the poet continually struggles to reconcile his mortality with his belief system.

It is important to note that Renard openly acknowledges that ‘la difficile foi’ (CP 128) is, by its very nature, problematic. Over the years, Renard’s poetry reflects the various stages of his faith, as he oscillates between passive acceptance and profound questioning:

(CP 203)

Pourquoi le dieu ne se révèle-t-il partout qu’en étant partout invisible?  
Connaissable qu’étant inconnaissable?  
Signifiant qu’en n’ayant pas de sens?  
(M 30)

Throughout these stages, the one spiritual stumbling-block that consistently features in Renard’s poems is the subject of the limiting force of death. Indeed, there is a helplessness conveyed as he claims that ‘la mort me retient, et je ne puis rien être’ (M 91) and asks ‘où trouverais-je la force de survivre en attendant la vie?’ (DN 118).

The poet is repeatedly confronted with the reality of death and must therefore strive to incorporate the apparent finality of death into his belief structures. In order to do so, Renard employs a liminal vocabulary as he seeks to portray death in terms of a passage to eternal life rather than a barrier, where ‘toute mort est ouverte à l’être essentiel présent dans toute mort’ (CP 164). The concept of a threshold into an eternal realm is therefore primordial in the poet’s imaginative framework, for without it, he would be forced to see the inexorable passing of chronological time simply in terms of a movement towards inevitable termination. It is only by means of his eternal perspective that Renard may rejoice in the hope that he has and thus overcome the seemingly negative power of death, portraying it as a beginning rather than an end:

M 102

Here, the rhyme scheme serves to highlight the close imaginative link between time and death, with the emphatic ‘chaque heure [...] je meure’, while ‘transcende’ clearly indicates an awareness of the vertical axis. In the poem entitled ‘Ailleurs’, for example, Renard wonders ‘suis-je vif, suis-je mort’ (CP 82), where ‘ailleurs’ signifies a spiritual rather than a spatial displacement. It is this belief in l’ailleurs and in an ultimate salvation that sustains Renard:

Mais garde l’espérance [...] et tu sauras qu’encore, à la nuit comme à l’aube de tous les avenirs, le dieu te sauvera!

(OM 11)

This poem is taken from a recent collection (2000) and demonstrates Renard’s continuing faith in the revelation that is immanent (as highlighted by the affirmations made in the future tense, ‘tu sauras’, ‘le dieu te sauvera’). This, Renard believes, will bring clarity to the darkness that the poet feels in his present reality (‘la nuit’).

‘L’enfant qui me hante s’appelle été’

The poems’ emphasis on the eternal contains within it Renard’s desire for a new quality of life. In Renard’s paradigm, access to this new life involves crossing the threshold of death in order that the self may undergo a process of rebirth (‘en passant par la mort où est passé l’amour/pour naître à votre été’, M 90). In the texts, the poet employs various imaginative liminal representations to express the process of spiritual rebirth and new life. Spring, for example, is portrayed as being a point of passage from death and from ‘la fureur des saisons de douleurs’ (CP 29):

Le futur, s’il se déplombait, s’il me démasquait son dédale, tolérait-il qu’au printemps mon angoisse y ensevelisse ses idoles et ses momies?

(DR 12)
Similarly, in contrast to ‘le vide hivernal’ (CP 57), Renard claims that ‘l’été féconde mes yeux!’ (CP 105). The summer is associated with new life, hope and possibilities:

Venu l’été,
les pluies s’en vont, les dieux verts se taisent dans les îles. [...]  
Aucun domaine n’est clos.  
(CP 181)

et que même la mort finirait de mourir 
pour être aussi par lui rendue à votre été  
(CP 95)

Si jamais nous fûmes 
sans nom, dans l’été,  
homme et femme unis  
en un seul corps d’or [...]  
hors hiver, hors mal,  
hors mort, hors néant  
(DR 63-64)

Here, the image of summer is employed to signify freedom (‘rendue à votre été’) and reconciliation (‘homme et femme unis’). The exhilaration that Renard’s experiences is emphasised by the use of alliteration (‘mêmes, ‘mort’, ‘mourir’), while the poet also attempts to draw the reader into the poems and to share this hope (‘nous fûmes’).27

In the same way that Renard uses spring and summer to communicate concepts of freedom and rebirth, so l’enfance also draws on similar associations (‘une enfance/vers l’eau centrale d’été’, CP 118). The purity of the childhood state, as perceived by Renard, reflects the traditional Christian belief that childhood embodies an innocence which is particularly receptive to the divine:28

27 André Alter remarks on this literary association, commenting that ‘l’été s’identifie en réalité avec l’espace de recueillement où le poète nous invite à pénétrer’, Le Sacre du silence (Seyssel: Champ Vallon, 1990), p. 151.
28 The Bible describes children as those ‘who do not yet know good from bad’ (Deuteronomy 1.39) and in Mark’s Gospel, the story is told of how ‘people were bringing little children to Jesus to have him touch them [...] He said to them, “Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. I tell you the truth, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it”, Mark 10.13-15, New International Version.
L’enfance rit et joue
d’un miroir sans image,
d’une lampe sans ombre
ou d’un cahier sans pages.

Elle invente tout ce qui manque
en créant tout ce qu’elle ignore.

(SG 15)

The poet depicts childhood as a state of simplicity in which the child is free from the burden of responsibility and where (s)he may live in a world of causes without effects (as emphasised by the phrases ‘sans image’, ‘sans ombre’, ‘sans pages’). The lack of self-consciousness that Renard links with the experiences of childhood implies that a child may enjoy the immediate pleasures of life without being aware of the constraints of temporality. Elsewhere in Renard’s poems, the association of childhood and life is emphasised, as the image of childhood is linked with the life-giving properties of the sun:

Si je devenais innocent, si je retrouvais cette enfance chargée de citrons et d’oranges comme un verger.

(DR 46)

Here, the image of the orchard also relates childhood to vitality (‘chargée de citrons et d’oranges’). These childhood qualities greatly attract Renard, for they represent a form of liberation (‘l’exacte enfance/habite libre/comme le chevaux/sous les tamaris’, CPR 80). There is a close imaginative link established between l’enfance and the threshold to new life, as reflected in Renard’s definition of ‘l’esprit d’enfance’, which he describes as ‘([…]) l’esprit primitif, sauvage, innocent, naturel), il me garde en permanence dans un état d’ouverture, de découverte, d’étonnement. Il m’accorde de regarder sans cesse d’un œil nouveau les êtres et les choses […] Il me purifie des idéologies et des normes que l’on entreprend de m’y imposer!’ (AN 12).29

The innocence attributed to childhood means that Renard also perceives it as encapsulating a state of openness, through which one may be granted access to l’au-delà (‘Les enfances sont des fenêtres’, SG 54). In ‘Cantique pour des pays perdus’, the poet asks ‘y trouverais-je mon enfance?’ (CP 27) and similarly, ‘Incantations

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29 Renard’s view of the childhood state is reminiscent of Kundera’s, who remarks that ‘children are the future […] For children have no past […] History is a series of ephemeral changes, while eternal values are immutable, perpetuated outside history, and have no need of memory […] children are life, and living is seeing, hearing, touching, drinking, eating, urinating, defecating, diving into the water and gazing at the sky, laughing and crying.’, Milan Kundera, The Book of Laughter and Forgetting, trans. by M.H.Heim (London: Faber & Faber, 1992), p.257.
des enfances' also establishes a strong associative link between childhood and l’aillleurs:

Où sont les doux enfants qui savaient des voyages,
les enfants envoûtés dont j’ai gardé l’odeur
et qui laissent en moi des paradis sauvages?

Ils sont morts dans la mer, ils sont partis ailleurs
(CP 62)

There is a strong sense that Renard is enticed by the apparent proximity of this more innocent (and, by implication, more spiritual) state (‘Juste au-delà/l’enfance attend’, CP 172). Renard’s use of the childhood image conveys something of his longing for an aillleurs that is physical, spiritual and temporal, highlighting its distinct otherness from the poet’s present reality. The association between 'des paradis sauvages' and childhood connotes the link between l’enfance and interaction a with a spiritual autre, and is one that can be seen elsewhere in the texts:

J’obéirai à l’enfance
qui a reconnu ma chair
dans sa chair ensevelie
et lui partage le pain.

(CP 106)

Despite Renard’s apparent idealisation of the childhood state, it is nonetheless problematic for, as one of the above examples illustrates, it can also prove to be elusive (‘Où sont les doux enfants qui savaient des voyages […]?/Ils sont morts dans la mer, ils sont partis ailleurs’). Elsewhere in the poetry, childhood is also associated with pain and uncertainty (‘Une enfance doit y apprendre/A ne pas guérir de l’incertitude’, CP 161). Similarly, the poet acknowledges that this search for l’aut-delà is not one that will necessarily bring happiness:

Dans les contrées les plus cruelles, […]
où trembleront le désespoir
et les enfances foudroyées,
dans la douleur

(CP 31)

Throughout the texts, the poet’s complex perception of l’enfance can be seen where ambiguities abound. One particularly pertinent example of this ambiguity is the reference that Renard makes to ‘mon corps secret, mon corps interne/où toute enfance est enterrée […] – ce temps-ci est diluvien.’ (M 76). Here, the poet leaves it
entirely unclear as to whether he believes that there is an inner enfance hidden deep within or whether his enfance is dead and buried and so has nothing to do with his adult life, leaving the reader to draw his own conclusions.

Despite this indeterminate attitude, it is nonetheless clear that Renard does perceive the childhood state as one that embodies the mystery of the relationship between the profane and the divine:

l’enfance fascine la femme issue de l’ancien sang,
l’exorcise, la voue à qui n’a pas de nom
pour incanter en elle l’alliance toujours conclue et toujours future.

(DN 155)

For the poet, l’enfance links the physical and spiritual realm and represents a point of passage between humanity (‘issue de l’ancien sang’) and the deity (‘qui n’a pas de nom’). The atemporal bond between spirit and flesh therefore is incarnate in childhood. While chronology dictates that l’enfant must grow older and be worn down by ‘la déréliction et l’incertitude’ (SG 43), the innocent state of l’enfance is perpetually renewed and retained. Significantly, the poet chooses to focus primarily l’enfance rather than on les enfants, as an inner state is something that dwells within each individual:

Le dieu ne meurt qu’en toi,
 attendant que l’enfance en toi le ressuscite.

(SG 107)

Here, the divine is not depicted in terms of an immortal being, but rather as one that is subject to the finality of death (a fact that is suggested typographically by the use of the lower case in ‘dieu’). While both le dieu and l’enfance are in-dwelling (as highlighted by the repetition of ‘en toi’ in the two lines), it is l’enfance (and not god) that has the power of life over death (‘ressuscite’). Elsewhere, Renard develops this idea as he explores the essential link between the poem and l’enfance, where the latter has the capacity to awaken us to the énigmes des émotions:

Je considère le poème comme l’un des moyens [...] de ranimer en nous une part de la source toujours vive et toujours nouvelle (je l’appellerai l’«esprit d’enfance») que constituaient le système sensoriel, les instincts, les réflexes primitifs de l’aventure humaine préhistorique, et de nous rouvrir (à travers nos mots de maintenant) aux énigmes des émotions.

(AN 75-76)
Poetry plays an intrinsic role in this process, as it offers a means of access to the 'source toujours vive et toujours nouvelle' that the poet perceives the childhood state to be. The liminal role that the poem serves in granting access to l'enfance is attributable primarily to the fact that the poem, like l'état d'enfance, can continually offer new perspectives:

Je définirai subjectivement et imparfaitement le poème [...] comme un «office de la transparence» qui, en ne cessant pas de changer le regard du poète sur les êtres et les choses, invite aussi autrui à les voir d'une façon toujours nouvelle, que décrit par surcroît l'état d'enfance permanent incarné dans ses divers symboles et significations.  

The Inner Journey

'Toute vraie voie est intérieure'

In the same way that Renard employs the image of l'enfance to signify a predominantly metaphysical state within the self, so he also adopts an overwhelmingly spiritual interpretation of the image of the journey, claiming that 'toute vraie voie est intérieure' (SG 63). This section will explore the ways in which Renard employs the metaphor of the journey and what these representations reveal about his perception of the threshold.

In contrast to Réda, whose principal interest lies in actual travel, Renard's poetic imagination often employs metaphors of travelling and the image of life as a road to denote spiritual growth, as he finds himself 'sur la route sans limite du voyage spirituel' (LV 245). The contrast between Réda and Renard is perhaps particularly evident in Lieu du voyageur, Notes sur le mystère (published in 1980), in which Renard quotes Nicolas de Cues:

«Le voyageur [...] qui marche c'est-à-dire qui se meut sur une voie infinie, si on lui demande où il est, répond: Sur la voie; et si on lui demande d'où il vient, il répond: De la voie; et si on lui demande où il va, il répond: Vers la voie, venant de la voie. Et c'est ainsi qu'une Voie infinie est appelée le lieu du voyageur, et que cette voie est Dieu.»  

(LV 166-67)

The ambiguous title of the collection denotes the complex nature of the image, where the *lieu* of the traveller refers to a spiritual destination rather than a physical one. The subtitle (*Notes sur le mystère*) reinforces a focus that is fixed primarily on the vertical axis and on the mysterious interaction that is possible with the divine (*'le lieu du voyageur, et que cette voie est Dieu'*). While Renard refers to this ‘voie infinie’ with what could be construed as being in physical terms (‘sur’, ‘de’, ‘vers’), it is also conveyed in terms of a temporal path that traces the traveller’s point of departure and arrival (‘où il est’, ‘d’où il vient’, ‘où il va’). In the texts, Renard portrays the road as not simply a means of movement from one point to another, but as being a defining force for all those with whom it comes into contact (‘Suis-je ma route avant ma route?’*, *TI* 59, ‘Il n’y a pas de voie. Tu l’es toi-même – et son terme’, *CP* 203).

In sharp contrast to Réda, Renard manifests comparatively little interest in the physical act of walking in his poems, except in terms of its associations with acts of penance and therefore as a physical symbol of the spiritual journey (‘C’est à l’humilité de la marche: à sa lenteur et à sa lourdeur – que me voici donc rendu’, *LV* 245). While the texts do contain references to specific geographical locations (indeed, in Renard’s most recent collection, *À l’orée du mystère* (2000) he refers to ‘Amazonie’, ‘Europe’, ‘l’Arctique’, ‘l’Antarctique’, ‘Asie’ ‘Amérique’ and ‘Afrique’), the poet’s primary focus is on metaphysical journeys. Réda savours his expeditions on foot, by train or by solex, but Renard rarely mentions the means by which he travels. This almost complete subordination of physical points of passage serves to highlight Renard’s absolute insistence on an ultimate spiritual destination (‘Ce dont je vis, ce dont je meurs/et me perpétue en ailleurs/n’est rien d’ici’, *CP* 56) and an overriding orientation towards a metaphorical *au-delà*. Thus, the journey itself is perceived as being infinitely less important than the place, or rather the spiritual encounter, to which he is destined (‘je m’en vais vers celui que je fus dans la gloire/et reconnais l’odeur de mes métamorphoses’, *CP* 65). Indeed, Renard’s physical journeys appear to act as little more than a prompt for metaphysical questioning and, in this respect, his poetry communicates a perception of travel that is similar to Frénaud:

Lentement, et parfois avec fièvre et se précipitant, le poète construit un chemin dans l’opacité fluente du monde et de lui-même, s’arrêtant tout à coup pour se demander s’il ne s’égarer pas, si chaque pas qu’il fait [...] ne le détourne pas du château avec lequel la fin il doit se confondre [...] Et pourtant, il doit continuer à trouver et à chercher, à progresser’.31

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Ultimately, Renard’s chief preoccupation with the journey image is as ‘un étonnant voyage [qui] nous métamorphosait’ (SG 105) and his ultimate goal is to travel further along the road of spiritual understanding. His poetry reflects a search for something that lies beyond the self in order that he may ‘accéder à l’être’ (SG 96) and thus he exhorts the reader to do likewise:

Va toujours plus loin que toi-même et l’inattendu t’adviendra.

(SG 105)

Franchis
l’extérieur et l’intérieur

(TI 31)

Importantly, Renard’s frequent references to travel are often imbued with uncertainty, as the poet experiences ‘la défaite/De ce corps qui s’en va sans aller nulle part’ (CP 10) on ‘le chemin sans nom’ (LV 235). This is frequently conveyed through the questions that the journeying act seems to elicit:

Puis je repartirai aux sources peut-être enfouies dans la garrigue
la question de ma soif.
Mais la reconnaîtrais-je si je rencontrais l’eau?

(CP 18)

Je marche (vers où? quel néant?)
aussi terribles que la mort accomplie par désespérance de ne voir finir
l’agonie.

(CPR 118)

Renard’s impetus to engage in a spiritual journey is thereby negated by a deep dissatisfaction and lassitude towards the notion of exploration, where the poet believes that ‘il ne me reste rien, dans les prairies nouvelles,/de la métamorphose’ (MM 104). This statement is made in one of Renard’s more recent collections of poetry (1991) and reflects the path that his own spiritual journey has taken over the years. Ten years previously, Renard asserted that ‘toute démarche authentiquement religieuse consiste, chacune à sa manière, en une incessante recherche des voies intérieures pouvant mener à une relation transformatrice avec le Mystère ou à une identification éventuelle avec lui’ (LV 225-26). However, with the passing years, his desire to explore ‘des voies intérieures’ seems to diminish somewhat. Despite the poet’s religious conviction, he does not deny the fact that the threshold represents an unknown, and therefore is to be approached with caution. The desire to reach l’au-delà and the fear of what that may entail creates a tension in the texts as Renard
oscillates between a movement outwards and a retreating back to the self. At times, the poet’s perpetual uncertainty appears to act as a hindrance, to the point where he is filled with confusion and disillusionment:

\[ \text{J'ai dit le mot nocturne et bu les eaux sauvages,} \\
\text{j'ai touche l'or, le feu – j'ai suivi des voyages} \\
\text{d'où je n'ai rapporté que des oiseaux mourants.} \]

\[(M 65)\]

This example demonstrates the deep frustration that Renard sometimes feels, where the ultimate fruitlessness of the journey is highlighted by the negative ‘ne […] que’ and the contrast set up between ‘l'or, le feu’ and ‘des oiseaux mourants’. This sense of disenchantment is implicitly bound up with the poet’s liminal mentality, where the beginning of a new journey (and the crossing of a new threshold) is both bewitching but also perhaps deceptive (‘les départs sont ensorcelants’, M 61).

While Réda's poems describe his travels à pied and those things he has discovered as he walks around the city, Renard employs the verb marcher in the texts principally as a metaphor. In Renard’s poems, the repeated emphasis of the verb ‘marcher’ ties in closely with the poet’s fascination with ‘la voie de ce qui dépasse/tout lieu’ (M 13). Like Verlaine, Renard’s poetic vision is directed towards a spiritual journey rather than physical displacement:

\[ \text{Va ton chemin sans plus t'inquiéter!} \\
\text{La route est droite et tu n'as qu'à monter,} \\
\text{Pourtant d'ailleurs le seul trésor qui vaille [...]} \\
\text{La mort là-bas te dresse un lit de joie.}^{33} \]

In contrast to Réda’s casual ambling around the back streets of Paris, Renard’s attitude is very firmly focused on ‘la rue où court la vie comme le sang aux veines’:\n
\[ \text{Je ne cesserai pas d'y marcher [...]} \\
\text{Sans chercher la demeure possible: l'éventuel lieu d'alliance,} \\
\text{Abîme l'être.} \]

\[(CP 161)\]

The sense of purpose in the phrase ‘Je ne cesserai pas d’y marcher’ communicates the poet’s determination to follow the path he believes is set before him. Yet this

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32 André Alter comments that ‘Jean-Claude Renard reste fidèle aux voyages [...] Il ne faut donc jamais cesser de poser des questions auxquelles seul ce dieu qui est en l'homme peut apporter les vraies reponses. Mais plus il avance, plus l'homme découvre que ces réponses ne lui parviennent d'abord qu'à travers celles que lui apportent le sacré’, Le Sacre du silence, pp.151-52.

purposefulness stands in contrast to the negative terms with which he describes his destination, for the very physical action of walking ultimately leads to a type of destruction (‘Abîme l’être’). The ambiguous nature of Renard’s perception of his destination is reflected elsewhere when the poet states that ‘Marcher/fût-ce vers rien/garde possible tout’ (LS 37), suggesting that it is the journeying process, rather than the goal, that provides possibilities. While, on one level, this attitude is similar to that of Réda’s, it has particular ramifications for a poet of faith like Renard. Here, despite Renard’s beliefs, the spiritual journey seems to have no determinable location and the reference to ‘rien’ betokens the uncertainty he feels about the nature (or even existence) of a spiritual autre. Nonetheless, despite these misgivings, there is also a restlessness that pervades Renard’s poems, as he is haunted by the compulsion to continue his spiritual quest (‘je ne puis m’arrêter nulle part’, LV 245). He seeks a spatial, temporal and spiritual otherness, in which all contradictions will be embraced:

Là se nomme ce que rien ne dit.
Là se trouve ce que rien n’indique.
Là demeure ce qui ne reste nulle part.
Là s’en vient ce qui n’est jamais là.

(CP 198)

‘Dans le long dédale où mon nom se perd’

While Renard displays a keen desire to travel along the road of spiritual growth, the recurring image of the maze indicates the poet’s trepidation when confronted with a metaphysical autre. As has been outlined in the study of Réda’s poetry, the maze challenges the usual function of the path for it is comprised of circuitous and obstructed paths that deny any sense of progression. For Renard, the maze’s confusing network of blocked and misleading routes prompt him to wonder ‘serait-ce moi que je défie: ma recherche et ma fuite mêlées à qui me cherche et m’échappe’ (CP 181). The repeated use in the texts of the image of the maze signifies the frustration and unhappiness that the poet sometimes experiences, where his principal concern with the destination rather than on the journeying process is challenged:

Dans le long dédale où mon nom se perd, je traîne un malheur, je vis une mort dont l’amour peut seul, si je le célèbre, assoupir mon sang, le purifier, lui offrir le baume et le corps nouveau que toujours je cherche et jamais ne trouve.

(\textit{DR} 65)

In this example, the poet’s very identity is threatened by the maze (‘où mon nom se perd’) and the experience of the maze is associated with ‘un malheur’ and ‘une mort’ (the impact of which is highlighted by the repetition of [m]). The imaginative link between the maze and feelings of isolation is also emphasised by the emphatic ‘toujours’/’jamais’, where the subject is both figuratively and textually negated (as ‘je’ is replaced by ‘ne’). Similarly, Renard also refers to l’anonymat du labyrinthe’ (\textit{CP} 184) and a place of confusion ‘où se perdre est tout et n’est rien’ (\textit{CP} 199):

À peine ouvert,
le dédale tisse – puis multiplie aux jeux d’immobiles miroirs ses mythes et les miens.

(\textit{DN} 111)

The maze is depicted as an active force, creating a bewildering network (represented textually by the [m] alliteration) that will challenge the subject’s own sense of identity (as signified by ‘miroirs’ and ‘mythes’). Therefore, despite Renard’s religious conviction and a desire to continue on his spiritual journey, the maze is still seen as a powerful force that can entrap:

Comment s’évader du profond dédale?
Il tourne sans fin autour de tes pas avec le délire

(\textit{SG} 11)

However, in the same way that Réda is continually exploring his \textit{environs} and is undeterred by physical barriers, so Renard imbues the image of the maze with positive spiritual (and liminal) connotations:

J’erre, parmi ces questions, comme dans un labyrinthe dont l’on sait que les structures, depuis l’époque paléolithique, représentent à la fois la prison dont on l’essaye de s’échapper et le sanctuaire dont l’on s’efforce de découvrir l’entrée, le lieu de jonction du sacré et du jeu, et l’espace où l’homme fête les mystères de la nature.

(\textit{EI} 12)
'J'avance, effaçant les questions.'

The poet's firm focus on the road that lies ahead serves as a defining force and contextualises all that goes before, with the result that the whole journeying process is defined in relation to its ultimate destination. For Renard, a search for meaning beyond the self is synonymous with a journey towards divine enlightenment (‘Se chercher au-delà de soi est commencer à se pister’, DR 18). *La piste* is a term that Renard employs repeatedly in his work and, as a recurring image, it suggests of Renard’s directional pull to a spiritual *au-delà*, a pull that the poet appears unable to resist:

Il fallait persister à vivre, suivre la piste, être en sachant que l’on n’est rien...

*SG* 176)

Here, Renard’s use of language renders it very different in tone from Réda’s poetry. Whereas the latter is predisposed to journeying for its own sake, Renard expresses the journey in metaphorical terms, where life is portrayed as being a spiritual obligation. The verb ‘falloir’ denotes the imperative that obliges Renard to follow this predetermined *piste*. In contrast to Réda, Renard is inspired by an otherness that lies beyond present reality, for ‘depuis toujours longe ma piste une présence, à la fois/intime et intacte, qui donne sens au cheminement’ (*TI* 25). This vague *présence* is both relational and complete (‘intime et intacte’) and it is one that the poet believes attributes meaning to his journey. Throughout the poems, Renard’s focus remains firmly fixed on his ultimate destination (namely a spiritual union with God) as he travels on this ‘voie d’une destinée singulière’ (*LV* 20).

Nevertheless, in a manner similar to that of the representation of his destination, Renard’s determination to follow *la piste* is counterbalanced somewhat by the fact that the nature of this *quête* is often expressed in very vague terms:

J’apprendrais alors à partir, sans connaître pourquoi ni vers où et sans regarder en arrière.

*DN* 146)
La longue Quête du Graal ne s’accomplit que si l’on va, par la garrigue et le désert, flairant le vent, cherchant la piste, errant la nuit, marchant du jour sans certitudes, sans repos, et sans attendre une réponse, vers le puits toujours plus lointain.  

(CPR 82)

In both of the above examples, the ongoing sense of bewilderment that Renard feels is portrayed clearly in the emphatic negations employed (‘sans’, ‘ni’, ‘sans’). However, Renard insists that by travelling on this spiritual journey, he may combat his doubts (‘j’avance/effaçant les questions...’, DN 111-12). Therefore, he accepts the futility of looking for answers on this side of the threshold of death (‘interroger est vain’, CP 10, ‘Le vide enseigne à voir. [...] Ne questionne pas’, CP 179). Indeed, Renard imagines that progress along the vertical axis is made possible through an encounter with the doubts and fears prompted by l’inconnu:

Pays quittés,  
je gagne les ravins en quête d’une piste promise au pur silence  
(CP 180)

As Renard envisages himself moving towards the ‘Très-Haut’,35 he is acutely aware of anything that that may impede his movement along the vertical axis. Set determinedly on la piste, Renard is wary of all that may distract or threaten to lead him away from the course on which he is set. His road to spiritual enlightenment leads upwards to ‘l’Un très pur’ (CP 200) and so, as he draws closer to God, he is watchful of that which may cause him to fall. This deep awareness of a vertical ascension to God is reminiscent of a similar paradigm in Reverdy’s poems, who claims that:

On ne peut pas marcher dans le sentier étroit  
On rentre du même côté  
Mais il y a une barrière  
Quelque chose vient de tomber  
Là-bas derrière  

In Renard’s poems, ravines, cliffs and chasms are used to communicate spiritual difficulties and the recurring image of l’abîme emphasises the poet’s wariness of l’autre abîme.\(^{37}\) Renard’s claims that ‘l’inconnu sans fin de l’abîme sans fond ouvert sur le néant’ (OM 11) and ‘l’abîme détourne sans fin toute fin’ (DN 141) denotes the profound uncertainty that the chasm image prompts, emphasised in the text by the emphatic ‘sans fin [...] sans fond’ and ‘sans fin toute fin’. In the texts, it is clear that the poet is haunted by ‘un état de vide total’ (EI 10) and l’abîme is frequently used as an imaginative expression of this:

\[
\text{Vas-tu céder aux songes qui s’échappent d’abîmes} \\
\text{plus reculés qu'on y avance, plus infini qu’on y descend?} \\
\text{(SG 10)}
\]

Importantly, the sense of the void that is prompted by l’abîme is not wholly negative. The poet also portrays it as a possible threshold to new possibilities (‘l’abîme est une voie’, CP 164, ‘Le vide est une première vitre’, CP 163) and even to new life (‘le vide prodigue une naissance’, CP 162). For this reason, the poet states that it is important ‘d’avoir assez d’orgueil et de courage pour tenter d’exister/plus haut que le non-sens au niveau du mystère’ (CP 153), in order that one may cross the ultimate abîme between life and death:

\[
\text{Silence pur, essence d’un abîme} \\
\text{Qui fait en moi vibrer le cristal noir,} \\
\text{Approche-toi de cette mort intime} \\
\text{Dont tu peux seul traverser le miroir} \\
\text{(CP 9)}
\]

The contradictory elements of the liminal image of l’abîme are highly representative of Renard’s poetry, embodying the poet’s claim that ‘les différences s’additionnent au lieu de s’affronter. Mais le rêve ou l’utopie continûment féconde d’une seule spiritualité universelle n’en demeure pas moins possible’ (EI 76). As the poet’s work has developed over the years, there has been a perceptible shift in his attitude towards l’inconnu as he expresses a more open acceptance of the uncertainty that he associates with the threshold image:

\[
\text{Et il me fallait apprendre à ne pas m’effrayer des incertitudes, du silence, du vide, des ténèbres, de la mort qu’il pouvait en même temps recouvrir.} \\
\text{(LV 108)}
\]

Despite the fear and confusion that Renard’s spiritual journey instills, the poet does not doubt the possibility of divine revelation: ‘l’expérience du vide est pour moi à la fois comme la carence ontologique que je suis par rapport à la plénitude ontologique qu’est la divinité et comme la manifestation, dans sa propre ténèbre, de ce qui, en tant que pur Mystère, transcende l’être et le non-être’ (EI 104). For this reason, the poet continues to assert the validity of the spiritual journey, as a means of being able to cross over into le sacré:

Non que je ne me questionne plus ni ne questionne plus rien au cours de mon itinéraire. Mais le questionnement a changé. Il est devenu le questionnement d’un non-questionnement: une pure ouverture à ce qui n’advient qu’à travers le silence.

(LV 234)

Conversely, by accepting the mysterious nature of the spiritual journey, Renard may overcome the power of le vide (‘Apprends ainsi que, par merveilles,/le mystère vide le vide’, CP 174) so that ‘le néant n’est pas une menace’ (CP 189). Only by continuing the journey does Renard believe that he can allay his fears, for it is the spiritual journey that gives the poet a sense of purpose that in turn helps him to overcome his doubts:

Il semble que toute démarche authentiquement religieuse consiste, chacune à sa manière, en une incessante recherche des voies intérieures pouvant mener à une relation transformatrice avec le Mystère.

(LV 225-26)

Renard accepts the threat of le vide, for even this acceptance will render possible a fusion with the spiritual realm, for ‘dans le rien loge le mystère – et l’impossible est à l’instant possible’ (CP 182).

The Role of Language

‘La parole qui rassemble et qui plénifie’

Renard’s resolute belief in the Christian metanarrative is displayed throughout the texts as the texts repeatedly address the same issues of faith. A substantial part of Renard’s poetic vision involves not only an examination of le spirituel but an engagement with it through the medium of language. Having traced the way in
which the poet privileges the atemporal over the temporal and the spiritual over the physical, this section will focus on Renard’s perception of the written word as a threshold.

Throughout his poetic career, much of Renard’s perception of the role of language has Biblical resonances, in which there is an intrinsic link between divine revelation and the word and where the latter is portrayed as being both the source of life and the point of passage between God and man. Within Renard’s poems, there is a strong association established between access to the deity and language (‘le Christ est Verbe, et le Verbe est l’arbre/dont tout est issu’, CP 67) and, throughout the texts, this interaction is placed within the context of an upwards movement:

l’homme spirituel et l’homme fait Verbe,
miraculera dans le Ciel ouvert
le Monde nouveau, la plus haute Terre

(CP 73)

Directing his attention to ‘le Ciel ouvert’ and ‘la plus haute Terre’, the poet envisages the threshold between the profane and le sacré as existing on the vertical plane, as he strives for ‘à cette altérité, à cet ailleurs, à cette transcendance occultes’ (AN 95). The liminal capacity that Renard perceives in poetry is due to the fact that he believes that language itself is more than merely a linguistic system. Indeed, Renard refers to ‘le vrai langage;/La parole qui rassemble et qui plénifie’ (CP 124) and to the notion of language as an essence:

Mais qu’au fond du langage
S’éveille et se célèbre la parole de l’être

(CP 145)

Renard insists on the idea that language can act as a point of union between man and eternal life, reviving the soul that was spiritually dead (‘la parole écarte les ruines/— ranime l’âme momifiée’. SG 32). For Renard, la Parole serves as a means of

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38 *In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing has been made. In him was life, and that life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, but the darkness has not understood it*, John 1.1-5. *New International Version.*

39 This association between Christ and the word has had a profound influence on religious poetry over the years. We think, for example, of Claudel’s claim that Le Verbe de Dieu est Celui en qui Dieu s’est fait à l’homme donnable/La parole créée est cela en qui toutes choses créées sont faites à l’homme donnables’. *Cinq Grandes odes, La Maison fermée*, p.95. Equally, one is reminded of Emmanuels’ explicit and immediate association between words and the deity, as the poet refers to ‘la parole dans la bouche de Dieu’, Jacob, ‘Né à jamais non né’, p.49.
crossing the threshold between the profane and the sacred, where 'la parole attire et reflète l’être’ (SG 143).40

'Nulle phrase ne franchit la faille'

However, despite the liminal function that language may serve, Renard is also keenly aware of its problematic nature, for he feels the limiting boundaries of language as he strives to express the transcendence of ‘l’Un/qui réside au-delà de l’être et du non-être et de toutes les langues’ (OM 15). Renard’s description of this predicament is one that is reminiscent of the mystic tradition, in which an apophatic theology is employed to circumscribe Truth by a series of inadequate negations, as 'le Mystère en tant qu’il est vécu n’a pas besoin de la parole et opère donc au-delà du langage.' 41 In the poems, this gap between the word and le sacré is frequently conveyed through a liminal vocabulary:

Mais nulle phrase ne franchit la faille,
n’obtient mieux que longer l’énigme,
luire sur le seuil

(DN 125)

Here, the force of the negative (‘nulle’, ‘ne’, ‘n’) is made all the more striking as it disrupts a sequence of words beginning with [f] and one can sense the poet’s despair, as he is deeply conscious of the inability of language to convey that which is other. Thus, while language has some mediating ability, ultimately it seems that it cannot penetrate the threshold between the profane and the sacred.

The poet is frustrated repeatedly by the inadequacy of language (‘comment dire/ce que les mots ne disent pas?’, CP 197), an emotion he refers to as as ‘l’angoisse du langage arrivé jusqu’au seuil’ (SG 19). Renard’s liminal mentality therefore lies at the heart of his perception of language, where the very words through which he tries to convey God only serve to highlight the barrier that exists between the two, as ‘la mystique [...] se situe au-delà de toute expression et de tout langage.’ 42 Throughout the texts, Renard continually searches for ways in which he may bridge this gap, as he wonders ‘y aurait-il un langage [...] à révéler et fonder peu à peu la vérité possible [...]?’ (CP 141). However, while he aspires to create ‘la parole étonnée de porter un mystère plus grand que la parole’ (CP 146), Renard must reconcile his

40This calls to mind Claudel’s portrayal of the liminal function of la Parole: 'La voici donc au seuil de ma maison, la Parole qui est comme une jeune fille éternelle/Ouvre la porte! et la Sagesse de Dieu est devant toi,' Cinq Grandes odes, 'L’Esprit et l’eau', p.52.

understanding of poetry with the limitations that language will necessarily impose upon him (‘Mais comment parler de ce qui n’est pas exprimable […]? Et pourquoi, à quoi bon encore cet amas de mots [...]’, LV 153). As Renard tries to work with what Reverdy refers to as ‘des mots trop secs qui ne gardent plus rien de ma substance’, the recurring questions throughout the poetry reveal the poet’s frustration and uncertainty:

Mais comment parler (et quelle langue)
À qui, pour qui, pour dire quoi [...]?

(CP 162)

Renard’s frustration is particularly apparent in the above example, where the poet’s relationship with language is utterly undermined and he feels bereft of the power to communicate (a helplessness that is highlighted by the ‘stammering’ effect of the repetition of [k] and [p]). This conflict between Renard’s desire to express a spiritual other and the impossibility of the task is explored in detail in Le Lieu du voyageur:

Ou n’ai-je pas tente de m’engager trop avant en voulant relater une experience qui [...] se produit au-delà du langage et ne laisse, après elle, que des traces ambiguës: les ombres vacillantes et troubles d’une lumière inqualifiable que, si subtil qu’il soit, le langage n’a qu’à peine pouvoir évoquer? Ecrire est donc, ici, foncièrement trahir.

(LV 153)

Again, we see how the poet’s perception of alterity lies at the heart of his understanding of faith and of language, as he struggles to relate that which lies beyond words (‘au-delà du langage’). The disparity between the experience and the inadequacy of language is made evident (‘traces ambiguës’, ‘ombres vacillantes’, ‘inqualifiable’), and yet writing is Renard’s chosen form of communication. This ambiguity is one that runs throughout the poems, where language is both central to the poet’s expression and yet periphery to his religious experience, being both the threshold and the barrier to his relationship with God.

‘Sans silence [...] le moi demeure inapte à se dépasser véritablement.’

This perception of language as serving a dual function as both a threshold and a barrier is communicated through the image of exile, where Renard explores the clear

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42 Renard, *Sud*, p.108.
disparity between man’s words and ‘La Langue du sacré’. Clearly distinguishing between earthly and divine language, the poet states that the latter ‘me fait homme en exil. [...] Me fait un homme d’ailleurs’ (CP 99-100). Thus, his awareness of alterity permeates his understanding of self and prompts a sense of separation, where language highlights not only its own inadequacies, but serves to isolate the poet. Indeed, Renard finds himself in a state of double exile, where he is deeply aware of his inability to fully communicate the otherness of the divine and yet also unable to resist this calling of sorts. Effectively, he is cut from both the world around him and from God.

In an attempt to resolve this paradox that language instigates, Renard focuses on the role of silence:

Sans silence [...] le moi demeure inapte à se dépasser véritablement [...]. Il reste incapable de s’affranchir de ce qui l’aliène pour connaître qu’il a la faculté d’être ou de devenir plus ce qu’il croit être ou que ce qu’il se satisfait d’être.

(LV 196-97)

Here, the sense of alienation and exile is overcome through the liminal function that silence performs (as conveyed through the verbs ‘se dépasser’, ‘s’affranchir’), offering le moi the means to fuller realisation of self. The importance of silence in Renard’s imaginative framework can be seen throughout the poems:

Mais dans le Silence un Amour - un haut amour fabuleux.
Et il y avait un Verbe dans l’amour: une Parole.

(CP 101)

La parole n’est-elle fondée que par le mystère du silence?

(CP 205)

If it is true that ‘dire est taire’ (TI 164), conversely, as the two examples above demonstrate, silence is portrayed as a mystical form of communication that is able to express that which language cannot. In this sense, it is able to overcome the barrier between words and the ineffable, acting as a type of threshold between two. For Renard, the very fact that ‘incommunicable est la pure essence’ (CPR 34) renders the role of silence as being crucial in his understanding of communication, as ‘le silence nous offre la possibilité de rencontrer une présence dont la parole excède toute parole’ (LV 199). Importantly, this silence is not ‘une absence de parole, mais

44 This awareness of linguistic limitations calls to mind Frénaud’s work, in which the poet wonders ‘qu’importe après, le murmure misérable du poème./C’est néant cela, non le paradis’, Il n’y a pas de paradis, ‘Il n’y a pas de paradis’, p.83.
la parole sans mots d’une expérience, à la fois intérieure et extérieure \(^{45}\) and, for this reason, it becomes the point of passage between man and l’indicible.

'Le poème est paradoxalement ouverture'

However, while Renard regards silence as a means of crossing the threshold between man and le sacré, this does not fully resolve the poet's dilemma as he still feels his fundamental need to express himself through words. In general terms, Renard is keenly aware both of the infinite possibilities of of language and words' capacity for renewal, as ‘chaque mot écrit un autre mot’ (*TI* 85):

*Sache-le:*
*jamais tout n’est dit*
*Car la langue n’ayant pas de fin*
*les mêmes mots faits neufs par chaque regard nu*

(*TI* 48)

Here, the opening imperative reiterates Renard’s conviction that words are in a perpetual state of regeneration, according to each individual interpretation ('chaque regard nu'). As the poet searches for a mode of communication that will bridge the gap between silence and dire ('il me fallait tenter de m’exprimer comme entre le silence et le dire', *LV* 9), his main focus is not on language *per se* but rather on the writing of poetry, which he regards as the medium of communication that will act as a threshold between the two states:

*Pourquoi écrire*
*sinon pour être et pour faire être?*
*Pour aller vers cela*
*qui est en toi et hors de toi*
*à la fois pur Tout et pur Rien?*
*Pour te sentir enfin,*
*à l’orée du silence,*
*au fond comme au-delà des mots*
*sacré par le mystère?*

(*SC* 91)

For Renard, while he regards silence as a supreme form of communication, the act of writing lies at the centre of his understanding of self. Indeed, it is the use of 'le langage poétique' in his writing that allows him to communicate the ineffable, as it is 'comme la trace de ce qui ne peut pas être exprimé: la première possible (mais

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\(^{45}\) Alter quoting Renard's comment on *La Lumière du silence, Le Sacre du silence*, p.12.
inqualifiable) de ce qui n’est pas présent dans les mots’ (NP 28). Throughout the texts, this trace is illustrated by Renard’s use of language, where contradiction and paradox hint at the mystery that he can never fully express:

C’est par ces mots morts et vivants
d’un peu de nuit, d’un peu de jour
que quand tu ignores tu sais
et que quand tu sais tu ignores.

(SG 81)

This example typifies Renard’s poetic style, where repetition only serves to emphasise the conflict of meaning and to draw our attention to ‘ce qui n’est pas présent dans les mots’. This irony is then highlighted by the contrast between the final word on the second and fourth lines, where any light shed on the mystery is counterbalanced by ignorance (‘jour’/’ignore’). Thus, Renard constructs texts that demonstrate language’s simultaneous power and failure to convey ‘la Vérité totale et absolue’ (EI 76), as ‘le langage poétique [...] nous indique à sa façon qu’il y a toujours quelque chose ailleurs, au-delà’ (NP 43). Similarly, Renard’s belief that poetry is ‘l’un des moyens privilégiés qui permettent d’exprimer l’inexprimable’ is reiterated in the following extract, where the mysterious power of poetry to act as a point of passage to the divine is expressed through paradox (‘à voir l’invisible’, ‘la présence du Silence saint [...] à travers l’absence même qu’il oppose aux mots’):

[...] la poésie essaie au contraire de donner, par le langage particulier qui est le sien, à voir l’invisible et à sentir la présence du Silence saint du Mystère à travers l’absence même qu’il oppose aux mots. C’est également en cela que le poème est paradoxalement ouverture et c’est de ce qu’il semble seul capable de parler et de parler comme il en parle qu’il se fait aussi lieu de réfraction du Sacré [...]

(LV 33)

Renard’s understanding of poetry is based on its function as a threshold between man and God (‘ouverture’) and Renard conveys poetry as having the Christ-like ability to mediate between man and God (‘Le poème nous mène jusqu’au seuil de la «maison de l’être»’, AN 203). Indeed, this ability is not limited to the individual’s relationship with the divine, for the poem may also uncover the mystery of the things of this world (‘la poésie [...] tente de traduire, à dépasser les contradictions’, LV 165-66) and act as a threshold to what Renard believes to be their essence:

46 Mazo refers to ‘cette ardente interrogation sur le mystérieux et irréductible phénomène qui transmue le langage commun en parole poétique’, p.8.
47 Renard, Sud, pp.101-02.
Le poème, comme tout art, nous rapproche des énigmes des êtres et des choses, nous mène au maximum jusqu’au seuil de leurs présences réelles et même, quelquefois, nous en entrouvrons les portes.

(AN 191)

In the same way that Renard’s poetry displays a continual awareness of ‘la pulsion naturelle qui semble universellement orienter l’homme vers le sacré, la transcendance, l’absolu’ (EI 13), so Pierre Oster Soussouev’s writings contain a strong sense of the spiritual. However, as the following chapter demonstrates, this expression of a metaphysical autre contrasts greatly from the representation of vertical images found in Renard’s poems and reveals a vastly different liminal mentality.

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Pierre Oster: The Irenic Threshold

'Au seuil du Règne'

In the contemporary context of a post-Romantic era, Pierre (Soussouev) Oster's unending praise of the natural world is far removed from the literary trends established by the vast majority of twentieth-century poets. Throughout four decades of writing, Oster (1933–) has resolutely maintained his poetic expression and his adoration of an edenic natural world. While Europe's urbanisation has continued apace, Oster's ongoing search for nature's 'chant le plus intime' (NTN 18) excludes any hint of contemporary influences and his poetry encourages a collusion between poet and reader, as Oster enjoins the reader to join him 'au seuil du Règne' (SL 124):

Tiens-toi sans crainte à l'écart des esthétiques inhabitées [...] Conforme-toi à la loi qui permet de lire la dynamique des pages. (OM xii)

The tone, language and subject matter of Oster's poems are far removed from the urbanity of Rédã's poetry or the religious assertions of Renard's poems and therefore provide a fruitful point of comparison and contrast with the poetry examined thus far in this study.

One of the overriding characteristics that contribute towards 'la dynamique des pages' in Oster's poems is the reverence that he expresses for nature and its ever-expanding grandeur. The sheer immensity of the vision encapsulated in Oster's work is perhaps particularly striking as the general tendency in

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1 While Oster also published under the name Pierre Oster Soussouev for some time during his literary career, he has since reverted to his former name, and therefore will be referred to as such in this thesis.
contemporary poetry is to focus on the microcosm, as typified in Réda’s poetry. Here, however, the reader is invited to join Oster in a pantheistic celebration of nature as the poet gazes out towards the overwhelming vastness of creation. In strong contrast to the doctrinally based beliefs of Renard that place a clear emphasis on transcendence and the vertical axis, the religious overtones in Oster’s poems centre around a pantheist theology that puts immanence to the fore. Pantheism, which ‘is seen as the quintessential expression of divine immanence’, also ‘holds that “everything is divine”’. This means that pantheism regards all things as forming part of an all-encompassing Unity, and therefore it is a belief system in which an investigation of representations of the threshold would seem to have little or no bearing. Undoubtedly, at first glance this pantheism would appear to be highly problematic in a thematic study of liminal images, for pantheism’s emphasis on immanence seems to utterly undermine the application of such a project. Certainly, as compared to the clear examples of threshold representations in the work of Réda and Renard, Oster’s pantheism is decidedly non-directional in nature and therefore questions the usefulness of the horizontal/vertical model and offers the greatest and ultimate challenge to this thesis. However, despite the clearly pantheistic outlook that Oster displays in his poetry, a detailed reading of his work does reveal a series of thresholds and borders that he establishes and the poet’s gaze does show an awareness of both the horizontal plane and shades of le vertical.

Standing motionless, surrounded by the natural world, Oster is awe-struck by the vastness of all that he sees and by the life that pulsates therein: ‘Tout l’Univers vibre’ (NTN 19). Very much in the Romantic tradition, Oster perceives nature as an organic whole, in which he may play a part through poetry. The poet thus believes that he participates in the infrastructure of nature and therein derives

2 The utter distinction between Renard’s and Oster’s spirituality can be seen in the fact that ‘immanence’ is ‘a term most often used in contrast to ‘transcendence’ [...] The most extreme form of immanence is expressed in pantheism, which identifies God’s substance either partly or wholly with the world.[...] In Christianity, the separateness of God’s substance from that of the world is guaranteed by the doctrine of creation ex nihilo’, The Cambridge Dictionary Of Philosophy, ed. by Robert Audi, 2nd edn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p.418.


4 While it is true that the term ‘Romantic’ designates an immense scope of diverse and contradictory elements, in this study it is used principally to denote a Wordsworthian belief in the purity of nature and an aspiration to the mystical, with an emphasis on revelation through immanence rather than transcendence. For an insightful discussion on Romanticism, I refer the
meaning and purpose. The religious experience engendered by nature is highlighted by the poet’s use of imagery, as he continues his ‘chant du Vent! Chant de l’Espace!’ (SL 30):

Quelle jouissance que de poser sur un autel inconnu l’offrande de quelques notations!

(AL 14/PT 284)\(^5\)

Throughout Oster’s poems, there is a palpable sense of awe as the poet contemplates nature:

*Le déploiement des champs épars, le soleil sur tous lieux étendu,*

*Voilà l’histoire que me raconte un puissant paysage d’automne.*

*Une place y est faite à qui se veut témoin de l’autre éternité.*

(D 71)

As the above example illustrates, Oster’s oscillates between praise of nature and evocation of a higher power within the natural world (‘un puissant paysage’, ‘l’autre éternité’). In this sense, he situates his poetry on the threshold between the horizontal and the vertical axes,\(^6\) and involves an implicit understanding of thresholds and limits, boundaries and borders, where the horizontal axis shades into the vertical without any definite threshold being crossed. This chapter will examine the ways in which Oster’s liminal mentality is made manifest in four main areas, namely through his portrayal of the irenic, nature, the divine and language.

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\(^5\) Where a poem has been reprinted in the Poésie Gallimard collection *Paysage du Tout*, then a double reference system is employed.

Oster and the Irenic

‘Je pénètre ce que je nomme’

Throughout the years, Oster strictly limits the subject matter of his poems to pastoral scenes and exaltations of the natural world. These thematic choices are in themselves unremarkable, but Oster’s poetic themes are rendered noteworthy because of that which they exclude. Completely removed from the preoccupations and concerns of modern urban life, all of his poems are situated in an unspecified, idyllic pastoral landscape. There is, however, a clear dichotomy between this landscape and the poet’s personal situation, as the latter stands in striking contrast to any bucolic paradise. Oster’s own life is supremely urbane, subsisting on the most meagre of incomes in Paris, and thus there is a significant rift in his psychology between everyday life and his poetry. Oster’s adulation of nature situates his poetry firmly in the School of Romantic poets and his celebration of the elements allows little space for questions or doubts he may experience. The poems work on the basis of non-contrast, creating a seemingly impervious wall with which to block out any sense of uncertainty of difficulty. It is important to note that, as is the case with Réda and Renard, Oster’s choice of subject matter (limited though it may be) is a genuine response to the world as he imagines it. The language he employs reflects the extraordinary correlation that he perceives between the word and the world. Oster describes certain moments of agreeable perception, but he resists any influence of the polemical and wilfully chooses to close his eyes to that which he does not wish to see (‘Mes yeux, je les referme! Il est doux d’être aveugle à demi’, D 11/PT 167). Oster’s liminal mentality is revealed in the fact that a very definite threshold must be crossed from his daily existence into the realm of the poems. As such, the outlying boundaries of the texts’ subject matter are particularly pertinent to any discussion on the threshold. This section will now focus on the tension that exists within the representations of the irenic in Oster’s poetry.

The poetic stance adopted by Oster resists any hint of the problematic between the urban and the natural world or between man and the earth, for it is based on an irenic tradition of compromise and acceptance. This irenic landscape demands that Oster construct and cross an imaginative threshold in order to enter
the pastoral Eden that his poems describe, for the literary ideal is in absolute contrast to the poet's own urban Parisian lifestyle. In this way, the very act of creating poetry creates a point of passage through which Oster may enter a sylvan paradise (‘Ah! Pressentant mon nom, je pénètre ce que je nomme’, NTN 69). For Oster, it is through the act of naming that he may create his own paradise and thus distance himself from day-to-day reality. By conjuring up this edenic world, Oster can then penetrate it, so that the Logos and the liminal are intrinsically linked. In the new space that Oster constructs through language, man and nature are portrayed as existing in harmony:

...Un bois sensible évoque le calme du ciel.
Je me soulève, élé, chantant l’essentiel,
Exaltant mon chemin!

(CM 98)

L’Univers est si sûr. La Lumière distincte est si douce.
Qui m’apaise, sinon le ciel? Sinon la mer, qui me courrouce?
Les landes, comme l’orage, s’étendent. La plus grande finit en moi.

(NTN 97)

The countryside is described as a place where anger, doubt and fear can all be appeased, while also acting as a guiding force that directs the poet (‘J’avance! (Guidez-moi, meutes des paysages!’), SL 38). Ultimately, Oster seeks a spiritual autre through sensory perception rather than reasoning or interpretation, and he deliberately avoids any hindrance to this reciprocal communication in an attempt to attain an absolute synthesis. Situating the texts in the landscape of rural France, alone and at peace, Oster stresses the absolute limpidity between man and nature (a focus that carries strong resonances of Lamartine):

Mais la nature est là qui t’invite et qui t’aime;
Plonge-toi dans son sein qu’elle t’ouvre toujours;
Quand tout change pour toi, la nature est la même,
Et le même soleil se lève sur tes jours.7

As such, the poet remains a passive receptacle to all the sights and sounds that the natural world can offer him.

7 Lamartine, Méditations poétiques, ‘Le Vallon’, p.43.
In order to remain cocooned in this edenic universe, Oster must block off any potential point of passage between his poetic landscape and everyday life. Oster's resistance to any problematical element within his representations of nature is demonstrated by the absence of boundaries, frontiers or movement towards frontiers in the texts. However, instead of references to physical boundaries, Oster does adhere rigidly to the thematic boundaries that he has imposed on the texts (these 'limites de l'empire', GA 69). Oster wishes to represent an ultimate unity and so, having set up this imaginative landscape through the poems, he then strives to portray that unity by ignoring all that exists beyond the poems' thematic boundaries. Thus, the representations of thresholds in the poetry have been fragmented through refraction and repetition, so that they are often heavily disguised as part of an organic whole (he claims that 'rien qui sous notre regard ne soit une autre leçon ou lecture de l'Unité', R 34). It is perhaps unsurprising that Oster rarely mentions thresholds explicitly, for this Parisian urban figure deliberately chooses to dissociate his everyday life completely from his poetry and therefore any threshold between these two worlds would serve only to highlight the inherent paradox in the texts. In order to preserve the irenic quality of his work, the poet immerses himself fully in an au-delà in which everything is encompassed in an organic totality. It is this state that Oster seeks to preserve, claiming that 'je déserte d'instinct les pensées qui ne marient pas à une compréhension comme fraternelle de la multiplicité l'exaltation du plus simple' (R 23).

"J'ai sans un geste [...] attendu le suprême moment."

As part of Oster's representation of nature, he often depicts himself assuming a passive role as he waits for divine revelation:

\[ J'ai \text{ sans un geste, sans un signe, attendu le suprême moment. } \]

\[ (GA \text{ 77}) \]

There is complete submersion in the immediacy of l'ici, as reflected in the limited references to verbs of motion in the texts. In this way, he attempts to submerge

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8 In this sense, Oster represents himself as both present and yet absent, as 'le "Je" restait souverain dans l'énonciation, mais totalement délesté du moi biographique, du moi réel et incarné', Engel-Roux, p.35.
himself in the landscape, prompted by the wish 'à m'intégrer à mon travail [...] à n'être plus rien enfin que ce que mon corps exprimera' (R 29). Whereas Réda's poetry is very much based on the notion of exploring geographical ailleurs, once Oster is situated in the irenic landscape he displays little interest in penetrating the sylvan paradise. This is indicated by the fact that references to movement in the texts are often vague and limited:

Le vent me guide

(VNP 10)

(Haute tempête,
Détourne-moi !)

(CM 21)

Je marche! Oublié du Lieu.

(SL 80/PT 55)

The short declarations and punctuation of these verbs all imply decisive action being taken and yet a closer examination highlights the vagueness of his statements (illustrated by 'oublié', 'guider' and 'détourner', all of which strongly suggest that Oster is looking for nature to inspire and direct him.) Instead of focusing on the dynamic interaction between man and the natural world, Oster wishes to create an absolute fusion, an ideal that seems to lead to an element of confusion in his work. While Oster's poetry constructs as an irenic landscape, nonetheless it would be erroneous to claim that there is no sense of conflict in the poet's work. Despite the fact that Oster makes explicit his desire for a synthesis between himself and nature, the poems also reveal the problematic nature of this desire, as the following sections will demonstrate.

Oster and Nature

'L'espace est souverain'

Oster situates himself in a vast landscape where, standing alone among trees, rivers, rocks, skies and mountains, he is profoundly aware of l'Espace, a term

9 With the exception of Oster's first poetic collection, Un champ de mai, the term l'Espace is used almost exclusively with an initial capital throughout his poetry. In this thesis, I have followed Oster's use of
used to connote an indeterminate place in which the poet seems to be particularly susceptible to divine inspiration. The vagueness of the term suggests a non-directional orientation that reveals the poet’s determination to contain his poetry firmly within a non-specific realm, where generalities dominate specificity. This section will explore the ways in which the poet’s liminal mentality is revealed through the image of l’Espace and through the perceived barriers that may block the point of passage between le concret and le spirituel.

Linked in closely with the poet’s perception of space are the physical geographical locations in which Oster situates himself in the poems. While a great deal of Réda’s poetry highlights interaction with the urban world, Oster’s poetic emphasis is far removed from the urban sprawl and metropolitan claustrophobia. For Réda, l’espace is seen as being somewhat powerless, as man’s relentless urbanisation threatens its existence:

\[ L’\text{espace} \text{ n’arrive pas à comprendre pourquoi de toutes parts on s’acharne, c’est le mot, à transformer sa plaine en entrepôts [...] } \]

\[ \text{Mais l’espace comprend bien qu’on l’étrangle et qu’il doit s’en aller tout de suite}^{10} \]

In contrast, Oster situates himself in open fields and flat prairies, gazing out on to a vast horizon that bears virtually no marks of the modern world:

\[ \text{Monde, tu me consens plus que l’ampleur du monde, } \]
\[ \text{Quand je t’aurai sans fin chanté, sans fin mon chant naîtra du } \]
\[ \text{Temps où tu es pris.} \]

\[ \text{(SL 105-06/PT 69)} \]

In a ‘campagne sans bord’, the plains extend out before Oster on the horizontal axis and the poet’s view of ‘l’ampleur du monde’ is unhindered. L’Espace acts as the antithesis to boundaries and in this way it embodies the notion of unrestricted movement. In one of his earlier poetry collections, Oster encapsulates his relationship with l’Espace thus:

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the majuscule, referring to l’Espace/l’espace as appropriate to the text being discussed. Where no specific example is being analysed, I revert to l’Espace, as it is by far the dominant form in Oster’s poems.

Here, the poet subverts the vagueness of the term *l’Espace* by imbuing it with positive characteristics (‘précieux’), while also associating it with suffering and revelation. Even in this one line, space is expressed in terms of an active divine force rather than a passive vacuum.

Throughout the texts, *l’Espace* is referred to in language that resonates with religious overtones. However, unlike Renard, Oster’s religious vision cannot be defined in terms of an orthodox belief system, and the latter’s focus on *l’Espace* suggests a pantheistic and non-directional approach to *le spirituel*. Oster does not attempt to construct a theology of space, but rather he perceives *l’Espace* as offering freedom beyond the doctrinal confines of a specific theology. This freedom operates on two levels, physically and metaphysically. On a physical level, the open landscape evoked by the term *l’Espace* conveys unrestricted physical movement and in the scenes that the texts depict, the scant references to any type of moderating reality do little to mark the landscape. On a metaphysical level, *l’Espace* appears to be linked with spirituality and therefore is associated with *le vertical*:

> [...] si l’Espace
> La change en ce repos de naissance qui passe
> L’immobile lueur de l’Âme d’avant le matin,
> Le Vent, la Terre forte, l’Espace divinement hautain

*(SL 101/PT 67)*

Textually, the predominant use of the initial capital in the term *l’Espace* emphasises the reverence that the poet feels towards it:

> Ô Espace adorable, soudain tu me donnes au feu,
> Et la foudre soudain me parle, je vis, enveloppé de ce don précieux!
> Sur toutes voix, j’entends la Voix qui m’initie,
> L’Éternité en travail au cœur d’une voix plus vive que la prairie!

*(SL 63/PT 47)*

Here, Oster personifies the landscape and *l’Espace* is endowed with, not only the magnificence of a deity (‘adorable’), but with power over man (‘tu me donnes au feu’). Moreover, a reciprocal relationship is established between Oster and *l’Espace*, as is conveyed with the use of the familiar ‘tu’. The association with the
elemental forces of fire (‘feu’) and lightning (‘foudre’) complement this animist interpretation of a religious experience. Elsewhere, the association between \(l'\text{Espace}\) and the night illustrates the way in which Osterresponds to these elemental images, where the poet describes them in relational terms:

\[
\text{J'attends. La nuit m'emplit. Ah! J'attends que partout l'Espace s'accomplisse!} \\
\text{(NTN 19/PT 89)}
\]

The factual, basic statement of ‘J’attends’ stands in contrast to the longing expressed in the emotive ‘Ah!’ Confronted with \(l'\text{Espace}\), the poet depicts himself in terms of a passive vessel, whereas \(l'\text{Espace}\) is a productive, self-accomplishing active force with divine power (‘l’Espace s’accomplit! NTN 30).

The plain, as one of the recurring representations of \(l'\text{Espace}\), is also linked with a sense of domination over the poet:

\[
\text{Ô Plaine impérieuse, si tu me retiens,} \\
\text{Le Jour même et la Nuit confondront mes liens!} \\
\text{(SL 95/PT 64)}
\]

The plain’s prairie power to confuse gives it a role of domination over the poet (‘tu me retiens’) and its sheer expanse serves to highlight Oster’s vulnerability (‘impérieuse’). Moreover, Oster’s direct invocation of the plain here and elsewhere in the texts (for example, ‘O Prairie! Prairie plus grande que le monde!’, \textit{SL} 77) highlights the fact that Oster associates it with divine power. Elsewhere in the poems, Oster reiterates this perception of \(l'\text{Espace}\) with the claim that ‘l’espace est souverain’ (\textit{CM} 24). \(l'\text{Espace}\) is consistently portrayed as a point of passage between the physical and spiritual and, entering \(l'\text{Espace}\), the poet feels that he is crossing the threshold into a new liberation (‘Espace, je ne marche, je ne suis libre qu’en Toi’, \textit{NTN} 33).

‘Montagnes. profonds autels’

Although the poet does not subscribe to a theology of space, he does portray certain natural phenomena (such as \(l'\text{Espace}\) and \textit{la cime}) as being quasi-divine forces. Within the poems, the mountain is presented as possessing an undeniably
reassuring physical presence and, in contrast to the plain, it marks a very physical boundary by which Oster can contextualise his surroundings (‘les monts s’abaissent, qui dessinaient une vieille et forte frontière’, NTN 64). There is an intimate reciprocity in his relationship with the surrounding *environs* for, as with *l’Espace*, Oster believes that a direct interaction between the mountains and himself is possible (‘avec les monts [...] je trace une pure alliance’, NTN 26). The size and immutable nature of the mountain is portrayed in terms of its ability to empower and protect:

> Monts qui me cernez, je vous ai élus.  
> O monts, je ne péris plus.  
>  
> *(SL 55)*

The mountains are linked with immortality (‘je ne péris plus’, ‘la cime des âges’, VNP 11) and, by extension, are seen as a symbol of hope (‘Le jour vaincu, les monts, les monts triomphent au loin’, NTN 45). The mountains are described as offering wisdom (‘la sagesse de la plus haute colline’, SL 109) and there is a strong association between mountains and enlightenment, where they become a point of passage into a sacred space and divine revelation (‘Montagnes, profonds autels’, VNP 10, ‘J’attends. Sur les sommets j’attends une première transparence’, SL 114).

’Sensible et insensible à l’abîme, je franchis la mer lourde et triste’

Both the representations of the mountain and of the plain suggest Oster’s pantheistic imaginative framework and his desire to interact directly with a spiritual *autre*. Nevertheless, the references to obstacles in the poems, while they are few in number, do indicate a tension in Oster’s relationship with nature. Even in the idyllic pastoral scenes that the poet describes, there is an awareness of the gulfs and caverns that surround him, implying that Oster’s wish to attain full immersion with the natural world is highly problematic. This tension can be detected particularly the poet’s representation of *l’abîme*, for it is an image that draws a markedly insular and introspective response from the poet. In the poems, corresponding and contrasting representations of the summit act as a type of fulcrum and counterbalance to the dialectic which *l’abîme* sets up. *L’Espace* is
portrayed in terms of its life-giving properties ('Des sources naissent de l'Espace, NTN 42), while l'abîme represents a force that confines and obscures:

Devant moi, l'autre abîme, à qui l'abîme confine...
Aucun soleil, aucun plongeur n'en a jamais sondé le fond.
(NTN 17)

Thus, l'abîme is a signifier of the threat and fear of the unknown ('aucun plongeur n'en a jamais sondé le fond') and, as such, it constitutes one of the few examples of an explicit uncertainty in the poet’s imaginative framework. This is particularly noteworthy in what are generally ruminative and unproblematic pastoral poems, for Oster’s profound awareness of l'abîme stands in relief from the overall tone of the texts. Indeed, it would seem that it offers some indication of that which lies beyond the iringic parameters of Oster’s poetry:

Je le cède, inspiré par les rocs, à l'abîme qu'il faut qu'on respire.
Une ligne bien définie est là marque de mon empire.
(NTN 42)

Oster’s relationship with l'abîme is a complex one and it highlights one of the contradictory aspects of this apparent Eden. While l'Espace appears to encourages a passivity in the poet as he adopts the role of a receptive tool in his environment, l'abîme can instil a sense of powerlessness, as Oster is confronted with the unknown:

L'extrème abîme, devant moi, grandit dans l'Origine
(NTN 17)

Here, the text visually represents Oster’s experience of l'abîme, where le signifiant is placed in a position of domination over the moi. The poet is overwhelmed by this force ‘extrème’, a force that also dominates the typography of the text. Oster’s sense of inadequacy when confronted with l'abîme is reflected by the fact l'abîme eclipses the moi on the page. This is highlighted by the emphatic [i], which appears four times in this short sentence. The [i] not only precedes the moi but surrounds it, encapsulating the notion of self in a greater whole and adding to the poet’s sense of helplessness. This is also compounded by
the final word, whose power is reiterated by the repetition of the [i] vowel sound which runs on to the next line, clearly demonstrating that its force cannot be easily contained. Oster also uses a capital ‘O’, whose physical appearance depicts a clear visual representation of the void that opens before him.

Nevertheless, the image of l’abîme is not entirely negative and the texts do make reference to the opportunities that ‘le pur abîme’ affords:

*L’ombre et l’abîme ont reconquis le pays où je suis arrêté, [...]*  
*La même pierre secrètement est comme un autre espace!*  
*(GA 56)*

Sensible et insensible à l’abîme, je franchis la mer lourde et triste.  
*(NTN 50)*

Paradoxically, the emptiness of l’abîme is associated with the point of passage to a new space (*comme un autre espace*, ‘je franchis’). The complex relationship that Oster develops with l’abîme (represented here as le vide) is one which is particularly predominant in Requêtes. It is here that the poet acknowledges the positive potential of le vide:

Le plus grand don, c’est de savoir pratiquer l’attente comme un art, de ne rien peindre avant que de raison. Je n’ai donc garde de combler mon vide. Je le consulte.  
*(R 25)*

For Oster, the challenge lies in resisting the urge to fill the void, for he believes that one may find ‘dans l’abîme de chaque objet, des gages de transparence’ *(R 18)*. For this reason, he urges the reader to savour the creative possibilities that uncertainty can offer (‘Promettons-nous de [...] ne pas non plus nous soustraire à l’abîme’, *R 22*). Indeed, Oster regards the chasmic experience with ‘l’abîme, le pur abîme...’ *(NTN 100)* as an integral part of spiritual enlightenment:

Abîme, manifeste, au plus clair de la tempête sans lieu,  
La cime inextinguible, le reflet du Lieu de Dieu.  
*(NTN 24)*
Here, Oster uses patterns of echo to great effect, as the rhyme of the words at the beginning of the two lines draws our attention to the contrast between the two in directional terms ('Abîme', 'La cime'). Equally, the repetition and end rhyme highlight the intrinsic link that Oster makes between spirit and space ('sans lieu', 'Lieu de Dieu'), suggesting that the point of passage to divine revelation may be found in these non-specific phenomena. Throughout the texts, as the poet is both wary of and drawn to *l'abîme*, these extremes of attraction and repulsion indicate Oster's ambiguous attitude towards the unknown ('Parfois, je prenais le parti de l'ombre. Et, parfois, le parti de/l'abîme', *NTN* 103). The various representations of the void reflect the way in which the poet oscillates between absolute rejection and acceptance of that which lies beyond the threshold.

**Oster and the Divine**

‘*Un vers qui me consacre*’

Oster’s creative process involves constant reworkings of the texts, where the same poem may be re-written innumerable times as the poet continually makes painstaking modifications. One of the impetuses to this laborious task is Oster’s belief that language contains within it a mystical force. Therefore, as the poet works with the written word, he believes that he may be granted access to *le spirituel*.

While the content of Oster’s poetry is Romantic in essence, its structure echoes the highly wrought, formal texture of Anglo-Saxon poetry. Throughout Oster’s poetry, a strong resonance of this tradition can be traced in both the format of the poems and in the poet’s underlying understanding of the role of poetry. Anglo-Saxon tradition held the belief that poetry acted as a mantic ritual force that magically mediated between man and the untamed natural world. Accordingly, the Anglo-Saxon poets were believed to be the mediating force between the horizontal and vertical axes and therefore, in this liminal capacity, they had privileged access to a spiritual *au-delà*. In Oster’s work, the poet continually refers to the concept of a unity with the natural world and this is a

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narrative that has much more in common with early Anglo-Saxon’s devotion to a type of naturalistic religion than with common contemporary literary thought. Portraying himself as a ‘poète dépossédé de l’univers par l’active étrangeté des sons, puis dépossédé de sa voix par la vérité supérieure de l’univers’ (MIU 29), Oster displays a very keen sense of the mystical union that he believes is possible with nature, as he seeks in the poems to ‘dire à neuf le rapport de la lumière et du mouvement de l’esprit’ (OM xxv):

\[
\begin{align*}
J’ai respiré la terre auguste. Et, près de l’auge de ciment, \\
J’ai sans un geste, sans un signe, attendu le suprême moment. \\
Je saisirai, sous un caillou, ce que sera la terre entière. \\
\quad \text{ (GA 77)} \\
\text{Je dis. Je vois. Je nais... Je suis sûr de l’essence divine.} \\
\text{Je m’anime et je fuis, je m’éprends du dessin des nuages déserts.} \\
\quad \text{ (D 73)}
\end{align*}
\]

As these examples illustrate, Oster’s poems express the Romantic idea that ‘nature would not be nature if she had no spirit, if she were not this singular counterimage of mankind, if she were not the indispensable answer to this mysterious question or the question to this infinite answer’.\(^{12}\) The frequent repetition of the first person pronoun in the above examples illustrates the poet’s faith that it is possible to have an intimate relationship between *le je* and *la nature* and throughout the texts, this belief is sustained.

Over the years, a strong sense of a ‘quête spirituelle’ underscores Oster’s writing, for his appreciation of the natural world is bolstered by a profound veneration:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Sur la plage, je veux chanter, insensible au revif des collines,} \\
\text{Le verger, les pommiers, les pommiers et les pins, les pins et les salines!} \\
\quad \text{ (NTN 26)}
\end{align*}
\]

This attitude of reverence is expressed frequently and is directed towards a various natural elements, as poems reflect the idea that 'the cosmos as a whole is an organism at once real, living, and sacred; it simultaneously reveals the modalities of being and of sacrality'.

Un astre, et qui vers nous descend, que nous révérons, vénérerons (VNP 1)

Si je tente à mon tour d’étancher ma soif à la source commune, [...] 

Je me glisse dans une grotte et j’adresse au soleil mes louanges. 

Je me souviens du vent qui sans frein dominait les mois.

Un temple m’est ouvert. 

(D 63)

The variety of references to interaction between the horizontal and vertical axes and to threshold representations (‘vers nous descendent’, ‘Je me glisse dans une grotte’, ‘Un temple m’est ouvert’) are typical of Oster’s poetic style. In contrast to Renard’s more orthodox expression of faith, the religious vocabulary employed by Oster is used in relation to his interaction with the natural world (‘nous révérons, vénérerons’, ‘mes louanges’, ‘Un temple’), as he uses ‘mots de ma voix lourde de possibles psaumes’ (CM 8):

Ah! j’exalte les vestiges

De la lumière à peine éclose! Y asseoir un royaume. En mai, en juin. (VNP 14)

As the above example illustrates, at times the poet’s adoration is also conveyed by the punctuation that he employs, where repeated exclamation marks convey the poet’s deep sense of awe towards the natural world. In contrast to Renard’s monotheistic Christian emphasis, in which le spirituel is closely associated with the vertical axis, Oster expresses the belief of pantheists, who ‘deny that what they mean by God (i.e. an all-inclusive divine Unity) is completely transcendent.

13 Eliade, p.117.
14 André Alter makes the point that ‘dès les premiers poèmes de Pierre Oster [...] nous entendons presque uniquement des exclamations devant la splendeur du monde, nous percevons cette voix enfouie qui ne cesse de répéter le nom de Père’, ‘Cette prière’, in La Voix des poètes, pp.14-16 (p.14).
They deny that God is “totally other” than the world.\textsuperscript{15} Oster’s poetry illustrates the way in which this Unity is expressed in terms of a fusion of \textit{l’horizontal} and \textit{le vertical}, as the poet experiences divine revelation in nature. A self-confessed admirer of Claudel’s work, Oster clearly displays Claudelian resonances in his portrayal of his relationship with nature. In many ways, Oster’s deep awareness of an ultimate spiritual unity is a distant echo of Claudel’s forthright religious convictions:

\begin{quote}
Je sais que je suis ici avec Dieu et chaque matin je rouvre mes yeux dans le paradis. [...] 
Mais dans ce cœur plein de sagesse la passion de la limite et de la sphère calculée de parfaire l’éternel horizon. 
Le verbe de Dieu est Celui en qui Dieu s’est fait à l’homme donnable. 
La parole créée est cela en qui toutes choses créées sont faites à l’homme donnables.\textsuperscript{16}
\end{quote}

Just as Claudel claims that ‘je fais des mots éternels! je ne puis rien nommer que d’éternel’,\textsuperscript{17} so Oster believes that he has access to the threshold that leads to an eternal spiritual \textit{au-delà} (‘En moi l’Esprit se perd; irrésistiblement je tends à l’exalter. Je suis le lieu de déchéance et le moment de sa glorification’, \textit{SL} 131). Unconstrained by the dogmas of a prescribed theology, Oster is still very keenly aware of his spiritual self as he interacts with nature (‘J’invoque l’univers, me prête à sa grandeur’, \textit{GA} 58). While Renard privileges the vertical plane by continually placing the tangible world within the context of his spiritual beliefs, Oster emphasises the divine quality within nature:

\begin{quote}
Je sens que, de partout, se lève un vers qui me consacre 
À l’univers, au feu de ciel, à l’ordre doré des sommets 
\textit{(NTN 76)}
\end{quote}

Here, the totality of the fusion is highlighted (‘partout’, ‘l’univers’) as the poet’s focus is redirected to the vertical axis (‘se lève un vers’, ‘de ciel’, ‘des sommets’). It reflects his desire to capture in words the essence of ‘la totalité féconde’, as part of ‘la perpétuelle décision qu’il doit prendre de convoquer l’esprit dans le dessin

\textsuperscript{15} Levine, p.2
\textsuperscript{16} Claudel, \textit{Cinq grandes odes}, ‘La Maison fermée’, pp.94-95.
\textsuperscript{17} Claudel, \textit{Cinq grandes odes}, ‘L’Esprit et l’eau’, p.45.
de la phrase... Oui, dès que l’on dispose deux mots sur le papier, l’esprit envahit’ (MIU 31). For Oster, the poetic word acts as a form of prayer (‘Art, c’est méditation’, SL 132) and artistic expression serves as the poet’s liturgy:

Partout, le paysage est pur. Partout, il resplendit.

Je ne sais plus, dans mon orgueil, que répéter le nom sublime qu’on m’a dit.

(GA 57)

The following sections will explore the ways in which Oster’s perception of alterity and his sensitivity to the threshold and to points of passage are revealed in the texts. These will be examined firstly through the poet’s representation of his pantheistic belief system, secondly through the recurring image of le chant and its associations with la mer and le vent and finally through his understanding of solitude.

‘Un panthéisme à la fois diffus et retors’

While Oster’s experience of spiritual epiphany does at times involve a direct reciprocity between man and god (‘Dieu parle, je L’entends’, SL 24), nevertheless, in line with the pantheistic tradition, the attributes of this god remain largely undefined.18 The element of uncertainty in Oster’s belief system is clearly conveyed in Une machine à indiquer l’univers, where the poet states that:

Panthéisme, pourquoi pas? [...] Il nous instruit de l’humanité dans son entier [...]. Nous aurons toujours intérêt à mettre en œuvre, dans notre existence, un panthéisme à la fois diffus et retors, car nous voyons de la sorte commencer des routes qu’il me plairait de se faire rejoindre: il peut y avoir pénétration d’un Dieu enfin unique dans la réalité – ou domination de la réalité par toute une assemblée de dieux.

(MIU 21-22)

In the above extract, the ill-defined (and apparently arbitrary) nature of the poet’s faith is counterbalanced by language that reveals Oster’s persistent longing to merge with the spiritual force of nature (‘se faire rejoindre’, ‘pénétration’). Thus we see that, despite pantheism’s emphasis of immanence over transcendence, the texts suggest that the all-encompassing Unity of nature is not always part of

18 Pantheists usually deny the existence of a personal God. They deny the existence of a “minded” Being that possesses the characteristic properties of a “person”, Levine, p.2
Oster's experience. Indeed, the very fact that the poems continually focus on the possibility of a mystical bond between man and nature (Oster describes himself as 'attentif et attaché aux phénomènes d'unité ou de richesse', R 34) betokens the fact that this is pre-meditated rather than instinctive. The underlying awareness of a spiritual autre that pervades the texts highlights the disparity between Oster's pantheistic declarations and his experience:

\[
\text{Le feu qui désormais me permet de franchir la limite sacrée,}
\]

\[
\text{De posséder le ciel et la totalité que le ciel me départ,}
\]

\[
\text{D’être un témoin toujours mobile et de marcher, ivre de plénitude}
\]

\[
\text{(D 15)}
\]

\[
\text{Il me faut [...]}\]

\[
\text{Participer au feu qui sous terre est le maître partout,}
\]

\[
\text{Pénétrer le fécond sommeil de la sainte et puissante substance,}
\]

\[
\text{Y contempler mon âme, encore inachevée, encore avide de sang!}
\]

\[
\text{(D 34/PT 180)}
\]

The liminal vocabulary employed ('franchir', 'Pénétrer') indicates the separation that Oster perceives between himself and divine revelation through nature. While Oster's entire poetic career constitutes an attempt to forge a 'union énigmatique entre les individus dans leur foisonnement fondamental et le lieu auquel nous sommes voués' (OM x), the pantheism that underscores this desire does not always lead to happiness:

\[
\text{La colline est en sang. Elle est toujours gravide et toujours ses entrailles}
\]

\[
\text{Montrent la cruauté de la divinité à laquelle j’ai cru!}
\]

\[
\text{(D 65)}
\]

The outpouring of adulation that flows from Oster is often counterbalanced by the exclamations and questions that pepper the poems, hinting at that which lies beneath the surface of the texts. Although these elements of conflict are proportionally very small, the very fact that they remain occulted indicates
something of Oster’s reluctance to deal openly with the problematic in his work. Throughout the poems, one is aware of the poet’s persistent search for a spiritual autre and Oster’s frequent invocations to the elements indicate this yearning (demonstrated in the following examples through the use of repetition and punctuation):

Ô douce loi d’été! Été de la beauté du monde!
Ô beauté
Du monde engravé dans l’Éternité!

(SL 60/PT 45)

Arrache-moi, ô roc, aux faveurs du faible néant!

(NTN 55)

This aspect of Oster’s paradigm is also revealed through the image of le cri, which conveys the problematical that exists within the poet’s desire for synthesis with nature:

L’Être crie l’Être, si tu cries
C’est que tu meurs, et que tu vis.

(CM 85)

Au plus fort de ma longue défaite, je crie. Et je résiste.

(NTN 50)

Visage ou cri, ou mer, une image m’appelle, je crie
Tourné vers la tempête, solitaire, lié à ton scare, prairie,
Et l’élégie des arbres se gonfle de présages!

(SL 77)

The verb crier is an assertion, but is very much provoked by negative encounters. It is associated with confusion (‘tu meurs’, ‘défaite’), questioning, oppression and subjugation. It is a war cry against all that would disturb the irenic paradigm in which Oster has situated himself. Threatened with destruction, the poet must retaliate and shout in the face of confusion. The violence of this reaction stands in contrast to the prosaic idyll of the pastoral realm, suggesting that while dissent is kept at bay, it has not been entirely removed from this world and that destruction is still possible from within.
‘J’entends de certains chants que nul ne peut entendre’

Oster’s reverence for nature carries with it strong echoes of Romanticism and, in particular, Lamartine and Novalis. The sense of the liminal in Lamartine’s own poetry is strongly conveyed through the poet’s repeated prayers and supplications. These are directed towards nature in an attempt to eliminate any barriers that stand between the individual and nature.

Mais pourquoi chantais-tu? — Demande à Philomèle
Pourquoi, durant les nuits, sa douce voix se mêle
Au doux bruit des ruisseaux sous l’ombrage roulant!
Je chantais, mes amis, comme l’homme respire,
Comme l’oiseau gémit, comme le vent soupirer,
Comme l’eau murmure en coulant.

Aimer, prier, chanter, voilà toute ma vie.

For Oster, le chant represents a privileged form of communication with l’autre, and is thus symbolic of his intimate relationship with nature:

J’entends, j’entends de certains chants que nul ne peut entendre.

(NTN 96)

Here, there is an emphatic insistence on this relationship as Oster employs a traditional Alexandrine form (with the addition of the repetition of ‘J’entends’) and a pattern of internal rhyme (‘en, ‘an’). Poetry and song are intrinsically bound up in an eternal hymn of praise for ‘la poésie est un éloge du soleil (il change); un rapport à la nudité énigmatique du nouveau; le chant des formes qui sous le regard se transmutent’ (RPAP 26). This direct link between man and God through poetry echoes Novalis’ work, who portrays nature as a continuum of languages that begins with the silent presence of inorganic nature, moves through the

19 Oster’s perceived ability to merge with nature is Romantic in essence, for, as Andrew M. Cooper states, ‘what substantiates the Romantic imagination is the body’s enhanced capacity for self-extension in the world’, Doubt and Identity in Romantic Poetry (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988), p.2.
20 In Marius-François Guyard’s insightful preface to Lamartine’s Méditations Poétiques, he remarks that ‘la musique du vers et de la strophe est pour Lamartine le moyen de communiquer, plus que des idées, des sentiments’ He goes on to comment that the poems display ‘plus de barrière entre les individus et de même plus de frontière entre l’homme et la nature, entre sa rêverie et le paysage qu’elle pénètre qui la pénètre’. Lamartine, Méditations poétiques, Nouvelles méditations poétiques suivies de Poésies diverses (Paris: Gallimard, 1981), pp.17-18.
sounding speech of man and ends with the creative word of God. Therefore all things come to represent a form of *Mitteilung* as ‘everything we come to know is a communication. Thus the world is indeed a communication – revelation of the spirit.’ This belief is reflected in Oster’s poetry, whose religious conviction is strongly anchored in the perceived relationship between nature and man, where *le chant* facilitates assimilation between the two:

*Les oiseaux chantent. Je m’essaie à marier mon chant au leur.*

*(GA 51)*

‘*La mer à ma voix recule*’

While Oster does not perceive words as holding any mystical quality, they are portrayed as having the unique capacity to evoke the realm of *le spirituel.*

The poet repeatedly employs the images of the voice and *le chant*, where the latter is depicted as a point of passage with nature as it helps the individual to participate in ‘l’ardent soupir qui vers le ciel s’élance’. Like Renard, Oster portrays language as the point of passage between the profane and the sacred and, as such, it is the ‘affirmation fluide’ between the horizontal and vertical axes. In particular, *la voix* and *le chant* are associated with *la mer* and *le vent*, as the poet enters into a reciprocal relationship with these elements. The fluidity of language is frequently evoked in the texts by the thematic link between the voice and the sea:

*Je chante. L’Océan brûle. Je chante sous l’empire de l’inaccessible Occident.*

*(NTN 106)*

*A ma voix, la clairière et la mer... Tout est tranquille au crépuscule.*

*Sous les arbres, tout est tranquille... La mer à ma voix recule.*

*(GA 20)*

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22 Novalis, p.82.

23 Favre makes the link between Oster’s view of nature and his poetry, remarking that ‘en célébrant le monde, il veut aussi célébrer le langage. Il souhaite accorder son poème aux grands rythmes cosmiques’, p.97.

La mer opaque n’est point liée à ces puissances que je sers,

Que je m’applique à contenir dans le secret de mes vers!

(GA 21-22)

Oster establishes a strong link between his poetic voice and the rhythm of the waves, but yet he is wary of the power that the latter seems to have over him:

Océan ! Écoute qui crie! Qui crie, Océan, en nos cris!
Épargne-moi de répondre à lénigme que tu m’appris.
Épargne-moi de trop aimer le rythme égal dans ma poitrine,
Le rythme égal, égal et doux, de la tendresse unique et trine.

(NTN 35)

It is worth noting in this instance that Oster moves away from pantheism to a more Claudelian paradigm, when he makes one of very few references to the Christian faith by describing the Holy Trinity as ‘la tendresse unique et trine’. The ‘rythme égal’ of the sea is also one that Oster uses to evoke the writing process:

[...] Un chant commence. Un chant commence infiniment.
Un chant commence. Ou recommence. Et je voudrais mourir de ce commencement.
Cherchant en songe quel mot nouveau, quel mot nouveau me pénètre

(NTN 13/PT 87)

The repetition in these lines echoes the lapping of waves on the shore, where each poem exists within the context of a much greater textual unity. The seamless flow of Oster’s poems re-enacts the ebb and flow of the tide as the poet’s emphasis is on the continual process of creating rather than on the product, for it is through this process that a more solid foundation emerges (‘La mer procède. Je connais, en elle je connais le roc essentiel!’, NTN 15).

‘Le vent chante avec moi!’

Throughout the poetry, Oster insists on the notion that his true vocation is to be found in the veneration of the universe (he claims that ‘je me tourne vers la profondeur de l’univers, y découvre ma seule possession, y cherche la seule
entreprise qui ne doive pas s’interrompre’, R 26). It is through the medium of le chant, that the poet finds fulfilment and significance (‘J’espère parce que je puis chanter’, SL 173) and his communion with nature is facilitated:

Que je chante, le vent souverain, le vent chante avec moi! [...] Déjà, je me rappelle, en m’élevant dans ma paix, Atlas qui porte la Terre. En songe j’ai porté toute une nuit son faix. (NTN 42)

So desired is the synthesis between nature and the poet that it is as if he bears the whole of nature upon his shoulders (‘j’ai porté toute une nuit son faix’). Equally, the poet’s desire for reciprocal commun(i)ca(t)ion with nature is made evident as he imagines that the wind joins him in his exaltation of the natural order (‘le vent chante avec moi’). Throughout the poems, the image of le vent is closely linked with la voix and le chant, as it is also used to signify Oster’s relationship with nature. In the same way that Claudel experiences ‘la Présence, l’effrayante solitude, et soudain le souffle de nouveau sur ma face’, 25 so Oster’s contact with le spirituel is often represented by le vent (‘Ah! Chanter pour me perdre! Pour me perdre en mémoire du vent’, NTN 22). Within the natural order, the wind plays a vital role in regeneration, thus it shares many of the properties associated with the spirit for it is invisible, yet powerful and life-giving:

\[\text{Le vent fécond me plaît, qui transporte toujours une graine,} \]
\[\text{Qui toujours me dispose à l’amour et passe où je me perds!} \]
\[\text{(GA 73)} \]

‘La solitude véritable nous lie à autrui’

Just as le chant is a significant aspect of Oster’s depiction of his relationship with nature, so solitude is portrayed as fulfilling an equally important role. 26 Within the Osterian poetic world of silence and of praise, there is an emphasis placed on the state of solitude, whereby the poet effectively silences the voice of modern urban

26 Xavier Tilliette comments that ‘la solitude est inscrite au seuil de son œuvre, une solitude qui ne veut pas se refermer sur la nuit, mais qui s’offre poreuse à la lumière [...] Cette solitude n’est pas cherchée ni même aimée, elle est nécessaire, métaphysique, et par conséquent sans remède, à jamais: “La solitude de chacun est de toujours.”’, ‘Dédicé à Angella Soussouev Oster’, in La Voix des Poètes, pp.10-13 (p.10).
life through his self-imposed isolation in nature.\textsuperscript{27} In the same way that representations of \textit{le chant} signify a point of passage with the divine, so \textit{la solitude} is intrinsically linked with the poet's perception of alterity:

La solitude véritable nous lie à autrui à l'instar du plus pur amour. Demandons la grâce d'être solitaire.

\textit{(SL 130-31)}

It is important at this juncture to highlight the fact that Oster very clearly differentiates between loneliness and solitude. While the former is perceived as being a negative experience (with associations of abandonment, unhappiness and desperation) the latter is portrayed as a positive force, insofar as it engenders a creative spirit and encourages dialogue with the self, as ‘jamais de solitude qui ne se crée une compagne’ (\textit{RPAP} 25) and ‘il n’est point de solitude qui ne soit accompagnée (\textit{R} 22).\textsuperscript{28} The very title of \textit{Solitude de la lumière} encapsulates this poetic ideal, where isolation (with its usual connotations of imprisonment, uncertainty or abandonment) are subverted by associations with warmth, light and (spiritual) illumination. Following the Romantic belief that, as John E. Jackson states, ‘loin d’être un aspect accidentel de sa situation, la solitude devient un \textit{mode d’être} du moi. [...] Rendu à soi, le sujet sera devenu sa propre société’,\textsuperscript{29} Oster perceives solitude as a positive force to be actively sought out, rather than as a negative absence of presence:

\begin{quote}
Solitude de Celui qui chante dans mon vers!
Solitude du Verbe, enfermant, transperçant le secret Univers!
\end{quote}

\textit{(SL 113)}

Here, solitude is depicted as a point of passage, both in terms of its association with communication and inspiration (‘Celui qui chante dans mon vers’) and divine revelation (‘transperçant le secret Univers’). Within the Osterian poetic world of silence and of praise, there is a deliberate privileging of solitude, whereby the

\textsuperscript{27} Ana-Paula Coutinho Mendes refers to ‘ce territoire poétique qui se trouve au-delà du seuil du silence’, ‘Solitude de la lumière ou la Grace d’être solitaire’, in Pierre Oster: poétique et poésie, pp.181-89 (p.182).
\textsuperscript{28} Roger Little highlights the distinction between \textit{isolement} and \textit{solitude} in relation to Saint-John Perse’s poetry, noting that ‘dans la solitude un dialogue est [...] possible entre \textit{je et moi}’, \textit{Études sur Saint-John Perse}, p.18.
\textsuperscript{29} John E. Jackson, \textit{Mémoire et subjectivité romantiques} (Paris: José Corti, 1999), p.17.
poet effectively silences the voice of modern urban life through his self-imposed isolation in nature.

Closely linked with *la solitude* is the motif of silence, as the poet’s solitary state allows him to enter into a silent form of communication with nature (he refers to ‘le silence, qui invinciblement signifie que nous pouvons prier..!’), *SL* 128). Within the sacred silence of prayer, the believer is granted access to the divine and a point of contact is made, a privileged reciprocity to which Lamartine refers:

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Attendons le souffle suprême
Dans un repos silencieux;
Nous ne sommes rien de nous-même
Qu’un instrument mélodieux!
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Similarly, Oster conveys the comfortable familiarity he feels with silence as he stresses the interactive nature of his solitude (‘Maintenant le silence du soir est semblable au visage que j’aime’, *GA* 19). Similar to Renard’s perception of silence, Oster believes he can attain a more profound revelation of *le spirituel* ‘à l’ouïe du silence’ (*SL* 94):

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Attaché à tous les phénomènes d’unité et de résonance, je suis capable cependant d’entrer dans le silencieux différend qui nous traverse. [...] Puissé-je entendre en moi cette voix qui parle et cette voix qui se tait! Aucune autre ambition ne me dirige.
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(*R* 29)

The idea of solitude and silence as being thresholds to *le spirituel* can be traced back to Oster’s earliest published collection, where his sense of abandonment is not provoked by solitude, but rather by the fact that ‘la voix incertaine, mais vivante, qui me parlait s’est tue; les mots divins qui ont longtemps donné une apparence de forme à ma solitude me fuient...’ (*CM* 124). While there is a strong emphasis on the positive liminal function of solitude and silence throughout the poems, the problematic nature of these thresholds is also evident. That is to say that, despite the poet’s insistence on an ultimate fusion with a spiritual *autre*, there is a strong sense that this is not always attainable. This is seen in the fact

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that at times, in contrast to Renard’s strong emphasis on a spiritual destination, Oster seems to still be engaged in the process of searching for, rather than finding:

Ah! qui chante ce chant? Qui s’efforce
Au chant dans le silence de l’Été?

Despite Oster’s declaration that ‘je chante’, the repetition in the above example conveys an uncertainty as the poet must confront the fact that sometimes there is no reply from l’ailleurs.

Oster and Language

‘Que chaque page poétiquement se soulève’

One of the striking features of Oster’s poems is the fact that the poet has consistently maintained the same style and format over a number of decades. That is to say that, throughout the years, Oster has continually placed a deliberate emphasis on the honing of his distinctive style, rather than on the development of new poetic forms. The similarities in subject matter, tone and style in the various texts give the overall body of work a remarkable cohesiveness. The Osterian preoccupation with the complex relationship between le vers and la page is made apparent throughout the poetry and it reveals the poet’s keen awareness of the boundaries and parameters that govern the visual impact of a poem. Leafing through Oster’s poetry, the reader is immediately struck by the span of the texts as they extend beyond the horizon of the page. In Requêtes, Oster observes that:

Par le vers et par la page, par notre aptitude à ranger dans un ordre personnel des mots quelconques, nous obtenons une manière de connaissance qui nous permet d’excéder notre inanité particulière, de nous déplacer d’un pas. Nous acquérons le pouvoir de nous confondre à la nécessité qui gouverne les images.

Oster places word-order (‘ranger dans un ordre personnel des mots quelconques’) within the context of an overarching structure (‘le vers’) and a physical space (‘la
page'). Ironically, the predominance of the two latter features is emphasised by the very word-order, where *le vers* and *la page* are inextricably bound together. This section will be concerned principally with Oster’s perception of the physical aspect of poetry and the way in which the threshold influences the poet’s creative expression.

Since the publication of Oster’s first volume of poetry (*Le Champ de mai*) in 1955, the poet has consistently produced poems that extend beyond both the horizontal and vertical boundaries of the page, representing in the texts ‘l’immensité qu’ont suscitée au bas du ciel l’or et les monts’ (*NTN* 14).\(^{31}\)

La nuit pure et l’éclat d’une pure tempête ont peut-être crié que je ne vivais point. [...] 

Le temps au dos comme un enfant je m’enfuis en riant pour fatiguer mon ombre. [...] 

(*CM 76-77*)

Here, the poet’s breathlessness (‘je m’enfuis en riant’) is re-enacted as the line draws out the last breath of the reader as the outlying boundaries of the text play an intrinsic role in conveying the overall meaning as he seeks to express ‘une vision infinie’ (*OM* viii).\(^{32}\) As can be seen in the poetry of Saint-John Perse, the use of longer line length can indicate a sensitivity to the notion of thresholds on both a physical and imaginative plane:

— Ainsi parfois nos seuils pressés d’un singulier destin et, sur les pas précipités du jour, de ce côté du monde, le plus vaste, où le pouvoir s’exile chaque soir, tout un veuvage de lauriers!\(^{33}\)

Oster’s poetic style and the way he situates the words on the page hints at a desire to continually push back the physical limitations of the page. In this sense, the

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\(^{31}\) Jean-Pierre Lemaire comments that ‘*lire un poème de Pierre Oster[...] c’est d’abord se laisser entraîner dans le déroulement d’un paysage sans bord’, yet ‘*le vers de Pierre Oster, en effet, respire non plus à son extrémité, dans le blanc final, mais dans son corps brisé, par toutes ses ruptures’*, ‘*L’Ouvrage de Pénélope*, in *Pierre Oster: poétique et poésie*, pp.39-43 (pp.39&42).

\(^{32}\) Referring to the use of the tetrameter in Saint-John Perse’s poetry, Roger Little highlights the impact of the longer line length with the comment that ‘*for the reader used to the alexandrine and shorter lines, there is a powerful impression of dynamic ‘souffle’, of being stretched to one’s limits’*, *Saint-John Perse* (London: The Athlone Press, 1973), p.99.

\(^{33}\) Saint-John Perse, *Eloges suivi de La Gloire des rois, Anabase, Exil*, ‘*Anabase VI*, p.127. While Oster’s use of the longer line length is reminiscent of the style of poets such as Saint-John Perse,
poet is perpetually redefining the threshold between the printed text and the page. The longer line length constitutes part of Oster’s poetic vision, for it is an attempt to convey ‘l’Espace précieux’ through the physical and rhythmical components of the texts, in a realm that is unbounded by the strictures of strict rhyme or regularity.34

... Ce temps suprême est la forme de la Parole de Dieu; l’Espace où se déploie son éternelle nouveauté. L’homme spirituel aime et désire jusqu’au temps éternel qui indique Divinité...Que mon livre soit confronté à un espace nouveau: que la vérité dans sa fraîcheur elliptique s’y déploie; que la succession des états de conscience que rapidement j’ai à franchir soit d’abord une juste, une bénéfique métamorphose. (SL 160)

For Oster, the writing act involves a confrontation with ‘un espace nouveau’ and a series of liminal experiences (‘la succession des états de conscience que rapidement j’ai à franchir’). Thus, Oster deconstructs the poem’s physical boundaries and instead creates a threshold space into which the poem may expand. That is to say, that which is traditionally considered a barrier (the white border of the page) no longer acts as a constraining force but rather, the blank canvas of the page is perceived as a frontier that may be crossed:

Que chaque mot de tout son poids de poesie pèse sur l’appareil de la page. Que chaque page poétiquement se soulève. (R 39)

‘La poésie excède toutes contraintes’

Oster’s defiance of particular poetic boundaries can also be seen in his approach to the writing process. The poet frequently reworks the same poem, changing and modifying the text ten or fifteen times, even after the text has been sent to print. This demonstrates Oster’s belief that a text is never definitive, for poetry is regarded as a living organism that is continually changing and a state of being rather than an act. In this way, Oster’s poems perform a liminal function, for they

as Patrick Kéchichian points out, ‘il s’agit moins d’imitation que d’éloge, de regard vers le même horizon’, , Le Monde, 2 juin 2000.

serve as a series of windows through which the other poems (or versions of the same poem) may be seen. It is the poet’s meticulous attention to detail that demands a perpetual reworking of the texts, as he scrutinises the poetic landscape (‘Etre poète, c’est regarder’, RFAP 50). Poetry is portrayed as a *modus operandi*, with the result that any one poem may be altered repeatedly as part of an overall poetic process, for ‘la poésie excède toutes contraintes’ (RFAP 55).

While Oster’s poetic voice is highly distinctive in contemporary literature, it does bear some of the hallmarks of former poetic traditions, more specifically Anglo-Saxon poetry and the *trouvère* of Northern France. In particular, Oster’s rhythmic patterns and use of alliteration echo the Anglo-Saxon poetic tradition, whose own origins of rhythm are to be found in an oral tradition. This was based on ‘a vigorous and strongly welded rhythmic pattern’ that followed the natural rhythm of the speaker’s breath, so that emphatic speech drew attention to alliteration and rhyme. Poetry was first and foremost a spoken phenomenon and so was written and recited as continuous prose, very similar to the style and overlapping themes in Oster’s work. In the case of both the Anglo-Saxon and *trouvère* tradition, the poet was continually engaged in a process of modification that involved embroidering, contracting and changing the poem according to the receptivity of the audience. The poem was perceived as a living organism that was always susceptible to metamorphosis, drawing on the dynamic that existed between poet and audience. Each retelling of a poem and every added syllable formed part of this organic whole, whereby there was no sense of the real poem and then subsequent amendments. Each version was as authentic and original as the last, and part of the poet’s role was to continually fine-tune and hone the poem in order to draw out all its various elements. In this sense, a poem was very much a work in progress and the poet’s job was never finished, as the poet chose to compose *through* the form rather than *in* it. The poem was never considered an entity in itself, as both Anglo-Saxon poetry and the *trouvère* relied much on the art of binding phrases together, linking episodes to episodes and ultimately creating an organic whole where the overall direction was more important than individual lines. Oster’s almost obsessive reworking of poetry demonstrates a

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similar poetic vision and a refusal to conform to the reader’s tacit acceptance of poetry as an act with a beginning and an end. Instead, the published work is no more definitive than a first draft, and indeed often Oster’s revisions will draw on previously published material, with the result that a perpetual dissatisfaction pervades his work. The countless manuscripts and minute changes that Oster effects on his poetry bear testimony to the arduous nature of the poetic process, which the poet describes as ‘une lenteur imparfaite à construire combiner conserver de pareils édifices de langage’. Conversely, however, Oster experiences a certain freedom as he constantly reworks myriad variations of the same texts, for he uses this process as a means of engaging with alterity (‘Créer; créer pour comprendre’, CM 117).

Throughout Oster’s revisions, a strong linguistic scaffold remains in place and the relatively superficial changes to a poem do little to alter the rhythm or structure of the texts. Rather, ‘la perfection de l’œuvre est le prix de son intégration à l’intelligible’ (R 18) as, throughout all the revisions of a text, Oster strives to communicate more clearly. Thus emerges a complex, and seemingly contradictory, attitude towards the threshold, where Oster’s ‘descriptions infinies’ seem to suggest a constant flux and lack of structure. Nonetheless, despite the surface movement of the text, there is a strong sense of delineation and boundaries within which the poet moves. Therefore, while any element of the poem may be revised five or ten times, the essence of the poem, its theme and tone remains in place. In this sense, Oster’s liminal mentality allows him to cross and redefine thresholds and boundaries at will, in order that he may ‘confondre vie et création dans une unité supérieure’ (CM 105). The natural world remains steadfastly the source of the poet’s inspiration, while the surface texture of the poem is susceptible to myriad changes that create a miroitement effect. For the critic, therefore, distinctions between form and content, tradition and originality have little purchase on a poetry of repetition and constant flux.

Oster’s rigid adherence to the theme of nature sets him somewhat apart from contemporary literary trends and, fully aware of his own isolation, Oster has a clear poetic vision, namely to convey a universal wholeness through the smallest and most humble of elements (‘La totalité féconde nos choix, s’y reflète.

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Nous avons affaire avec elle', *RPAP* 22). While Renard is inspired by the everyday objects that surround him to move from the horizontal to the vertical axis, Oster’s focus is not solely directed upwards, but it also expands outwards from the commonplace:

> La poussière illumine, amplifie la vénération qui nous lie aux plantes, aux pierres. Je la célèbre, en même temps que je ravaude l’humain.  
> *(OM xxvii)*

Oster’s poetry emphasises the possible crossing of the threshold between man and nature, he encourages the reader to join him in the quest for this liminal experience through an appreciation of *le petit* (‘Cherche, avec une application presque intempérante, cela qui relève du petit. Étudie la tête de l’épingle’, *OM* x).

‘*La plénitude infatigable du Tout*’

Oster’s ambiguous statement that ‘*l’univers de nouveau rime avec le langage*’ (*D* 71) suggests the balance between order and creativity that the poet seeks to embody in his writing, where language is portrayed as being an ordering force that causes nature to ‘rhyme’. Nature is a perpetual source of inspiration for Oster and the poetic act functions as a type of filter through which the poet processes and thus comprehends the world. Oster’s type of composition suggests a form of ritual, where each of the poems is part of a mystical ceremony. It is through the ordered nature of the poems (and their repetitive element) that access to a spiritual realm is rendered possible. While the arithmetical precision with which Oster constructs the poems does in some way seem to be at odds with his apparent abdication to nature, this does not negate the poems’ creative value, but rather it echoes the order that the poet perceives in the world around him. In the same way that nature recreates through repetition, so Oster seeks to create and renew by reverting to traditional patterns. Since early on in Oster’s career, the poet has

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38 Mario Rosa Pontes picks up on this aspect of Oster’s poetry, commenting that ‘c’est en effet cette impression de litanie, de liturgie religieuse à caractère répétitif, douée parfois d’un réel pouvoir incantatoire, qui se dégage de toute l’écriture ostérienne: l’avidité du poète semble se heurter à la minceur langagière qui pourtant le séduit’, ‘Une poétique de l’effacement’, in Pierre Oster: poétique et poésie, pp.67-75 (p.69).

39 François-Xavier Jaujard makes the point that Oster has created a poetry with ‘une science rigoureuse de la métrique et le dessein avoué de rénover le vers français (usé par son passé, sa
consistently produced poems of one hundred lines. Entire collections of poetry (for example Les Dieux and La Grande Année) are comprised of poems written in the same one-hundred line formula. The use of vers libres illustrates a movement away from the boundaries of traditional rhyming forms and thus the poet’s commitment to this verse form demands that another structuring force be employed in the texts. While Oster’s poetry is far removed from the Alexandrine, it manifests a very rigid internal structure, while the poet also seeks to embody a ‘liberté agile’ (OM xxvii) in the texts. This section will study the apparent contradiction between the freedom and constraints in Oster’s work and tensions that arise therein.

In tandem with the broad sweep of the line length, Oster’s poetic vision places a huge emphasis on the texture of words and sound and their sensual power over the reader. Thematically speaking, Oster’s poems are strikingly limited in range, as they concentrate on the contemplation of nature to the exclusion of all else. The Post-Romantic era has very much tended towards specificity, yet the poetry of Oster creates a world of paradigmatic majuscules, as a means of conveying the poet’s wonder at and veneration of ‘la plénitude infatigable du Tout’ (R 30). In contrast to Réda’s fascination with the individuality of the scenes he portrays, Oster stresses the universality of nature through the use of capitals, where ‘les mots à majuscules ne désignaient que l’idée des choses’. Rather than limiting himself to describing an individual tree in a particular landscape, the poet tries to encompass the whole of ‘tree-ness’ in the manner of Platonic Forms. So the texts are replete with references to ‘l’Arbre’, ‘le Ciel’, ‘la Plaine’, ‘le Jour’ and ‘la Nuit’, constructing a ‘pays total: qui contient à la fois la Mer et la Rivière, la Montagne, la Plaine et le Vallon, les Rochers, le Sable et l’Herbe. Pays abstrait surtout’.

It is worth noting that Oster’s use of generalities betokens an attempt to encapsulate the world as he perceives it, rather than to produce philosophical notions of abstraction. The universal landscape that Oster portrays is indeed a

richesse) grâce au recours aux subtilités de la métrique anglaise ou latine’, ‘Esquisse d’un profil, in La Voix des poètes; pp.33-35 (p.34).

40 Engel-Roux, p.59.


42 Engel-Roux, p.13.
Paysage du tout, for it has little to distinguish it as being unique, and his consistent use of the generic reveals an unusually limited amount of personal interpretation or authorial influence. In contrast to Réda, Oster chooses to describe scenes rather than relate, and he employs the immediacy of the visible, tangible world as a threshold to the quasi-divine. The semantic linearity of the texts means that the cohesive whole to which the poet aspires is not simply conceptual, but realised in the poetry. The sequential numerical ordering of the poems mirrors nature’s internal order, where every word points to the organic whole.

While the subject matter is limited, Oster’s meticulous attention to linguistic patterns focuses on the sounds of the words themselves. Delighting in the very process of description, the poet is particularly mindful of the phonetic quality of language:

Courons, sourions nous aussi sous les images du jour, de cour en cour.

(VNP 11)

Tout m’indique d’attendre

La vague tendre, tendre en mars, et plus tendre encore en septembre!

(NTN 25)

Je vous posséderai, poussières! Poussières, je susciterai

Un grand vent pour vous prendre! Vous serez, ô poussières.

(SL 59/PT 45)

These examples from Oster’s work clearly show his fascination with the tonality of language through repetition, alliteration and word play (‘attendre’, ‘tendre’, ‘septembre’, ‘posséderai’, ‘poussières’, ‘serez’, ‘courons’, ‘sourions’, ‘sous’, ‘jour’, ‘de cour en cour’). The alliterative emphasis also suggests the influence of

43 This is the title of Oster’s collection of poetry (1951-2000) published in the Poésie Gallimard series.
44 Engel-Roux remarks that ‘dans le désert inaugural qu’il traversait d’abord, le poète allait jusqu’à s’exclure lui-même du champ du poème, s’en absenter jusqu’à s’en abstraire’, p.35.
45 This aspect of Oster’s writing is referred to by Claude Bonnefoy, who states that ‘ses mots épèlent le monde. Sa parole se fait roc, arbre, prairie, sang des choses, reprend souffle dans le vent, s’humanise dans la chair, le regard, l’amour’, ‘Pierre Oster Soussouev ou la parole insérable’, in La Voix des poètes, pp.21-23 (p.21).
the oral and the Ango-Saxon poetic tradition, in which poems were embued with immense power for they were believed to hold a deeply ritual significance. Much more than merely a linguistic game, alliteration and internal echoes are used by Oster as expressions of his fascination with the infinite possibilities of creation and with new endless thresholds. The very supple structure of the poetry and its detailed exploration of linguistic possibilities demonstrate Oster’s desire to create new patterns and linguistic frameworks, as he seeks to create ‘un langage attentif, comme celui de Virgile, à imiter «le lyrisme des événements naturels, des météores, des torrents», à nous faire entrer dans «l’excès qui nous embrasse»’.

With the exception of some of Oster’s earliest poems in *Le Champ de mai*, the structure of the main body of poetry varies little from decade to decade. Phrases and themes reappear again and again, like multiple refractions emanating from the one prism. Although the majority of his poems adhere rigidly to the one hundred line format, the overall thematic thread of the work means that the poetry does not contain strict boundaries between individual poems. While each poem is sharply delineated from the other poems in a collection (through the one-hundred line cut-off point and the numbering of the poems), recurring themes and vocabulary unite the body of work. Numbering the poems in sequence, Oster highlights the infinite possible combinations that language affords, where each poem is a stage in a greater overall process. Rather than using poetry as a means of dealing with isolated incidents or experiences, Oster is primarily interested in the process itself. So much so that (without the indication of the numbered poems) it would be difficult to delineate one text from another, for they read as an infinite sequence.

For Oster, the highly impersonal system of numbering each poem also functions as a mode of detachment and gives the impression that the poetry is working independently from the poet, as one text seems to follow automatically on from another. Therefore, while there may be repetition within the texts, there are also moments which encapsulate Oster’s deep communion with the natural world. The idea of refraction and reflection therefore plays an integral part in the act of writing where ‘l’immensité surgit dans un reflet. Tout le bien se réfracte dans le miroir d’un acte’ (*AL* 25).

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Throughout the texts, the reader is drawn into an atemporal poetic landscape, where chronology is subverted and where the only indication of time passing is seen in the changing seasons and skyscapes. The poet continually returns to the same basic elements (namely the sky, mountains and trees), underscoring the universal continuity in all that Oster sees. As the following examples highlight, recurring scenes, ideas and terminology span from poem to poem:

Une flaqué obscurcit
La marelle du ciel

(CM 32)

Le ciel dur se défie de ces derniers oiseaux dont la prairie l’encense.

(SL 78)

Un nuage, le ciel... Et rien d’autre à la fin ne me reste.

(GA 63)

Le déploiement d’un ciel royal autour des arbres de brumaire

(D 71)

The natural world depicted in the poems is firmly underpinned by an understanding of the immediacy of an eternal present, for ‘nous ne pouvons vivre que si nous travaillons sans fin à comprendre que le Présent est notre seule profondeur’ (SL 14). Oster’s writing rarely deviates from the present tense and he claims that ‘je ne connais, je ne désire connaître, que dans le plus difficile présent’ (SL 136). The poet immerses himself in an eternal Eden (‘Je me contente de cette éternité infime à laquelle nous inclinent les sens’, R 33) and draws the reader into a realm where past and future have been deconstructed and only the present remains:

48 ‘Les éléments sans âge exhibent une présence indestructible, et les vigiles immuables, soleil, lune, ciel, arbre...montent la garde de la création ou président à la relève des saisons. Et voici le paysage immémorial, et sans frontières autres que la ligne du regard’, Tilliette, La Voix des poètes, p.11-12.
Le Temps me défendra du Temps qui me ravit!
(J’abandonne le monde! Le monde
M’abandonne autant que je suis...)

(SL 90/PT'61)

By situating his poetry almost exclusively in the present, Oster subverts a chronological order and simulates ‘l’atemporalité totale’.49 The atemporal plane is portrayed as a point of passage to a spiritual encounter, as Oster outlines in Solitude de la lumière:

La Foi. Elle est, ou suppose, comme l’adhésion à un Temps nouveau qui serait sensible à la présence du Logos, et par Lui comme enfin fondé en réalité.

(SL 133)

There is an integral link between Oster’s understanding of time and his spirituality, where it is through ‘un Temps nouveau’ that he believes that he is granted access to the Logos (‘Je me convertirai à la religion d’une alliance immédiate avec le temps./Religion d’exactitude et d’abandon’, AL 20). Situating himself as an observer in this natural landscape, Oster invites the reader to join him:

La plénitude habille la fragilité. A chaque heure, autour
De la prairie communale, au sommet d’une molle colline,
L’étendue enveloppe dans ses filets des nuages vagabonds,
Tu les observes, c’est donc ta route. Officie. Consomme le sacrifice.

(VNP 13)

Having crossed the threshold into an absolute present, at the point where all time is concentrated, Oster encourages the reader to participate in the liminal experience with him:

Réunissons dans le présent du poème tout ce qui nous est donné; que notre vie y soit comme l'éclat de l'Actualité divine; que notre Mort même y transparaisse illuminée.

(SL 163)

Creating a poetic framework that exists far from the hassles and stresses of daily modern existence, Oster sustains a universe in which the onslaught of time has little consequence. Moreover, he resolutely avoids any references that may limit or date his work to any specific period. Instead, he chooses to contain his poems in an atemporal realm that is unaltered by the passing of time or technological advances in urban life ('le Temps vrai, c'est le sens intérieur des existences singulières. Ce temps-là sauve bien qu'il détruise' (NP 108). Oster can truly create and control 'un présent transparent, où le passé toujours diminue, où déjà le futur ne soit plus' (P 165), for he is able to isolate and fully immerse himself in a wholly self-contained poetic landscape.

‘Au seuil et au sommet d’une complémentarité précieuse’

Having examined some of the main aspects of Oster’s poetry, it is important to make some reference to the poet’s other significant contribution to the literary world, namely the aphorism. While this study is concerned principally with Oster’s poetry, the dichotomy between the poem and the aphorism invites exploration and goes some way to explaining Oster’s liminal mentality. Undoubtedly, the greatly different physical appearance of the two forms represents the two very different purposes for which these literary genres are designed. Oster uses the length and expansiveness of the poem to challenge the outlying boundaries of the page, while the concise style of the aphorism pares language down to its minimum. The poems deal exclusively with nature and are expansive and solitary, while the aphorisms are urban and urbane, constrictive and social. Whereas le je in Oster’s poetry would feign objectivity, his commitment to the aphoristic style of discourse reflects a very different, subjective, first-person voice:

Parler du néant, c’est une sottise, une faiblesses, et un crime.

(NP 115)
La révolte n’aura jamais de sens. Il faut comprendre, aimer ou dominer.

(NP 129)

The fact that Oster oscillates between these two starkly opposing genres, changing so utterly and uniformly, suggests that, despite their differences, the long sweeping line of the poem and the short concise aphorism nevertheless share a common feature. Just as the poems express the ‘solitude de Celui qui chante dans mon vers’ (SL 113), so the aphorism represents another assertion of independence on the part of Oster. He articulates a keen awareness of the self-imposed isolation that compels him to move beyond more fashionable literary forms and he portrays himself as ‘le poète épris d’une image du monde qu’il entr’aperçoit en fermant les yeux, s’enfonce dans sa nuit. Equipée sans retour; sans compagne; sans foi’ (NP 113). In both the poem and the aphorism, Oster’s unusual style heightens, if not engenders, the sense of isolation he experiences as he acknowledges that ‘je suis seul à penser selon moi’ (NP 110). Yet it is only in this way that Oster feels that he is truly able to express himself:

Le pouvoir d’exprimer que possède le poète n’est que la résultante de son double pouvoir d’attention intérieur et de nudité spirituelle. Le poète, qui sait oublier toutes choses, sait aussi voir au-delà: rien ne s’interpose entre lui et le Réel Suprême.

(NP 125)

It is by means of this 'double pouvoir d’attention intérieur et de nudité spirituelle' that Oster may cross the threshold into a heightened communion with a spiritual realm. This process is one that seems to entail solitude from anything that would distract ('Le poète, qui sait oublier toutes choses [...] rien ne s’interpose entre lui et le Réel Suprême'). In both the poem and the aphorism, Oster appears to be deliberately isolating himself in an attempt to 'voir au-delà'.

The use of the aphorism, while notably employed by René Char, is a relatively rare form of expression in modern literature. In the same way that Oster’s poems create an impenetrable barrier between himself and contemporary society, so the aphorism marks Oster’s attempt to differentiate between daily existence and the poetry. Equally, the two modes of discourse draw on a similar writing technique, although this is expressed in very different ways. Oster’s interest in the world of science is reflected in the arithmetical precision and
attention to detail that can be seen in both the poetry and prose. In literary forms, Oster painstakingly constructs a world in which he rigidly imposes his own boundaries and borders. The same impetus that prompts Oster to adhere to one-hundred line poems and intricate rhyming patterns also allows him to construct short pithy epithets. In both cases, the same basic principle applies, namely that ‘dans un texte unique, j’entrelace à loisir des éléments qui me sont fournis par les jours’ (R 21). Certainly, the aphorism and the poem display two contrasting aspects of Oster’s artistic vision, and yet this contrast does not appear to trouble Oster excessively, for he is happy to express himself through both genres. Rather than wanting to clarify his own position as regards literary technique, Oster focuses on the act of writing itself:

La plénitude de l’Acte me contente. Elle étanche ma soif, nourrit ma faim, m’est l’apaisement d’une parole.

(RPAP 15)

Thus, the two modes of discourse embody an organic whole in which the poem uses the sweeping line length, the majuscules and expansive imagery to reflect the immensity of ‘l’Espace précieux’, while the aphorism encapsulates the intricacy and self-contained order of a world in which ‘chaque goutte de pluie est féconde’ (NTN 87). The dynamic created in the synthesis of these two very different forms of discourse is of ultimate interest to the poet, as together these genres act as a threshold to l’Unité:

Poésie et prose l’une à l’autre transparentes. Exigence d’une vigueur seulement classique. C’est là que je veux me placer, au seuil et au sommet d’une complémentarité précieuse. À toucher l’objet central.

(OM xxii)

Oster perceives language as a threshold into ‘l’essence divine’ (D 73) and he does not merely feel an affinity with nature, but he believes that the relationship is a reciprocal one. The poet addresses the natural forces and believes that they in turn reply in the guise of the inspiration which nature arouses in him (‘Un chant commence. [...] Et je vou-/drais mourir de ce commencement./Cherchant en songe quel mot nouveau, quel mot/nouveau me pénètre’, NTN 13). The poet’s belief that ‘la poésie excède toutes contraintes’ (RPAP 55) is represented in the texts by the longer line length, while the poet
stresses the universality of nature through the use of majuscules. Having explored the ways in which Oster is inspired by nature, the following chapter will study the poetry of Jaccottet, a poet who also draws on nature for a great deal of his artistic inspiration. However, while Oster uses poetry to create a definite boundary around the ienic scenes in his poems and seeks an absolute fusion between le je and nature, Jaccottet is much more interested in fusing his everyday experiences of nature with his understanding of le vertical. Thus, these two ‘nature’ poets have very different ideas as to how they may gain access to le spirituel. While Oster privileges the immanent, Jaccottet, in a manner similar to that of Renard, deals with a transcendental (and therefore directional) theology.
PHILIPPE JACCOTTET:
THE UNIFYING THRESHOLD

‘La puissance invisible, le cœur du monde’

The landscape of the poetry of Philippe Jaccottet (1925–) is one where the beauty of trees, rivers, birds and mountains is celebrated and his delight in and appreciation of the particularities of nature is manifested throughout the poems. However, Jaccottet’s portrayal of the natural world is very different from the Osterian vision of an irenic autre but rather, like Renard, he demonstrates an interest in transcendence instead of immanence. Yet in contrast to Renard’s perception of transcendence, Jaccottet’s poems suggest that nature can act as a point of passage to divine revelation. This chapter will explore the various ways in which the texts represent nature as a threshold to le spirituel and as a point of access to what he terms as ‘la puissance invisible, le cœur du monde’ (S 43).

At the beginning of this chapter, it is worth reiterating the distinction that this thesis makes between the horizontal and vertical axes of the poetic imagination. While this is not an attempt to encapsulate fully the complexities and infinite subtleties of the poetic imagination in such a general classification, nevertheless the horizontal/vertical distinction can prove useful as one means of categorising poetry. As this study has already demonstrated, a poet’s tendency towards either axis will, to a large extent, dictate the thresholds he perceives in the world around him and, in turn, the manner in which he then portrays these in his poems. For this reason, the horizontal/vertical classification is especially pertinent when considering the theme of the threshold and its representation in the texts. At this point, it is important to emphasise that this categorisation does not imply a premeditated manipulation or contrivance on the part of the poet to place
his poetry into either a vertical or horizontal framework. Rather, it is an indicator of an artist’s particular preoccupation, which is naturally reflected in the subjects about which he chooses to write and the way in which he views them. It is the premise of this thesis that the horizontal/vertical distinction is one that is an intrinsic part of the poet’s imagination, and therefore of the poem, and frequently only becomes apparent on a closer inspection of the text.

In terms of the horizontal/vertical distinction, Jaccottet’s poetry provides a useful contrast to the other poets studied thus far. As we have already seen, Réda’s almost exclusive interest in the horizontal plane means that the thresholds he perceives are, first and foremost, physical ones (as reflected in the many references to doors, windows etc. in his poems). Conversely, Renard’s focus as a writer and a croyant is consistently drawn upwards to the vertical plane as his liminal mentality is primarily concerned with the threshold that exists between man and God. The Osterian paradigm seeks a fusion of the two axes and yet this is done within an imaginative construct that is set apart utterly from everyday life.

In Jaccottet’s poetry, there are many representations of both l’horizontal and le vertical and the texts encompass both axes in a diverse range of poetic styles. The first section of this chapter will explore Jaccottet’s perception of nature and of the divine and how he attempts to fuse the two in his work. I will then focus on three specific images that illustrate this tendency (namely the tree, the bird and the mountain) and examine the ways in which they are depicted as having liminal properties. The final section will explore Jaccottet’s understanding of poetry as a threshold and the manner which he seeks to create ‘une parole capable d’établir un rapport juste avec ce qu’elle désigne’.

‘Enracinée dans le concret, dans le particulier’

Formally speaking, Jaccottet’s work displays the greatest diversity of the five poets in this study and his creative output includes not only a wide variety of poetic styles (vers libre, traditional sonnets and hai-ku), but also carnets and journals. The very range of ways through which Jaccottet chooses to express

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1 Jean Starobinski, ‘Parler avec la voix du jour’, in the introduction to Jaccottet’s Poésie, pp.7-22 (p.8).
himself indicates something of his liminal mentality, where he does not limit himself to any particular genre but instead prefers to flit over generic boundaries. Similarly, Jaccottet’s translation work (most notably of German Romantic poets such as Hölderlin) indicates an underlying interest in alterity, as this form of writing implicitly involves a confrontation with linguistic and cultural otherness as Jaccottet attempts to make the texts relevant and accessible to the Francophobe reader. Underpinning Jaccottet’s various writing styles is a keen awareness of the need to use language that reflects reality (‘il faudrait que le livre renvoie au monde’, TS 279) and therefore that facilitates communication, rather than hinders it. To this end, his writing is immediate and personal in style and, much in the same way that Réda delights in the commonplace observations of the Parisian suburbs, so Jaccottet fills his poems with observations of the natural world.

Un soir, le ciel resta plus longtemps clair sur les grands jardins verts et noirs couleur des pluies de la veille. Les globes luirent trop tôt. Alors dans le nid des branches apparut le chant du merle

\( I \ 18 \)

Il y a juste, au pied du lit, cette araignée (à cause du jardin), je ne l’ai pas assez piétinée

\( P \ 34 \)

Derrière la fenêtre dont on a blanchi le cadre (contre les mouches, contre les fantômes), une tête chenue de vieil homme se penche sur une lettre, ou les nouvelles du pays.

\( PSN \ 13 \)

As the above examples illustrate, Jaccottet’s poems provide candid portraits that focus on everyday sights, rather than on introspective musings, as he observes


cloudscapes, wildlife and sunlight. Nevertheless, invariably the poems move from a focus on *le concret* to a certain measure of reflection:

...Et le ciel serait-il clément tout un hiver,
le laboureur avec patience ayant conduit ce soc
où peut-être Vénus aura parfois
entre la boue et les buées de l’aube,
verra-t-il croître en mars, à ras de terre,
une herbe autre que l’herbe?

*(LH 91)*

Here, the everyday and the metaphysical are intrinsically linked, where commonplace musings (‘...Et le ciel serait-il clément tout un hiver’) seems to lead to deeper reflection. This fusion lies at the very heart of Jaccottet’s work, as the poet oscillates between representations of tangible reality and of a metaphysical autre rather than focus on one axis over the other.

Above all else, Jaccottet is adamant that his poetry and spirituality be firmly rooted in the particulars of everyday life and so he rejects certain forms of poetic expression ‘parce qu’elle n’est nullement enracinée dans le concret, dans le particulier’ *(EM 68)*. Throughout the texts, Jaccottet attempts to recreate the balance between *le concret* and a spiritual element that he perceives in nature’s composition:

les eaux abondantes descendre
aux degrés d’herbes et de roche
et les premiers oiseaux louer
la toujours plus longue journée
la lumière toujours plus proche

*(P 104)*

This example typifies Jaccottet’s writing style in which the landscape dominates, and man plays a secondary role in the scene. The natural world and the spiritual interact effortlessly (‘les premiers oiseaux louer’) and everyday phenomena assume supernatural qualities (‘la toujours plus longue journée/la lumière toujours

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plus proche’). This interaction between tangible reality and the metaphysical can be traced back to some of Jaccottet’s earliest published poems:

En ce jardin la voix des eaux ne tarit pas, 
est-ce une blanchisseuse ou les nymphe... [.
— Les nymphe... Mais qui cherche autre chose ici qu’une voix claire, 
une fille cachée? Je n’ai rien inventé [...] 

Et je ne rêvais pas

(P 36)

In this poem entitled ‘Ninfa’ (published in the late 1940s), Jaccottet juxtaposes the ordinariness of ‘la blanchisseuse’ with the mystery of ‘les nymphe...’, while repeatedly asserting the veracity of his experiences (‘Je n’ai rien inventé’, ‘Et je ne rêvais pas’). As this chapter will demonstrate, Jaccottet’s poems mark an attempt to reconcile both these elements of existence, wherein various representations of alterity reveal a complex and considered understanding of the threshold.

‘Une ascension des choses’

Jaccottet takes much of his inspiration from the natural world, which in turns initiates an interaction with ‘le Tout-autre’ (S 39). It is worth highlighting the fact that, while Jaccottet’s poems contain myriad representations of vertical images, the poet’s spiritual expression appears both muted and unconventional in comparison to religious poets such as Hopkins, Claudel and Renard. Nonetheless, whilst by no means a religious poet, Jaccottet does express an awareness of a possible mystical relationship with nature. There is an awareness of a realm and power beyond tangible reality that interacts with the individual. It is a force ‘qui

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6 This is a straight translation of the term Ganz andere employed by Rudolf Otto (translated by John W Harvey as ‘wholly other’). Otto claims that ‘the consciousness of a ‘wholly other’ evades precise formulation in words, and we have to employ phrases which seem sometimes sheer paradox, that is, irrational, not merely non-rational, in import’. The Idea of the Holy, trans. by John W. Harvey (London: Oxford University Press, 1950), p.59.
est en toi et hors de toi’ (LH 90) and, while Jaccottet chooses not to define it by any religious doctrine or tradition, it is nevertheless undeniably present:

qu’il y ait, non pas au-delà des collines
ou des nuages, non pas au-dessus du ciel
ni derrière les beaux yeux clairs, ni caché
dans les seins nus, mais on ne sait comment
mêlé au monde que nous traversons,
de cela que la voix ne peut nommer, de cela
que rien ne mesure

(LH 71-72)

Throughout the texts, there is a strong emphasis placed on the potential communion that is possible between the individual and nature:

Écoute: comment se peut-il
que notre voix troublée se mêle ainsi
aux étoiles?

(PSN 63)

Jaccottet’s desire to transcend tangible reality betokens his spiritual awareness, an awareness that is frequently described in terms of a movement along the vertical axis:

C’est bien une ascension des choses que je considère, ou comme la montée d’un angle dont la pointe irait toucher l’énigme de nos vies

(PSA 77)

The notion of crossing the threshold between the horizontal and the vertical axes (this ‘ascension des choses’) appears to be an intrinsic part of Jaccottet’s imaginative framework and indeed his critical writings reveal the extent to which he is aware of the horizontal/vertical dichotomy. For example, in L’Entretien des muses, he sees Claudel as a writer who ‘se débat sauvagement entre terre et ciel’ (EM 16). In Bonnefoy’s poetry, Jaccottet believes that ‘l’horizontale, qui domine (table, lit) suggère un mouvement lent et soutenu’ (EM 254) while he describes himself as being ‘trop sensible que je suis à l’étroitesse de l’intervalle qui sépare le vol de la voltige, la grandeur de la grandiloquence’ (EM 16). Jaccottet’s varied literary and spiritual taste is reflected in his his reading of works as diverse as Hölderlin (from the German Romantic tradition) and Bashô (a Haï-Ku poet and
follower of Zen philosophy). One of the common threads of these very different writers is that they share a general appreciation of the presence of spiritual elements in the natural world and Jaccottet appears to be drawn to this aspect of any given work:

Il se peut que la beauté naisse quand la limite et l’illimité deviennent visibles en même temps

(S 39-40)

Equally, elsewhere Jaccottet claims that ‘le poète serait cet homme sans apparence, sans appartenance, qui s’obstine à écouter ce vague bruit de source, de plus en plus lointain, dont il tire sa vie même’ (EM 285). However, his fascination with a metaphysical alterity is offset by an awareness of the distance that exists between man and ‘l’espace [...] plus haut, non pas plus haut/ailleurs, pas même ailleurs’ (LH 71):

Toute fleur n’est que de la nuit [...]Mais là d’où son parfum s’élève je ne puis espérer entrer c’est pourquoi tant il me trouble et me fait si longtemps veiller devant cette porte fermée [...]Ce monde n’est que la crête d’un invisible incendie.

(P 108)

The contrast of opposites that is set up between ‘ce monde’ and ‘là [...] où je ne puis espérer entrer’ hints at the problematic nature of the threshold (as represented here by ‘cette porte fermée’). Jaccottet’s awareness of le spirituel is evident in the references to vertical movement (‘s’élève’) and to mystery (as implied by ‘un invisible incendie’). This is then counterbalanced by an emphasis on the horizontal through tangible reality (‘toute fleur’), signalling the potential difficulty there may be in fusing le concret and le spirituel. In the following sections, I will examine three recurring images in which Jaccottet’s liminal

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mentality can be traced, to see the ways in which the poet seeks to achieve 'la résolution de cette contradiction profonde en une souveraine harmonie' (EM 294) in the texts.

**The Tree**

As an image, the tree is frequently used by Jaccottet to signify a possible threshold between the natural world and a divine encounter. The tree image is one that is widely used in poetry and the chosen portrayals of the tree can indicate an individual poet’s preoccupation with either the horizontal or vertical plane. In the poems of Claudel and Valéry, for example, the tree is seen in terms of its verticality, as it serves to direct the reader’s gaze upwards. In contrast, Saint-John Perse’s perception of the tree places it firmly on the horizontal axis and its function as a stagingpost supersedes any suggestion of the spiritual. In Jaccottet’s poetry, there is a focus placed on the tree’s liminal function where, in Bachelard’s words, ‘l’arbre droit est une force évidente qui porte une vie terrestre au ciel bleu’. Jaccottet’s portrayal of the tree image is principally in terms of it reaching up from the ground to the skies and thus it becomes the fulcrum of concrete reality and another plane.

Within this study, a clear distinction can immediately be made between the use of the tree image in the poetry of Jaccottet and Oster. The latter chooses to de-contextualise his portrayal of the natural world, tending towards the almost absolute generalisation of all elements of nature. Trees are represented in the form of ‘l’Arbre’, as a means of expressing the whole of ‘tree-ness’. In direct contrast,
the reader is immediately struck by Jaccottet’s delight in the sheer diversity of nature. Even when Jaccottet does refer to a tree in the generic, the trees form an intrinsic part of the landscape, interacting with both the earth and sky:

Du monde confus, opaque
des ossements et des graines
ils s’arrachent avec patience
afin d’être chaque année
plus criblés d’air

(P 138)

This short poem (Arbres I) is one of three in a series (‘Arbres I’, ‘Arbres II’ and ‘Arbres III’), in which the trees are situated on the horizontal axis and are described as ‘travailleurs tenaces/ajourant peu à peu la terre’ (P 140). However, they are also associated with the vertical axis, for they lead ‘vers une grotte à peine plus profonde’ where ‘peut-être [...] n’y a-t-il plus d’absence ni d’oubli’ (P 139). Jaccottet is very much a poet of specificity, where detail is always noted. The tree forms an intrinsic part of the natural landscape and so it is in the background of everyday dramas:

Le dimanche peuple les bois d’enfants qui geignent,
des femmes vieillissantes; un garçon sur deux saigne
au genou

(P 47)

While Oster is interested primarily in the paradigm of the tree, Jaccottet’s poetry dwells on the rich diversity and individuality of different tree varieties. This is reflected in the fact that his poems are peppered with references to ‘les peupliers’ (P 89), ‘les lilas’ (P 44), ‘des chênes’ (P 112), ‘tilleul et laurier’ (LH 80), ‘des figuiers’ (LH 31), among others.

‘S’ouvrir vers le haut’

Throughout the texts, the image of the tree is linked with two predominant themes: the life cycle and spiritual awakening. For Jaccottet, both of these prompt reflections on a metaphysical autre beyond the immediately tangible and thus a
liminal awareness is implicit therein. The first dichotomy in Jaccottet’s poetry is the fact that the tree represents both abundant life and death and decay:

L’amandier en hiver: qui dira si ce bois sera bientôt vêtu de feux dans les ténèbres ou de fleurs dans le jour une nouvelle fois? Ainsi l’homme nourri de la terre funèbre.

(P 92)

Jaccottet’s perception of the tree as a simultaneous reminder of nature’s bounty and of man’s inevitable mortality is reminiscent of Valéry’s poetry, in which ‘a sharp sense of the way in which growth and decay, existence and degeneration, are inseparable principles’. For both Jaccottet and Valéry, there is an inescapable link between life and death, where ‘to live, to grow, is to forfeit the total potentiality of the seed and to enter on a cycle of existence that leads to maturity, decay and death, for like the human organism the plant must spend energy in order to live’.¹² This perpetual cycle of germination, blossom and death prompts Jaccottet to reflect on mankind’s fate and on his relationship with ‘la terre funèbre’:

Les peupliers sont encore debout dans la lumière de l’arrière-saison, ils tremblent près de la rivière, une feuille après l’autre avec docilité descend, éclairant la menace des rochers rangés derrière. Forte lumière incompréhensible du temps, ô larmes, larmes de bonheur sur cette terre!

(P 89)

In this poem entitled ‘Le Livre des morts’, the inevitability of death is encapsulated in the leaves that fall like tears to the ground ‘avec docilité’. Importantly, Jaccottet demonstrates his acceptance of nature’s life cycle, as he sees himself as being equipped with an ‘âme soumise aux mystères du mouvement’. The tree image acts as a strong reminder of man’s impotence when confronted with the earth’s natural order, for it is a perpetual reminder of mortality. Jaccottet describes trees as ‘ces merveilles de vert, ces colonnes, même

choisies pour la cognée’ (P 46) and refers to them by employing language that imitates nature’s pattern of the life/death cycle, where the inverted internal rhyme in the phrase ‘merveilles de vert’ is abruptly cut short by the sharp sound of the staccato consonant [c] (‘colonnes’, ‘cognée’).

However, even when its leaves have fallen, the tree is not seen as a negative image. Conversely, Jaccottet sees the strength of ‘les arbres nus’ in their verticality as the bare branches reach up into the sky (he describes ‘leur façon de s’ouvrir vers le haut, le passage sans rupture du tronc rude aux subtiles branches extrêmes: l’Un qui s’épanouit avec grâce en le Multiple’, S 121). While the tree’s movement upwards and outwards does prompt Jaccottet to reflect on metaphysical questions, the tangible presence of the tree (and its ‘tronc rude’) continually draws Jaccottet’s attention back to the immediacy of what is before him:

Peu m’importe le commencement du monde
Maintenant ses feuilles bougent
maintenant c’est un arbre immense
dont je touche le bois navré

Et la lumière brille à travers lui
brille de larmes

(P 148)

In this short poem from the ‘Monde’ section in the Airs collection, Jaccottet’s overall poetic vision is encapsulated. The poet is unconcerned with resolving the great mysteries of life (‘peu m’importe le commencement du monde’) and instead he focuses his attention on the sheer physical presence of the tree. The internal echo of ‘bougent’ and ‘touche’ emphasises the interactive nature of the relationship between the tree and the poet, as the latter is keenly aware of the movement of the tree’s leaves. There is a rapport established between Jaccottet and nature, where the former is granted immediate access to a tangible autre (‘je touche’). Moreover, the tree is attributed with human emotions (‘le bois navré’), thus suggesting Jaccottet’s belief that communication between man and nature can be reciprocal.
The use of the tree image as a poignant reminder of life’s brevity and of man’s inevitable demise is a familiar one in literature. One is reminded particularly of Hopkins’ ‘Spring and Fall’, in which a young girl is comforted as she mourns the apparent death of Goldengrove trees:

Margaret, are you grieving
Over Goldengrove unleaving?
Leaves, like the things of man, you
With your fresh thoughts care for, can you?
Ah! as the heart grows older
It will come to such sights colder [...]
And yet you will weep and know why.
It is the blight man was born for,
It is Margaret you mourn for.¹³

Similarly in the poetry of Jaccottet, the tree image is frequently used to signify both the beauty and tragedy of nature, for the ‘prodige de ces milliards de mouvements, de transmutations simultanées et successives’ (S 121) is also a symbol of death (‘l’ossuaire des forêts’, I 33). In a sense therefore, the poet sees the tree image as representing the threshold space between life and death. The aesthetic beauty and physical presence of the tree is counterbalanced by the metaphysical reflection that it prompts in Jaccottet and thus it would seem that the ‘enjoyment of beauty [is] interfered with by thoughts of its transience’.¹⁴ In this instance, Jaccottet’s reflection only seems to lead to baffled resignation:

Accepter ne se peut
comprendre ne se peut
on ne peut pas vouloir accepter ni comprendre

(P 149)

The stark unpunctuated phrases and the negative repetition (‘ne se peut’, ‘ne peut pas’, ‘ni’) suggest that the tree image may also be associated with a sense of loss

¹⁴ Sigmund Freud, Writings on Art and Literature (California: Stanford University Press, 1997), p.177. This is the conclusion drawn by Freud after observing a certain poet’s reaction to nature. Freud writes that ‘the poet admired the beauty of the scene around us but felt no joy in it. He was disturbed by the thought that all this beauty was fated to extinction, that it would all vanish when winter came, like all the human beauty and all the beauty and splendour that men have created or
and resignation. Again, one is reminded of the poetry of Hopkins, where in 'Binsey Poplars' the poet expresses both nostalgia at the felling of the trees and regret at man’s ruthlessness:

My aspens dear, whose airy cage quelled,
Quelled or quenched in leaves the leaping sun,
All felled, felled, are all felled; [...] 
O if we knew but what we do

So too for Jaccottet, the tree image contains in it both elements of beauty and sadness, life and death, for the trees, like man, will inevitably return to the ground from which they came:

Comme on voit maintenant dans les jardins de février
brûler ces petits feux de feuilles
(et l’on dirait que c’est moins pour nettoyer
le clos que pour aider la lumière à s’élargir),
est-il bien vrai que nous ne pouvons plus
en faire autant, avec notre cœur invisible?

(PSN 37)

'Lumière de passage'

Not only are trees used to signify the threshold between life and death, but they interact with other elements of the natural world. As the following examples illustrate, frequently Jaccottet conveys this in the texts through the focus that he places on the interplay of the light or wind in the branches of the trees:

Quelquefois c’est comme en avril, aux premières tiédeurs,
quand chaque arbre se change en source, quand la nuit
semble ruisseler de voix comme une grotte

(CB 15)

may create. All that he would otherwise have loved and admired seemed to him to be shorn of its worth by the transience which was its doom”, p.176.

15 Hopkins, The Selected Poems of G.M. Hopkins, p.36.
[... ] Reconnaissance néanmoins
à ce vent dans les chênes qui ne se tait point.

(P 85)

Les légères feuilles bougent à peine,
comme pensées d’enfants endormis. Je traverse
la distance transparente

(LH 85)

Thus Jaccottet depicts an harmonic interaction between trees and the forces of
nature (elsewhere he describes the trees as ‘tout ce vert’ that ‘tremble et brille [...] sensibles au moindre courant d’air’, P 43). Moreover, this interaction hints at the
possibility of communication between the poet and the tree, for as the leaves
move they are described in terms of ‘voix’ and ‘pensées d’enfants endormis’. One
is reminded of Valéry’s ‘Dialogue de l’Arbre’ where the poet develops this
theme:

Mais c’est Toi que j’entends [...] Cent mille feuilles mues font ce que le
rêveur murmure aux puissances du songe. Je te réponds, mon Arbre, je te
parle et te dis mes secrètes pensées.16

Both the sunlight and wind are intangible and yet their presence is very
much in evidence through the medium of the tree. Thus, the tree serves as the
point of passage, granting access to ‘la distance transparente’:

je ne peindrai qu’un arbre qui retient dans son feuillage
le murmure doré d’une lumière de passage...

(P 91)

The tree’s interaction with the light and wind (‘le murmure doré’) creates this
‘lumière de passage’ and provides a threshold space to a metaphysical encounter.
The association between light and an experience of le vertical appears to be
particularly strong in Jaccottet’s poetry and he is drawn to the interaction between
light and trees, carefully documenting the nature of this relationship:

Here Jaccottet’s construction of an intimate and complex link between the horizontal and vertical plane is seen clearly, for the commonplace picture of sunlight falling on a tree is rendered extraordinary as the poet moves beyond the purely physical appearance of the scene. These lines of poetry resonate with a spirituality that is expressed in vertical terms, as ‘la cascade céleste,/de haut en bas’ and ‘la chevelure de l’air’ force the poet’s gaze upwards and call to mind Baudelaire’s description of ‘cheveux bleus, pavillon de ténèbres tendues,/Vous me rendez l’azur du ciel immense et rond’. Although the stimuli are different, both Jaccottet and Baudelaire express a moment of revelation in which the horizontal and vertical axes are fused. It may be this revelatory encounter to which Jaccottet refers in the phrase ‘lumière de passage’, where the tree acts as an agent of both literal and figurative illumination:

Les hauts arbres tranquilles
et la lumière de dix heures en septembre
comme une fraîche cascade

The tree’s liminal potential is expressed in the fact that it is the threshold between the commonplace (‘la lumière de dix heures’) and the mystical (‘une fraîche cascade’). Undoubtedly, this duality and liminal quality explains in part Jaccottet’s attraction to the tree image. A similar quality in Valéry’s poetry is highlighted by Décaudin in his comment that ‘si l’arbre et la colonne tendent vers le ciel, la lumière en descend. [...] Il y a certes une lumière rasante [...] qui est promesse de verticalité’, Décaudin, p.100.
Dans l’enceinte du bois d’hiver
sans entrer tu peux t’emparer
de l’unique lumière due:
elle n’est pas ardent bûcher
ni lampe aux branches suspendue

(P 105)

In this poem, the interplay between light and the tree offers the possibility of finding ‘l’unique lumière’. The singular quality of this light source makes it seem tangible (‘tu peux t’emparer’), with emotional and spiritual associations:

Elle est le jour sur l’écorce
l’amour qui se dissémine
peut-être la clarté divine
à qui la hache donne force

(P 105)

The light is equated with spiritual contact (‘la clarté divine’), while the bark of the tree acts as the agent by which ‘l’amour [...] se dissémine’. The poet creates a striking visual image as he contrasts ‘l’enceinte du bois d’hiver’ (with its associations of darkness and enclosure) and the brightness of ‘l’unique lumière’. For Jaccottet, ‘la clarté divine’ is closely linked to the inevitability of death (‘la hache’), as the axe abruptly cuts the tree off from its life source. In doing so, the axe also reinforces the power of a spiritual awakening (‘à qui la hache donne force’). Through the tree, the poet may experience what Mallarmé referred to as a ‘renouveau’:

Et triste, j’erre après un rêve vague et beau,
Par les champs où la sève immense se pavane
Puis je tombe énervé de parfums d’arbres, las,
Et creusant de ma face une fosse à mon rêve,
Mordant la terre chaude où poussent les lilas,
J’attends, en m’abîmant que mon ennui s’élève...\(^{19}\)

The notion of the tree as a threshold between light and dark, life and death, the horizontal and vertical axes is one that lies very much at the heart of the representation of the tree in Jaccottet’s poetry:

Peupliers le soir [...] leur forme [...] comme des signes ou des sémaphores, des flammes, des bougies [...] Puis qu’ils retiennent la lumière (et l’ombre) – là est probablement l’essentiel – , qu’ils sont, dans l’étendue, autant de jalons, comme si chacun d’eux redisait plus loin dans un texte le mot lumière ou le mot soir, or et ombre. Ils accentuent, ils ponctuent l’espace, avec un côté doré et un côté noir, à distance presque indistincts.

(S 139-40)

While ‘les chênes semblent éclairés de l’intérieur’ (AJ 10), they create a space where ‘une lumière de passage’ is possible. The tree marks out definite physical boundaries on the horizontal landscape and, as Jaccottet scans the horizon, the trees mark thresholds and borders between different spatial contexts:

Ainsi de l’églantier, chaque fois que je l’ai revu, qu’il m’a surpris. Ses branches dessinaient une arche sous laquelle on était tenté de passer, comme pour accéder à un autre espace, tout en sachant bien que, dans un sens, ce n’était pas «vrai».

(AJ 25)

j’advance enfin parmi les feuilles apaisées, je puis enfin faire ces quelques pas, léger comme l’ombre de l’air [...] (Chose brève, le temps de quelques pas dehors, mais plus étrange encore que les mages et les dieux.)

(LH 86-87)

Here, Jaccottet’s perception of the spatial threshold and of horizontal points of passage is very clearly associated with the tree (‘j’avance’, ‘faire ces quelques pas’). Nonetheless, Jaccottet also links the idea of movement with that of the vertical plane (‘plus étrange encore que les mages et les dieux’, ‘une arche [...] comme pour accéder à un autre espace’). In this way, the tree is portrayed in terms of performing a liminal function between man and a metaphysical autre, and yet these moments of epiphany granted by the tree are not entirely ‘«vrai»’. The poet is still fully aware of the fact that trees are simply trees (‘tout en sachant bien que, dans un sens, ce n’était pas «vrai»’, AJ 25). It is important to note that, while
Jaccottet displays a profound interest in finding the threshold to a spiritual realm, in contrast to Renard, he does not adhere to the doctrines put forward by many of the religious poets. Instead, the tree itself (rather than religious codes or doctrines) is perceived as a comforting and guiding presence:

Ce qui est admirable encore dans l’arbre, c’est qu’il est élégant et noueux à la fois. Sans doute m’en apprend-il plus sur la sérénité, sur la patience, qu’un tableau à sujet moral.

(S 121)

The Bird

‘À la fois près et comme très loin’

Moving on from the image of the tree that is used to embody both the horizontal and vertical axes, I will now examine a predominantly vertical image, namely that of the bird. In the same way that Jaccottet pays close attention to a wide diversity of trees, so he often focuses on individual bird types (for example wood pigeons, nightingales or cuckoos). There is a strong imaginative link established between trees and birds in Jaccottet’s work and the bird is situated predominantly within the context of wooded areas (they are ‘dans le lierre sombre’, P 34, ‘dans le nid des branches’, P 52, ‘dans l’assemblée des chênes’, P 112). Throughout the poems, the bird is conveyed as an image of freedom which, to a large degree, is due to the fact that it exists in a realm that transcends man’s control. Its flight embodies many of the qualities traditionally connected with spirituality and so, in Bachelardian terms, it is ‘une image dynamique’:

Le mouvement de vol donne, tout de suite, en une abstraction foudroyante, une image dynamique parfaite, achevée, totale. [...] Ce qui est beau, chez l’oiseau, primitivement, c’est le vol. Pour l’imagination dynamique, le vol est une beauté première.
For Jaccottet, this ‘beauté première’ is in part due to the fact that the bird exists in both the horizontal and vertical plane, for it is a creature of flesh and blood that can nonetheless transcend the earth. For the most part, the texts portray birds as occupying a threshold space that involves both the corporeal and the spiritual plane. There is a powerful association between the bird and spiritual existence that follows a well-established tradition, as Bachelard comments:

Si la pureté, la lumière, la splendeur du ciel appellent des êtres purs et ailes, si, par une inversion qui n’est possible que dans un règne des valeurs, la pureté d’un être donne la pureté au monde où il vit, on comprendra tout de suite que l’aile imaginaire se colore des couleurs du ciel et que le ciel soit un monde d’ailes.

So, for example, the perception of the bird as a point of passage into the vertical realm and, consequently, as a symbol of freedom, is one that can be found in Hölderlin and Valéry:

For even today
I heard it said in the breezes:
That poets are free as swallows.


For Jaccottet, the ascent of the bird directs the poet’s gaze up into the sky and towards the light (he describes the bird as it ‘fuit en criant vers l’éclaircie’, PSN 74). The associations with ‘la pureté, la lumière, la splendeur du ciel’ that Bachelard indicates are evident Jaccottet’s poems, where the bird image is frequently juxtaposed with various representations of light:

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20 Bachelard, L’Air et les songes, pp. 79-80.
21 Bachelard, L’Air et les songes, p.89.
22 Hölderlin, p.183.
Je ne vois presque rien plus rien que la lumière, 
les cris d’oiseaux lointains en sont les nœuds

(P 180)

The ‘êtres purs’, conveyed as creatures of purity and light, are also linked with various references to fire (which is both a purifying force and a source of light):

Un aigrette rose à l’horizon
un parcours de feu

(P 112)

S’il pouvait habiter encore la maison
à la manière d’un oiseau
qui nichérait même en la cendre
et qui vole à travers les larmes!

(P 154)

The bird’s power lies in its resilience, a quality that allows it to triumph over adversity (‘qui vole à travers les larmes’). In the above example, Jaccottet draws on the ancient image of the phœnix, a prominent symbol of immortality in ancient Egyptian and early Christian art. This mythical creature was believed to build its own funeral pyre and, having set fire to the nest, would be consumed in the flames and be reborn from the ashes. There is a striking contrast between the bird’s ability to transcend the destructive force of fire and Jaccottet’s own attempts at crossing the threshold that leads to a spiritual autre:

Ces tourbillons, ces feux et ces averses fraîches,
ces bien heureux regards, ces paroles ailées,
tout ce qui m’a semblé voler comme une flèche
à travers des cloisons à mesure emportées
vers un but plus limpide à mesure et plus haut,

(c’était peut-être une bâtie de roseaux
maintenant écroulée, en flammes, consumée

(P 90)

The poet’s desire for spiritual enlightenment is represented by a movement from the horizontal plane (‘des cloisons’) towards ‘un but plus limpide à mesure et plus

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haut'. However, the parallels drawn between bird and man (where the latter attempts to emulate the former by creating ‘ces paroles ailées’) stop short when the poet is unable to escape his limitations. The illusive nature of transcendence is stressed by the violence and destruction of the final image, where hope of engaging with l’autre has been utterly destroyed.

There is an undeniable sense of frustration and spiritual isolation suggested in Jaccottet’s poetry, as the poems express a profound sense of division between the bird (a predominantly vertical image) and man (an earth-bound creature). This is communicated where the birds are portrayed as being physically and audibly distant (‘les cris d’oiseaux lointains’, P 180) and where ‘on n’entend pas d’oiseaux parmi ces pierres/seulement, très loin, des marteaux (P 107). It is worth emphasising that Jaccottet’s detailed descriptions of birds prevent them from becoming simply a spiritual metaphor. Indeed, throughout the poet’s work, the reader is reminded that the bird is also dependent on the horizontal axis in order to survive. For this reason, the bird embodies much of Jaccottet’s poetic vision, for, while a predominantly vertical image, it is nonetheless bound by the constraints of natural law:

De même le vol de l’oiseau n’est pas absolument libre, mais obéit à des lois invisibles. (AJ 14)

The very fact that the poet is so keenly aware of birds in nature shows that they are often close at hand (rather than existing purely in l’ailleurs). It is this complexity that renders it such a rich image, embodying both the tangible and the elusive components of existence (‘ces cris d’oiseaux sous les nuages [...] à la fois près et comme très loin’, PSN 21).

‘Vers l’espace éclairé’

Jaccottet’s participation in ‘la jubilation verticale’ (GR 66) is evident from the beginning of his poetic career, as he endeavours to recreate the bird’s flight in his poems:
J'ai su pourtant donner des ailes à mes paroles,
je les voyais tourner en scintillant dans l'air,
elles me conduisent vers l'espace éclairé...

(132)

In the same way that birds can transcend the purely horizontal, so Jaccottet aims to 'give flight' to his words and thereby be granted access to 'l'espace éclairé'. Thus, the image of a bird in flight is employed to convey literary inspiration:

Je me souviens qu'un été récent, alors que je marchais une fois de plus dans la campagne, le mot joie, comme traverse parfois le ciel un oiseau que l'on n'attendait pas et que l'on n'identifie pas aussitôt, m'est passé par l'esprit et m'a donné, lui aussi, de l'étonnement.

(PSN 25)

The parallel made between the swift flight of a bird and a word passing through the poet's mind is a striking one. It indicates Jaccottet's understanding of the creative process, where words are seen as existing independently of the writer and are intrinsically linked with the notion of transcendence. Indeed, elsewhere the poet makes explicit his belief that words have the power to transcend, stating that 'que les oiseaux tournent dans le soleil; que ces paroles brillent sans aucun poids un instant encore avant la nuit', PSA 135).

However, as Jaccottet's poetry develops over the years, the poet is still perplexed by an essential dichotomy for after over two decades of writing, he is forced to acknowledge that the threshold to the vertical plane is not easily crossed:

Le poète tardif écrit:

«Mon esprit s'effiloche peu à peu.
Même la passerose et la mésange me semblent lointaines,
et le lointain de moins en moins sûr.

(PSN 73)
Fleurs, oiseaux, fruits, c’est vrai, je les ai conviés, 
je les ai vus, montrés, j’ai dit: 
«c’est la fragilité même qui est la force», 
facile à dire! et trop facile de jongler 
avec le poids des choses une fois changées en mots!
On bâtissait le char d’Élie avec des graines 
légères, des souffles, des lueurs, on prétendait 
se vêtir d’air comme les oiseaux et les saints...

(LH 77)

In the second extract, the image of clothing oneself in air (‘se vêtir d’air’) is used to convey the attempt to cross over into le vertical (whether this be literally, as the bird can, or spiritually, like the saints). However, the poet is forced to acknowledge that ‘le poids des choses une fois changées en mots’ will not necessarily grant him access to a spiritual realm (as expressed through the vague ‘le lointain de moins en moins sûr’ and the implications of deceit in ‘on prétendait’). This admission stands in direct contrast to his earlier poems, in which he portrayed ‘les nymphes, les ruisseaux, images où se complaire’ (P 36). Jaccottet now finds himself bereft of his former creativity and thus is ‘non plus aillé [...] depuis lontemps fui par les nymphes’ (LH 77), nevertheless he remains determined to continue writing:

[...] mais en me forçant à parler [...]
j’insiste, quoique je ne sache plus les mots, 
quoique ce ne soit pas ainsi la juste voie

(LH 78)

Thus, despite the uncertainty that Jaccottet now experiences, his desire to create poems with (what he referred to twenty years previously as ‘ces mots de peu de poids’, P 91) remains unabated. The notion of a possible point of passage to a spiritual autre continually runs as a motif throughout the texts and the development of Jaccottet’s poetry over the decades betokens a perpetual attempt to reconcile man’s corporeal existence with his spiritual side. While Jaccottet’s perception of poetry may change, the bird image continues to signify a union between the horizontal and vertical axes and to exemplify a liberated mode of communication. In La Promenade sous les arbres (1980), the poet declares:
Ah! sûrement, j’adopterai un jour un langage plus vif et plus chantant pour m’y élever comme alouette et le conquérir dans l’allégresse de la poésie!

(PSA 59)

The notion of liberty and boundaries appears again and again in Jaccottet’s writing, as the poet struggles to combine freedom of expression with ‘des lois invisibles’ of his craft. The reconciliation of these two aspects is pivotal in Jaccottet’s poems and influences, not only his own poems but his broader artistic taste. This is exemplified in his high regard for Purcell, a composer whom Jaccottet describes in terms of opening up the threshold to the vertical axis:24

Nul doute, cette fois les voyageurs
ont passé la dernière porte:

ils voient le Cygne scintiller
au-dessous d’eux.

(PSN 68)

In contrast to the relationship between words and objects, a musical note or chord cannot be said to ‘represent’ an object in the same way. Nevertheless, the very signs that are used as representations of notes do hint at the influence of the vertical axis as it is imposed on the horizontal lines of a sheet of music. Therefore, while ‘la lecture horizontale n’est pas annulée [...] l’organisation verticale prévaut dans l’espace musicale’.25 For Jaccottet, Purcell’s music, like the image of the bird, expresses a freedom of movement that suggests the possibility of access to an ailleurs beyond le vertical:

Il nous a fait entendre le passage des brebis
qui se pressent dans la poussière de l’été céleste

(PSN 64)

It is this point of access that Jaccottet seeks throughout his poetry, as he strives to produce ‘rien qu’une voix qui volerait chantant/à travers l’ombre et la lumière’ (LH 24).

24 In musical terms, Purcell refused to be constrained by tradition and his music defied many of the conventions of the Restoration period. Arthur Hutchings refers to Purcell’s music in which ‘sequences may pass through a series of keys, whereas in older music “modulation” meant cadencing on other notes than the tonic, rarely with a distinct shift of tonality’, Purcell (London: B.B.C., 1982), p.16.
'Lorsque nous parlerons avec la voix du rossignol'

In the poems, Jaccottet displays a particularly keen awareness of the sound of birdsong as he walks through the ‘paysage léger/où des oiseaux jamais visibles nous appellent’ (P 43):

Que les oiseaux vous parlent désormais de notre vie. [...] et quand nous volerons portés par la légèreté à travers tous ces illusoires murs que le vent pousse [...] Lorsque nous parlerons avec la voix du rossignol...

(P 68-69)

In the same way that Valéry claims that ‘l’oiseau seul et l’homme ont le chant’,26 so Jaccottet perceives birdsong as a point of contact between man and the bird (‘les oiseaux vous parlent’, ‘nous parlerons avec la voix du rossignol’). This ease of communication is analogous with freedom of movement, whereby man is released from the restrictions on the horizontal plane (‘nous volerons’, ‘à travers tous ces illusoires murs’). This movement towards the vertical axis is a crucial part of Jaccottet’s general spiritual framework:

J’imaginais toute la matière aspirant à se métamorphoser lentement [...] comme si toutes choses cherchaient à devenir de plus en plus gracieuses et de plus en plus lumineuses, à monter sans relâche [...] vers une sorte de cime[.] (PSA 131)

Jaccottet’s desire to create ‘weightless’ poems signals an attempt to cross the threshold between tangible reality and a spiritual realm with ‘des paroles pareilles/aux actes des fleurs, bleues ou rouges,/à leur parfum’ (ABA 31).

While birdsong, like words, may express beauty and spirituality (‘les premiers oiseaux louer’, P 104) nevertheless it still remains a part of everyday life and, in this respect therefore, it represents a fusion of l’horizontal and le vertical.27 Rather than exclusively focusing on one axis, Jaccottet explores the

27 Jaccottet’s emphasis on the fusion of the two axis means that his portrayal of bidsong is decidedly less overtly religious than the Claudel’s, who claims that ‘les cris de l’alouette et sa montée dans le ciel expriment la joie de l’âme qui s’élève vers Dieu’, Claire Pfenniger,
problematic nature of the threshold space between the terrestrial and the divine, as he strives continually for fusion between the two:

Nos paroles volent dans la lumière transparente, comme les hirondelles rapides aux soirs d’été, et au-dessous la vie de l’homme continue avec les changements du jour. [...] 

Il ne s’agit pas pour autant, j’insiste, d’un envol. 

(PSA 129)

While man’s words may soar ‘dans la lumière transparente’, they are nevertheless intrinsically linked to ‘la vie de l’homme’ below. For Jaccottet, it is this balance that is the very nexus of the threshold through which man may encounter the divine:

Loué soit l’amour qui fait s’élèver la louange sur la faute et qui emporte notre esprit dans ses serres de puissant oiseau, afin qu’il atteigne les plus transparents étages de l’air.

(PSA 133)

The Mountain

It is perhaps unsurprising that Jaccottet, as a native of Switzerland who has a fascination with the natural world, frequently employs the image of the mountain. Indeed, throughout the texts, he gives the impression that he feels a particular affinity with mountains, claiming that ‘cette montagne a son double dans mon cœur’ (PSN 45). Yet while Jaccottet is accustomed to the dramatic mountainous landscape of the Swiss countryside, he is equally captivated by ‘ces montagnes basses de la Drôme’ (‘L’Approche des Montagnes’, PSA 59). In a manner similar to the portrayal of the image of the tree and the bird, Jaccottet sees the mountain as representing a point of passage between two axes, for physically it provides a way in which man may ascend, and by implication transcend (‘Maintenant nous montons dans ces chemins de montagne’, PSN 39). In this way, the space


180
delineated by the mountain marks a movement (or a threshold) from the horizontal to the vertical axis (indicated in the above example by the verb ‘monter’). As the poet contemplates mountains both large and small, he explores their dual function as barrier and threshold to both a geographical and metaphysical ailleurs. This section will examine the ways in which this image reveals more of the poet’s liminal mentality, as it performs a mediating role between the earth and sky.

‘Le mur de la montagne’

The mountain is often portrayed in terms of a barrier, for one of its key characteristics is that it serves as a very definite boundary that clearly delineates l’ici from l’ailleurs. Mountains are seen as blocking access to that which lies beyond one’s present spatial context and the fact that the mountain is seen primarily as a barrier signifies an important aspect of the poet’s liminal mentality:

Le front contre le mur de la montagne  
dans le jour froid  
nous sommes pleins d’horreur et de pitié.  

(P 169)

In the above example, the impenetrable nature of the mountain (‘le mur’) is associated with ‘le jour froid’, instilling fear and pity in Jaccottet. The ambivalent image of the mountain is caused partly by its sheer size, as it dominates the individual’s view of the landscape. The sheer physical presence of the mountain betokens limits and boundaries and yet Jaccottet’s liminal mentality constantly seeks to challenge the very concept of such limitations:

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28 Haruki Murakami makes the point that ‘mountains, according to the angle of view, the season, the time of day, the beholder’s frame of mind, or any one thing, can effectively change their appearance. Thus, it is essential to recognize that we can never know more than one side, one small aspect of a mountain.’, A Wild Sheep’s Chase (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1990), p.170.

29 The significance of this barrier is particularly striking when we consider that, as Richard Stamelman comments, ‘the poetics of passage, of passing through, of à travers, are important to Jaccottet’, ‘The Unseizable Landscape of the Real: The Poetry and Poetics of Philippe Jaccottet’, Studies in Twentieth-Century Literature (1989), 61-83 (p.64).
Il ne faudrait pas que la limite eût plus de force que l’illimité [...]. Tout recommence toujours à partir de conditions et d’incertitudes, de difficultés nouvelles. Là est aussi l’espoir: dans l’obscurité, dans l’impossibilité. Pas moyen de renier ce point de départ qui est pourtant comme un piège d’où il semble que l’on ne puisse sortir.

(S 43)

Here, Jaccottet clearly illustrates his liminal mentality and his desire to move beyond barriers, however formidable they may be. Similar to Réda, the appeal of travel and of crossing physical thresholds is communicated (‘pas de moyen de renier ce point de départ’), despite any risks that it may entail. For the poet, any obstacle (however impassable it may appear to be) contains within it the idea of renewal and hope (‘tout recommence [...] là aussi est l’espoir’). Paradoxically, therefore, despite the mountain image’s very definite associations with barriers, it also seems to be analogous with the promise of something that lies beyond:

La parfaite douceur est figurée au loin
à la limite entre les montagnes et l’air

(A 45)

Lured by the enticement of l’inconnu, the poet climbs the mountain and eventually can be rewarded with a new perspective of the world below, as Jaccottet’s reference to George William Russell’s writing expresses:

Quand j’étais jeune, je fréquentais beaucoup les montagnes, ayant découvert que dans l’atmosphère des hauteurs la vision devenait plus riche et plus lumineuse.

(PSA 24)

Plus rien que des montagnes miroitantes’

For Jaccottet, the sheer physical presence of the mountain embodies ‘à la fois lente ascension et concentration’ (S 100-01). It is perhaps for this reason that Jaccottet employs the mountain image to communicate feelings of oppression and terror, as the immense power of the mountain is used to express crushing
difficulties (‘Misère/comme une montagne sur nous écroulée’, P 171). Conversely, however, it is also described as being a place of peace and silence:

Dans la montagne, dans l’après-midi sans vent et dans le lait de la lumière luisant aux branches encore nues des noyers, dans le long silence: le murmure de l’eau qui accompagne un instant le chemin

(PSN 35)

Part of the attraction of the mountain space is precisely the silence that it offers and an association is frequently made in the texts between the mountain, silence, strength and stability. Equally, while the mountain has a very dominant physical presence, it is often linked with images of ephemera:

Maintenant donc, des masses pesantes sont devenues pareilles à des fumées, et sans doute est-ce là le mirage que je désirais.

(PSA 64)

(et les papillons sont autant de flammes perdues, les montagnes autant de fumées)

(P 180)

le socle des montagnes fume de trop de brouillard...

(PSN 19)

In these examples, the mountain image is juxtaposed with transient phenomena (‘le mirage’, ‘les papillons’, ‘brouillard’), suggesting the poet’s fascination with the shift that occurs when these substantial, formidable natural formations become hazy and indistinct in appearance. This shift is best observed at some distance from the mountain and Jacottet often chooses to focus primarily on the view of the mountain, rather than the view from the mountain in his poems. That is to say, the poet does not highlight the role of the mountain as a vantagepoint but instead, he frequently situates himself at one distance removed from the mountain and his gaze is drawn towards the mountain. Thus we see that the mountain is frequently juxtaposed with references to distance in the poems:
Dans l’étendue
plus rien que des montagnes miroitantes

La lumière se fortifie, l’espace croît,
les montagnes ressemblent de moins en moins à des murs,
elles rayonnent, elles croissent elles aussi, [...] 
Qu’avons-nous franchi là?

Viewed at some distance, the mountains are no longer seen as an impassable, definitive barrier but rather they are linked with mystery and splendour and the association between the mountain and the play of light (‘miroitantes’, ‘rayonnent’) in the above examples highlight this. Elsewhere, Jaccottet reiterates this quality, where the mountain is transformed into an indistinct haze (‘plus j’y pense, plus je m’assure que le moment où ces montagnes m’émèrveillent est quand justement elles sont à peine visibles: c’est leur légèreté de buée qui m’obsède’, PSA 64).

‘Au seuil de l’illimité’

The liminal experience of the mountain is also conveyed through the fact that, for Jaccottet, it is an image that is synonymous with the notion of travel and of passage:

Il y a des gens qui ne respirent à leur aise qu’au seuil de l’illimité; j’aime plutôt cet espace que les montagnes définissent mais n’emprisonnent pas, comme quelqu’un peut aimer le mur de son jardin, autant parce qu’il suscite l’étrangeté d’un ailleurs que parce qu’il arrête son regard; quand nous considérons les montagnes, il y a toujours en nous [...] l’idée du col, du passage, l’attrait de ce qu’on n’a pas vu...

Just as Réda perceives the wall as both a barrier and an indication of a geographical autre, so Jaccottet sees the mountain as a force that hints at ‘l’étrangeté d’un ailleurs’. For this reason, a liminal mentality is implicit in
Jaccottet's representation of the mountain as he considers 'l'attrait de ce qu'on n'a pas vu' and he finds himself drawn to the threshold of l'ailleurs:

(L'enfant rêve d'aller de l'autre côté des montagnes, le voyageur le fait parfois [...] On se demande quelle image il voit passer dans le miroir des neiges, luire quelle flamme, et s'il trouve une porte entrouverte derrière.[...])

(PSN 20)

This image of 'la porte entrouverte' displays an important feature of Jaccottet's liminal framework, where each threshold holds the promise of other thresholds beyond. In the same way that the climb to one mountain peak reveals the summits yet to be scaled, so the poet's view of the horizon is always expanding. In this sense, Jaccottet's liminal mentality is similar to that of Char's, where 'the threshold in all its forms is the central architectural figure and the thought of the poetry [...] where traversal is continuous'.

Throughout Jaccottet's poems, the theme of distance and travel occurs again and again and the mountain is described as 'l'espace sans espace' (P 90) where concepts of limits and distance are distorted. However, unlike Réda's writing, these are not the casual observations of the promeneur, for they offer a very different awareness of spatial displacement:

Entre la plus lointaine étoile et nous la distance, inimaginable, reste encore comme une ligne, un lien, comme un chemin.

S'il est un lieu hors de toute distance, ce devait être là qu'il se perdait: non pas plus loin que toute étoile, ni moins loin, mais déjà presque dans un autre espace, en dehors, entraîné hors des mesures.

(P 166)

While Jaccottet's spiritual beliefs are undoubtedly expressed in a decidedly more muted way than Renard's, nonetheless the above example demonstrates the way in which Jaccottet's concept of the threshold is intrinsically linked to the notion of an intangible, unknown autre ('un lieu hors de toute distance'). The journey that
the poet depicts begins on the horizontal ('un chemin'), yet is directed upwards ('entre la plus lointaine étoile et nous'), and ends in a space beyond limits and boundaries ('non pas plus loin [...] ni moins loin').

This pattern of movement is one that is illustrated repeatedly in the mountain image, where Jaccottet is drawn to the vertical plane 'avec le passage irrésistible des oiseaux' (P 89). The rapprochement of the tension between the two axes also gives some insight into Jaccottet's understanding of spirituality, in which the image of the mountain plays a significant role:

J'imaginais toute la matière aspirant à se métamorphoser lentement [...] à monter sans relâche, grâce à l'amour qu'elles nous inspirent, vers une sorte de cime; et cette cime atteinte, toute peine, tout mouvement, toute parole cessaient automatiquement dans un état qu'il est absolument vain de vouloir évoquer ou même comprendre.

(PSA 131-32)

Here, Jaccottet's understanding of the threshold is clearly revealed, as the poet links movement along the vertical axis with an absolute and indescribable autre ('à monter sans relâche [...] vers une sorte de cime'). Much in the same way that Hölderlin describes 'cette réalité intérieure redécouverte dans la «sainte innocence» des Alpes', so Jaccottet sees the mountain as the point of passage between the horizontal and the vertical plane, where both are inextricably bound (he envisions 'une sorte d'universel mariage, et concert, de la Terre et du Ciel', GR 66).

Over the passing years, however, there has been a perceptible shift in Jaccottet's portrayal of the fusion of the two axes, as he manifests a new trepidation towards anything that is not firmly rooted in the horizontal:

32 This calls to mind Blake's 'The Marriage of Heaven and Hell', in which the poet envisions a world where 'roses are planted where thorns grow./And on the barren heath/Sing the honey bees.' Blake's awareness of something beyond the constraints of commonplace existence prompted him to claim that 'if the doors of perception were cleansed every thing would appear to man as it is, infinite.' William Blake, Complete Writings, ed. by Geoffrey Keynes (London: Oxford University Press, 1969), p.148 & 154.
Maintenant, je me méfie à nouveau de l’élán qui m’a porté [...]. Alors ce qui me gêne en lui, c’est qu’il m’ait emporté de l’autre côté, dans l’invisible; parce que cela ressemble à une fuite.

_(TS 330)_

In this later example of Jaccottet’s work, he rescinds his former interest in ‘l’autre côté’, seeing it more in terms of escapism than of exploration and he appears to be less interested in ascending spiritual heights than in years. This change is reflected elsewhere, when Jaccottet states that:

Le problème, pour notre esprit, serait moins d’entasser des rochers, de bâtir des temples, que d’ouvrir des passages dans les murs.

_(PSA 36)_

The image of ‘des passages dans les murs’ betokens a clear shift in Jaccottet’s paradigm, as the focus of spirituality is now firmly situated on the horizontal plane, as he wishes to attain ‘une observation à la fois acharnée et distraite du monde, et jamais, au grand jamais, d’une évasion hors du monde’ _(PSA 39)_.

Poetry as a threshold

‘Un refuge contre le réel’

As we have seen in the representations of the tree, the bird and the mountain, Jaccottet’s poetry involves a constant and ongoing act of reconciliation between the tangible world and a metaphysical _autre_, as articulated through a variety of liminal images.⁶³ While both Jaccottet and Oster portray a close relationship with nature, Jaccottet’s acceptance of the problematic stands in marked contrast to Oster’s active denial of any sense of division between self and nature:

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Je te parle, mon petit jour. Mais tout cela
ne sera-t-il qu’un vol de paroles dans l’air?

(P 57)

In Jaccottet’s poetry, nature is sometimes attributed with divine properties (‘cette lumière souveraine’, PSN 47) and yet the poet is also wary of deifying nature and of indulging in what he perceives as escapism:

Je ne vois pas le salut dans quelconque retour à la Nature avec un grand N, et [...] je ne vais pas chercher dans le silence des campagnes un refuge contre le réel.

(TS 293)

Therefore, while Oster embraces nature wholeheartedly as a non-directional divine force, Jaccottet’s rather more muted response recognises the limitations of nature (‘Feuilles et nuages [...] vous ne nous êtes pas d’un grand secours./Un simple coup de vent un peu frais vous éteint’, PSN 56). As a consequence, fusion with a spiritual other by means of nature is not always easily attained, as the poet acknowledges that ‘même le jour, même la plus vive lumière, même le très doux septembre ne sont pas faciles à traverser...’ (AJ 42). One of the poems from Pensees sous les nuages demonstrates this, as Jaccottet clearly shows the tension underlying his relationship with nature:

Jour à peine plus jaune sur la pierre et plus long,
ne vas-tu pas pouvoir me réparer?
ressoude-moi ce cœur. [...]
Soliel enfin moins timoré, soliel croissant,
soulève-moi sur tes épaules,
lave-moi de nouveau les yeux, que je m’éveille,
arrache-moi de terre, que je n’en mâche pas
avant le temps comme le lâche que je suis.

Je ne peux plus parler qu’à travers ces fragments pareils
à des pierres

(PSN 31)

The series of commands and supplications that the poet employs emphasises the fact that he believes intimate communication to be possible with the natural world, while also indicating the problematic aspect of this communication. The
sense of desperation conveyed as he begs to be released freed from a purely horizontal existence (‘soulève-moi sur tes épaules’, ‘arrache-moi de terre’), suggests that nature may not respond to his requests. Thus, it must be stressed that Jaccottet does not see nature purely as a divine or magical force and yet he does place an emphasis on the vital relationship between man and nature. While both Oster and Jaccottet draw much of their poetic inspiration from the natural world, Jaccottet does not envisage a ‘La Grande Terre’ in which all natural elements are awe-inspiring and, at times, fear-inducing. Rather, Jaccottet’s personal journals attest to a different type of relationship with nature, in which an intimacy is perceived between man and the natural world.

‘Ni à toi, ni à rien’

The liminal aspect that pervades Jaccottet’s poems can be clearly seen, not only in the fact that a relationship with nature is seen as possible, but the very way that that relationship is depicted. Certainly, the poet imagines a great deal of communication between himself and nature (‘Forêt marine à l’aurore [...] j’entre et je suffoque en toi’, P 54, ‘Tu es ici, l’oiseau du vent toumoie/toi ma douceur, ma blessure, mon bien’, P 26). When referring to interaction with nature, Jaccottet frequently employs the familiar ‘tu’ form (for example, 'Aide-moi maintenant, air noir et frais, cristal/noir', LH 85) and thus highlights the close link he feels with the natural world. Jaccottet seems very comfortable with addressing nature and his poems convey a desire similar to Hölderlin’s ‘to end this eternal conflict between our Self and the world [...] to unite ourselves with Nature’.34

Alouette, étoile en plein jour, [...] 
puissiez-vous me conduire encore jusqu’au seuil d’une telle nuit.

(I 26)

34 Hölderlin, p.85
The above examples illustrate the way in which Jaccottet envisages the possibility of personal interaction as being limitless, for he does not restrict his understanding of communication to human contact. Instead, the very act of directly addressing a wide range of natural elements grants him access to a relationship with them, whereby the parole becomes a passage.

While it is true that the texts are conspicuously devoid of references to people in the third person, nevertheless they are filled with references to tu, nous and vous. Jaccottet’s poetry is replete with questions, commands and invocations, directed at various objects and people. Throughout the poems, there is a focus on representations of self and other and it is here that we see the poet’s conception of parole-passage represented, where the word is explicitly linked to a point of access. For example, ‘Portovenere’, in the L’Effraie collection of 1944, illustrates this notion even at this early stage of the poet’s career:

La mer est de nouveau obscure. Tu comprends, c’est la dernière nuit. Mais qui vais-je appelant? Hors l’écho, je ne parle à personne, à personne. Où s’écroulent les rocs, le mer est noire, et tonne dans sa cloche de pluie. [...] la majesté de ces eaux trop fidèles me laisse froid, puisque je ne parle toujours ni à toi, ni à rien.

(P 31)

Here, Jaccottet highlights the sensual quality of nature by appealing to the senses of sight (‘obscuré’, ‘noire’), sound (‘appelant’, ‘l’écho’, ‘tonne dans sa cloche’) and touch (‘froid’). This possible interaction with the natural world is then counterbalanced by the reference to frustrated communication (‘qui vais-je appelant’, ‘je ne parle à personne, à personne’, ‘je ne parle toujours/ni à toi, ni à rien’). The poem depicts an immediate and tangible world into which the reader is invited, as Jaccottet draws his readership into the poetry (‘Tu comprends’, ‘ni à
The familiarity of the second-person *tu* establishes an intimacy that is then reiterated by the use of *je* (‘Mais qui vais-je appelant?’, *P* 31), drawing the reader’s attention to the relationship between the text and the self and thereby employing *la parole* as a point of passage between *le je* and *l’autre*. Later in the text, this close alliance is reinforced by the uniting of the first and second person in the dialectic ‘je ne parle toujours/ni à toi, ni à rien’. The irony of this statement serves to undermine the credibility of the words, thereby destabilising the very notion of communication. This rupture is reiterated by the poem’s final image, when any possibility of communication with *l’autre* is denied, as the threshold is closed definitively (‘claquer la porte’).

The poet’s openness to *l’aillleurs* is reflected in the interplay between self and other throughout his work and his attempts to explore the linguistic threshold between *le je* and *l’autre* indicate the pivotal role that a liminal mentality plays in his writing. The opening poems in *L’Effraie*, for example, highlight the intimacy between the first person and *tu*, as the simple statement ‘Tu dors’ it marks a crossing of the threshold between poet and reader. However, this ease of communication is undermined by the fact that *le tu* is unspecified and unknown. The reader therefore is placed in an ambiguous situation, as (s)he is addressed in the familiar form although (s)he is unknown to the poet. With no guidance other than literary convention, unconsciously the reader consents to being drawn into the poem and assumes the role of the addressee. The close relationship between *le je* and *le tu* is reinforced by the juxtaposition of the personal pronouns in the line:

\[
\text{Tu dors, on m’a mené sur ces bords infinis}
\]

\[(P 25)\]

In this way, Jaccottet establishes a link between self and other and yet he highlights the fact that this poetic universe does not consist uniquely of *je* and *tu*, for he introduces the ambiguous *on*. This other presence is vague yet undeniable and is a definite controlling force over *le je* (‘on m’a mené’). The relationship between self and other is emphasised a few lines later (‘[…] combien de choses/j’en pourrai dire, et de tes yeux…’), and this alliance is finally consolidated through this use of the pronoun ‘nous’:
Mais ce n’est que
l’oiseau nommé l’effraie, qui nous appelle

(P 25)

‘Le poème nous ramène à notre centre’

This notion of the parole-passage extends beyond Jaccottet’s representations of direct communication with nature and into his very poetry, for it is through language (parole) that he may express the point of passage he believes possible between le concret and le spirituel. The balance of opposing elements is not merely a theme in Jaccottet’s poems, but influences his very approach to the poetic act. In his carnet of January 1959, Jaccottet records his ‘rêve d’écrire un poème qui serait aussi cristallin et aussi vivant qu’une œuvre musicale, enchantement pur, mais non froid, regret de n’être pas musicien, de n’avoir ni leur science, ni leur liberté’ (S 15-16). Here the poet acknowledges the importance of both structured methods and creative freedom in the creating art with which ‘on n’explique absolument rien, mais une perfection est donnée qui dépasse toute possibilité d’explication’ (S 16). The poet is keen to convey this ‘perfection’ through a renewed sense of awe at the wonder of creation and writing is intrinsic to this aim, as Jaccottet equates the mystery of life with that of poetry (‘l’étrangeté même du fait de vivre, qui n’est pas mince, et l’étrangeté du poème, seraient inséparables […] la poésie et la vie m’ont toujours paru étroitement liées, à leur racine’, TS 307). The poem is seen as embodying the idea of the parole-passage as it performs an intermediary role between the artist and the natural world, piercing through much of the pretence that Jaccottet sees around him:

Pour nous qui vivons de plus en plus entourés de masques et de schémas intellectuels, et qui étouffons dans la prison qu’ils élèvent autour de nous, le regard du poète est le bélier qui renverse ces murs et nous rend, ne serait-ce qu’un instant, le réel; et, avec le réel, une chance de vie.

(EM 301)

It is the poet who may move beyond the perceived limitations of his environment (‘le bélier qui renverse ces murs’) and thus extend hope to those who wish to
cross the threshold of life itself (‘une chance de vie’). For Jaccottet, poetry has an unquestionable ability to break borders and cross the threshold into le réel ‘parce que la poésie pourrait être mêlée à la possibilité d’affronter l’insoutenable’ (S 90).

The concept of the threshold is a crucial part of the poet’s perpetual quest to align not only man and nature but le sensible and l’éternel, where words are clearly portrayed in terms of their liminal function to a spiritual epiphany:

Ainsi, ainsi faut-il poursuivre, disséminer, risquer des mots, leur donner juste le poids voulu, ne jamais cesser jusqu’à la fin – contre, toujours contre soi et le monde, avant d’en arriver à dépasser l’opposition, justement à travers les mots – qui passent la limite, le mur, qui traversent, franchissent, ouvrent, et finalement parfois triomphent en parfum, en couleur – un instant, seulement un instant.

(S 57)

Poetry thus acts as the very threshold whereby man may enter into communion with the divine (‘Dieu, dedans de la parole’, S 42) and Jaccottet portrays this mediating function of language in oppositional terms:

Toute activité poétique se voue à concilier, ou du moins à rapprocher, la limite et l’illimité, le clair et l’obscur, le souffle et la forme. C’est pourquoi le poème nous ramène à notre centre, à notre souci central, à une question métaphysique.

(S 39)

Here, the liminal power of poetry is emphasised as it is portrayed as being able to unite directly contrasting elements, communicating something of Jaccottet’s vision of ‘cet état d’équilibre entre les contraires’ (PSA 128). Thus it serves as a point of access to the metaphysical (even if it does not necessarily provide answers to humanity’s preoccupations or questions).

35 Stamelman makes the point that ‘what defines the unseizability and the elusiveness of the real is its fundamental otherness. The poem is a space through which this otherness passes, a necessary space, for without it the alterity of the real could never be expressed’, p.63.
36 Micheal Sheringham stresses the liminal role that Jaccottet grants language, stating that écrire pour Jaccottet c’est se vouer à ce va-et-vient, ce tatonnement... Pour être digne de cette tâche de creuser les chemins du monde, pour être ouverture au monde, la parole doit surmonter bien des obstacles’. L’être et le lieu: Frénaud, Jaccottet, Deguy’, in La poésie au tournant des années 80, pp.75-86 (p.78).
'Parler sans images'

In a preface to Jaccottet’s work in the Gallimard Poésie collection, Jean Starobinski highlights one of the central preoccupations expressed in Jaccottet’s poems, namely the relationship between truth and language. Starobinski comments that ‘Jaccottet n’estime pas que la vérité soit un vain mot, ni qu’il soit illusoire de tenter d’aller en un pacte indissoluble, le vrai avec la parole poétique.’ In contrast to Renard’s understanding of truth, Jaccottet’s is based neither on a belief system nor feelings, but ‘elle se révèle dans la qualité d’une relation au monde’. Thus, for example, the mountains are much more than a picturesque scene, for they are believed to communicate some truth about man’s relationship with the world (the poet claims that the ‘«montagnes légères» essayaient de dire la vérité, non pas sur le monde ni sur moi, mais peut-être sur nos rapports’, PSA 66). While the poet sees language as providing a type of a vehicle to a deeper form of reflection, it must be stressed that he does wish to use nature as a veiled code for his beliefs. Jaccottet is very keen to avoid the label of a philosopher or thinker but instead he wishes to create poetry that encapsulates nature’s beauty, asserting that ‘la poésie n’est ni cet enjolivement du réel, ni cette évocation hors du monde avec quoi on veut trop souvent la confondre’ (EM 301).

Jaccottet’s perception of poetry is one that is closely bound up with one of the significant influences on his writing, namely the Japanese haï-ku. In L’Entretien des muses, Jaccottet comments:

(Il m’arrive de croire que les seuls poètes qui aient su, continûment et de la façon la plus pure, inscrire l’éternel dans le sensible, sont les maîtres japonais du haï-ku. Chez eux, non seulement la trouée se produit à travers le particulier, mais à travers les plus vils objets. Et comme sans y penser.) (EM 257)

37 Jean Starobinski in the introduction to Jaccottet’s Poésie, p.8.
38 As Michael Bishop comments ‘perhaps the most fundamental, and certainly a long-felt, factor in Philippe Jaccottet’s conception of (the) language (of poetry), is his deep sense of the horrifying untruthfulness of ‘speech’, The Contemporary Poetry of France, p.55.
39 In this respect, Jaccottet’s objective echoes that of Roud, who claimed that ‘c’est d’un autre langage des fleurs que j’aimerais parler, un langage direct, sans «comme», sans la docilité du symbole’, Gustave Roud, Les Fleurs et les saisons (Geneva: La Dogana, 1991), pp.11-12.
An awareness of the threshold is implicit in the Japanese poem, where there is a strong emphasis on the joining together of opposing elements. Similarly, Jaccottet’s liminal mentality is pivotal to his poetic vision, for it is through an understanding of the threshold that a point of fusion between le concret and le spirituel be located. The poet is attracted to poems that combine l’éternel and le sensible, an act that is performed through the medium of everyday objects and that goes to form the basis of poetry that is ‘pure’. This purity is a quality that Jaccottet believes the Japanese masters embody in their poetry and he refers to the haï-ku as being a poetic form in which:

Une vérité était saisie, et si légèrement saisie, en quelques mots: une de ces relations cachées entre des choses lointaines, parfois même insignifiantes en apparence, relations dont la découverte nous illumine au point, dans certains cas, de changer notre vie.

(TH 126-27)

Jaccottet’s fascination with haï-ku poetry is particularly evident in Airs (1967), in which he adapts the haï-ku form within the framework of contemporary French verse. This collection opens with the phrase ‘Peu de choses’, which is a fitting synopsis of the general theme of the poems. Following the tradition of the haï-ku masters, Jaccottet chooses nature as his subject matter, with a particular focus on everyday elements such as rivers, grass, fields and birds, where ‘le poète n’est pas demiurge [...] il est celui qui s’efface pour laisser paraître la beauté dont il est le témoin.’ In one of these poems, Jaccottet employs an alternate masculine/feminine rhyme with one aural rhyme throughout, offering the listener a rhythmic representation of the absolute unity to which he aspires:

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40 The liminal aspect of the haï-ku can be detected in R.H. Blyth’s remark that ‘in haiku, the two entirely different things that are joined in sameness are poetry and sensation, spirit and matter, the Creator and the Created’, The Genius of Hai-ku: Readings from R.H. Blyth on Poetry, Life and Zen ([London]: British Haiku Society, 1994), p.68. I have taken Blyth as the principal reference for the haï-ku, as it his writings that had such a profound influence on Jaccottet’s own work. In his writing, Jaccottet refers to the work of R.H. Blyth, one of the greatest Western experts on Japanese culture. When Jaccottet read Blyth’s four volumes of work in August 1960, he wrote that ‘ils contenaient, de tous les mots que j’ai jamais pu déchiffrer, les plus proches de la vérité’ (S 55).

41 Pinson, p.184.
Jaccottet’s celebration of ‘la poussière allumée’ displays an imaginative poetic framework that is similar to the Japanese masters, where the unique beauty of every object is to be appreciated.\(^42\) The clarity and purity that Jaccottet perceives in the hai-ku renders it ‘une poésie sans images’, in which there is an absolute fusion ‘de la vie quotidienne et du monde donné au premier venu’ (TS 129). The sub-titles to the *Airs* collection convey this balance between nature and the metaphysical experience, as Jaccottet moves from the ‘Fin d’hiver’, to ‘Oiseaux’, to ‘Fleurs et fruits’, to ‘Monde’, to ‘Vœux’. The contrast between the individual titles of Jaccottet’s work suggests the tension caused by the attempted alignment of these two worlds. Titles range from the most commonplace natural elements (‘Martinets’, ‘Fruits’, ‘Lune d’hiver, ‘Oiseaux’, ‘Arbres I, II & III’) to ‘J’ai de la peine à renoncer aux images’ and ‘Peu m’importe le commencement du monde’. Rather surprisingly, the more metaphysical themes do not fall under the sub-title ‘Vœux’, but are scattered throughout *Airs*, thus highlighting the continual tension between *le concret* and the metaphysical. For Jaccottet, this tension is one which is alleviated in the hai-ku poems, as each unit of seventeen syllables is a self-contained text (‘une vérité était saisie, et si légèrement saisie, en quelques mots’, TS p.126).

Undoubtedly, the attraction that the poet feels towards the hai-ku is partly due to the fact that hai-ku masters such as Bashō employed images of simple everyday objects in their work to portray beauty and simplicity, rather than as

\(^{42}\) ‘In poetry, as in life itself, distinctness, the individual thing, directness is all-important’, Blyth, p.63.
symbols of philosophical truths. Blyth comments on this aspect of Japanese poetry, when he remarks:

But where Bashô is at his greatest is where he seems most insignificant: the neck of a firefly, hailstones in the sun, the chirp of an insect, muddy melons, leaks, a dead leaf – these are all full of interest, meaning, value, that is, poetry, but not as symbols of the Infinite, not as types of Eternity, but in themselves. Their meaning is just as direct, as clear, as unmistakable, as complete and perfect, as devoid of reference to other things, as dipping the hand suddenly into boiling water.

As a form of writing, it seeks to be ‘devoid of reference to other things’, where each haï-ku is perceived as being an organic whole. Through the poem (‘dont la brièveté garantirait la perfection, dont la simplicité attesterait la perfection’), an appreciation of the natural world and of simple things is expressed in an attempt to highlight the extraordinary that exists in everyday objects. This aspect of the haï-ku is one to which Roud is also attracted:

Je me suis dit parfois qu’une seule poésie, étrangère à Athènes autant qu’à Jérusalem, a pu surmonter ces contradictions: celle du haï-ku, où l’on croirait vraiment que le moindre objet, le moindre moment de ce monde-ci sont habités par une lumière éternelle.

While Renard’s poetry explores ideas within the confines of a systematic theology, Jaccottet aspires to creating a poetry in which he avoids metaphysical reflection (‘peut-être faut-il aller vers une expression moins métaphysique’, S 92), in an attempt to simply state that which he sees. Similarly, Jaccottet aspires to write poetry that is ‘truthful’ (‘elle doit dire vrai, ou en tout cas, mentir moins

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44 Blyth, p.56.
45 Barthes puts this in the following terms: ‘Vous avez le droit, dit le haïku, d’être futile, court, ordinaire; enfermez ce que vous voyez, ce que vous sentez dans un mince horizon de mots’, L’Empire des signes, p.91.
46 Barthes, L’Empire des signes, p.91
47 Roud, pp.71-72.
48 This approach is one reminiscent of the hai-ku masters, a fact that Blyth highlights when he stresses that ‘it is necessary to state with some vehemence that haiku is not symbolic, that is, not a portrayal of natural phenomena with some meaning behind them’, p.71. Blyth goes on to state that ‘no haiku is a philosophical comment. Human life is not little: it is not to be compared with the infinite, whatever that is. Haiku are not hints; they suggest nothing whatever’, p.115.
que les dogmes, les doctrines', *TS* 306) and, to this end, he formulates the idea of language without images:

\[
\text{J’aurais voulu parler sans images, simplement pousser la porte...}
\]

(*LH* 49)

This desire for utter transparency is necessarily highly problematic, marking an essential dichotomy that pervades Jaccottet’s poetry as he can only ever express himself through the very images from which he seeks to be rid. Here, for example, the association between language without images and the opening of a threshold is made explicit, while also highlighting the fundamental paradox of Jaccottet’s claim (where the door acts precisely as an image of the poet’s aspiration). Thus the poet necessarily finds himself entrapped in a ‘bonheur désespéré des mots, défense désespérée de l’impossible’ (*S* 51) as he is unable to fully reconcile words and images. With the passing years, Jaccottet is forced to admit the futility of his aim to write poems ‘sans images’, for ultimately it is all the poet has to offer (‘Pour moi, il me semble qu’un poète ne peut donner ni commandements, ni solutions, ni réponses [...] Qu’il laisse donc simplement après lui quelques images’, *TS* 295-96).

The final chapter in this study will examine the poetry of Alain Bosquet, a poet whose interest in the signifying power of words stands in sharp contrast to Jaccottet’s quest for a language ‘sans images’, and indeed to the work of all the other poets studied thus far. For this reason, the application of threshold terminology will now take a new direction, as we focus on a poet whose liminal framework is conveyed much more through the characters in his poems than through imaginative representations of the threshold. The following chapter will explore the way in which Bosquet’s imaginative framework is revealed through the poet’s portrayal of *le je* and *l’autre* and through the narrative voices that he adopts in the texts.
'Le réel, l'irréel? Tous deux, je les renie'

This study of the threshold has involved a process of plotting the often difficult course that contemporary poets take as they negotiate concepts of identity and alterity and of examining the way in which this is expressed through various liminal representations. All the poets in this study have engaged in an exploration of a hypothetical autre beyond tangible reality and this has been reflected by those aspects of otherness that each one chooses to privilege in the texts. As this study has demonstrated, the threshold disseminates a plurality of meanings and it is this plurality that is particularly germane as we embark on a study of the poetry of Alain Bosquet, where the poet's liminal mentality through the idea of poetry as being an inexhausible point of passage.

Broadly speaking, Bosquet's poetry covers a wide range of general themes (such as death, love, morality and nature), all of which are underpinned by a sense of the absurd as the poet works from the premise that 'cette planète est ridicule' (SFS 145). In relation to the work of the four other poets explored in this study, Bosquet's poetry is particularly contemporary in its thematic content and the poems echo clearly a post-modernist mistrust of meta-narratives. In contrast to Renard's orthodox faith and Oster's irenic paradigm, Bosquet's poems present the reader with a world in which definitions and boundaries are no longer objective certainties and where various representations of the threshold are employed to both reflect and deflect reality. This chapter marks a new departure in the application of the theme of the threshold, for Bosquet's eclectic mix of styles and subject matter constitutes a very different type of poetry from that which has been
explored thus far in this study. Bosquet's poems present a world in which the banal and the surreal co-exist with no ostensible pattern or sense and yet an underlying awareness of the threshold pervades the texts. In this chapter, I will examine the poet's liminal mentality as revealed in the poetic form, *la réalité* and *le rêve, le je* and *l'autre* and the role of language as a point of passage.

Bosquet's immensely successful writing career spanned four decades and the sheer volume of his creative output in many literary *genres* (poetry, novels, *récits*, anthologies, plays, criticism) is in itself noteworthy. The appeal of Bosquet's work extends far beyond the confines of the Francophone world and it is testimony to his popularity as a writer that his poems have been translated into a large number of languages (including Arabic, Catalan, English, German, Greek, Norwegian, Russian, Serbo-Croat, Spanish, and Turkish). Undoubtedly, the marked broad appeal of Bosquet's poems over the years has been due in part to the accessibility of the texts' manner and subject matter. That is to say that, rather than trying to confuse or obscure, Bosquet's primary aim in his poems is to communicate clearly, in the belief that 'a poem has no need to question its tools - grammar or the blank page. The challenge for me is to be comprehensible and translatable' (*NM x*). Bosquet does not see his poetry as an attempt to offer explanations ("le poème n'est qu'un produit de beauté", *PED 802*) but instead he places a firm focus on a celebration of the complexity and absurdity of life ('mon existence est une vaste rigolade', *SFS 177*):

Je suis poète: est-ce la faute à pas-de-chance?
Et je suis prosateur: voudra-t-on m'excuser...
La vie est belle et tour à tour stupide: on danse,
on souffre, on réfléchit, on échange un baiser.

(*SP 12*)

Bosquet's witty, slightly irreverent tone combines universal themes such as life and death, love, nature and human relationships with many of the everyday preoccupations associated with late-twentieth-century life:

Un vieux préservatif sur la commode.

(*PED 713*)
Bien lavé? J'appartiens au savon Palmolive.
Bien rasé? J'appartiens à ma lame Gillette.
Bien nourri? J'appartiens à mon yoghurt Danone.
À l'heure? J'appartiens à ma montre Oméga.

(PED 430)

Au bureau, à cinq heures,
avec pour seul témoin ma machine à écrire

(PED 733)

References of this sort root the poems historically and culturally, rendering them very different from the atemporality of Oster’s pastoral scenes or Renard’s religious quest. The contemporary specificity of the subjects with which Bosquet deals is reiterated by the general ironic tone that extends throughout his poems:

Je ne connais qu'un seul remède: l'ironie,
avec, de temps en temps, un peu de cruauté.
Le réel, l'irréel? Tous deux, je les renie
en me moquant: je ne passerai pas l'été.

(SP 14)

The ironic tone of self-conscious parodic scepticism that runs throughout the texts illustrates the way in which Bosquet seeks continually to challenge notions of authorial integrity as he describes himself as ‘moi qui voudrais tout dire et ne rien exprimer’ (PED 627).

The Poetic Form

‘Je m'accroche à la rime’

On a stylistic level, one of the striking features of Bosquet’s work is his use of rhyme, for the poems are entrenched in the poetics of versification and Bosquet’s attraction to traditional rhyme schemes can be traced over the length of his poetic career. Throughout the years, the poet consistently employs regular rhyme schemes and vers libre and thus he creates a rich pattern of poetic styles, as he
draws on a variety of styles and techniques. While the image of the threshold rarely appears in Bosquet’s texts, there is evidence of his liminal mentality in the focus that he places on rhyme and in the way in which he plays with the horizontal and vertical lines of the texts themselves. Thus, while Bosquet’s poems do not contain a hierarchy of liminal representations, the concept of the threshold is equally pertinent to an exploration of verse techniques as it is to specific threshold images.

Bosquet’s attraction to traditional structuring forces in the texts is manifest through his frequent use of regular rhyme, rhythm and repetition and the force of these structures acts as a trunk on to which Bosquet grafts his poems:

Je m’accroche à la rime,
syllabe après syllabe [...]  
Je sais trop

le poids des servitudes,  
pour croire que mes vers suivent ma loi.  
J’obéis, sage et prude:  
l’instinct n’est plus à moi,

il dépend des folies  
qui m’imposent les noms, les adjectifs,  
dictature établie  
à mon insu.

(PED 497-98)

In this example, the regular rhyme scheme draws attention to the phonic quality of the poem, while the visual impact of the text mirrors its significance (as, for example, the words ‘syllabe après syllabe’ appear on the page one syllable to the left of the previous line). Parallels and echoes can be found throughout the texts and there is often a strong focus placed on the internal, as well as on end, rhyme. As the following example shows, the poet often constructs poetry using very definite patterns of repetition:

ô peintre de l’exil qui s’appelle existence
ô peintre du néant qui t’appelles jongleur
si nous dansions mais immobiles
si nous dansions mais graves

(PED 102)

The strict syllabic equality that Bosquet often imposes on his work marks another important stylistic aspect of his poetry as he frequently chooses to structure his poems around the alexandrine, hexasyllable or octosyllable:

l’univers rugira
j’invente une prière
pour te béatifier
l’univers barrika
j’invente
la cathédrale
pour tes cheveux

(PED 181)

Ce soir, la lune est carnivore,
Et se disputent les citrons.
Six morts déjà! Qui les déplore?
Au cœur, la néfle se corrompt.

(PED 117)

Early examples, such as Langue morte published in 1951, illustrate Bosquet’s adept use of the octosyllable line. This proficiency is demonstrated repeatedly by the poet:

Présente-moi cette inconnue
que tu deviens toutes les fois
que mon poème s’insinue
comme un insecte entre tes doigts,
change tes seins en hirondelles
et te partage avec les loups.
M’appartiens-tu, femme rebelle
qui prends la forme d’un caillou?

(PED 15)
Éloigne-toi, femme trop lasse
Pour habiller ce livre nu.
Une autre image te remplace,
qui revendique à l'inconnu
le droit de vivre de mensonges.
Tu me déplais! écrite en vers
ou effacée. Je te prolonge
comme on prolonge un jeu pervers
qui prend la forme d’une danse

(PED 18)

The alternating feminine and masculine rhyme in the *rime croisée* and the octosyllable line that are shown in the above examples are particularly representative of pre-mid-nineteenth-century poetry. However, it must be stressed that Bosquet’s adherence to traditional forms is counterbalanced with a playful disregard for those same rules, as the poet undermines the very structure he has imposed on the writing. This can be seen in the above examples, where the ‘s’ *muet* at the end of one line is not fully rhymed, for it is not followed by another ‘s’ *muet* (therefore ‘loups/caillou’ and ‘mensonges/prolonge’ do not comply with the classical form). In this way, Bosquet mixes the classical tradition with standard post-Romantic practices. Elsewhere in the poetry, Bosquet frequently chooses to employ the quatrain, extending it for anything up to twenty stanzas.2

At an earlier stage in Bosquet’s career, in *Maître Objet* the poet presents the reader with an array of quatrains under the sub-title of *Les Semblables*. In one sense, the poems in this particular collection are *semblables* in the sense that they have all been given grammatical terms as titles (*Au Neutre, Au Vocatif, Au Négatif, À L’Antérieur, Au Subjectif, Au Passif, Au Positif, Au Collectif*, PED 123-32). Thus, even through the very titles of the poems, Bosquet highlights the grammatical mechanisms within the texts. All of the poems are comprised of between five and thirteen stanzas and each of them is written as *alexandrins* with *rimes croisées*:

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2 For one such example, I refer the reader to Bosquet’s poem *Je ne suis un poète d’eau douce* (pp.148-50), in which the quatrain is sustained for nineteen stanzas.
Comptes à rendre à la matière! mille excuses
Pour ton chaos natal! tu voulais l’illustrer,
Lui donner un visage. Ô naïf, tu t’abuses
À comprendre pourquoi tu vis contre ton gré.

(PED 125)

Tout est parfait, tout est loyal, il marche aux cimes
De ses verbes heureux. Les siècles sont comblés
Par sa chanson de geste: à cette heure il s’estime,
Applaudit l’univers et veut se ressembler.

(PED 131)

While the content of the poem is often a great deal more contemporary, Bosquet’s technical ability and originality is frequently in evidence through the traditional forms that he adopts.³

‘Pourquoi, Monsieur, cet emploi de la rime?’

As Bosquet’s poetry develops over the years, this simultaneous adherence to and manipulation of classical poetic rules gives his poetry a jocose quality as he openly acknowledges his manipulation of traditional genres. One of the fundamental aspects of Bosquet’s liminal mentality is revealed through his playful attitude towards classical poetic structures. In particularly striking contrast to Oster’s remarkable poetic consistency, Bosquet alternates between a wide variety of rhyme schemes and subject matter. Paradoxically, while the poet often employs traditional forms, he does not attach any particular value to them, for he recognises the artifice in writing and proceeds to play with it:

Je vous ferai des épigrammes sur mesure:
toute une éternité en encre violette! [...] Je me moque de vous:
je vous ferai des épitaphes sur mesure.

(QT 92)

³ I use the term ‘originality’ in the context of the sonnet form as it is defined by David Scott, who comments that ‘true originality as a sonneteer [...] expresses itself less perhaps through flagrant divergence from the norm than through a kind of incontrovertible manifestation of its necessity’, David H. T. Scott, *Sonnet Theory and Practice in Nineteenth-century France: Sonnets on the*
This form of flippant humour betrays Bosquet's general sense of detachment from the texts, as he mocks his role as poet ('Je vous ferai des épigrammes', 'Je me moque de vous'). The use of direct address through use of the second person can be found throughout the poems, where, in contrast to Oster's and Jacottet's dialogue with nature, Bosquet's interaction with the world is of a very different kind:

Pourquoi, Monsieur, cet emploi de la rime,
qui fait de vous un poète attardé?
Dans chaque texte en vers elle supprime
un mystère, un frisson. Tout est fardé:

vos poèmes d’amour portent perruque
et leurs douleurs n’ont rien de naturel.
On s’y regarde à peine, on s’y reluque:
l’artifice y remplace le réel.

(PED 688)

There is a clear irony here in the fact that, within the context of a traditional regular ten-syllable line and *rime croisée*, Bosquet is giving a voice to the criticism that his poetic style is in some way artificial and must be modernised. Accusing himself of parody (through the persona that he himself is parodying), Bosquet responds to these claims in the following poem in the collection:

Osera-t-on moderniser la rose?
Osera-t-on éconduire l’azur? [...]  
S’il reste pur,

chaque poème accepte le caprice,
la raison, l’irraison et la fureur.

(PED 688)

In Bosquet’s poems, this capricious tone is sustained as the poet is at pains to avoid philosophising, claiming that ‘rien n’est plus triste/qu’un manuscrit qui se voudrait profond’ (PED 689). In order to avoid writing poetry that is too ‘profond’, Bosquet engages in a process of perpetual creation and deconstruction as he continually sets up poetic structures that he then subverts. One such

example of this process can be found in *Sonnets pour une fin de siècle*, in which the poet employs what seems to be a traditional sonnet and yet he omits the rhyme, thus undermining the apparently traditional form. In this collection, the poems are all constructed with a regular rhythm within each line and so a familiar rhythmic pattern is established. However, this pattern is disrupted immediately by the absence of rhyme at the end of each line and thus a tension is created between the interior of the lines and their outlying boundaries. This tension is made doubly clear by the fact that it is made manifest in the poems both orally and as they are represented on the page. Repeatedly in the texts, one finds a similar process at work, where Bosquet emphasises the potential dissonance between rhythm and rhyme. This playful challenging and dismantling of perceived norms can be found on every level in Bosquet’s poetry, as he repeatedly subverts the semantic and stylistic parameters within which he seems to be working:

Poète mort car il aimait ce monde.
Poète mort de critiquer ce monde.
Poète mort pour la patrie.
Poète mort pour la patrie des autres.
Poète mort d’amour.
Poète mort par le défaut d’amour. [...] Poète mort comme tombent les arbres.
Poète mort pour que l’indifférence ne soit pas dérangée.
– Taisez-vous, taisez-vous:
ici, jamais aucun poète n’est mort.

(PED 752-53)

This excerpt is taken from a poem in which the first twenty-five lines begin with the words ‘Poète mort’ and thus a pattern of boundaries and structures is well established in the poem. Bosquet then disrupts this pattern with a line that both orally and physically differs completely from all that has preceded it. The dissonance that this rupture causes is compounded by the irony of the line (‘ne soit pas dérangée’). Once Bosquet has subverted the pattern that he had originally set in place, the lines of verse that follow no longer begin with the familiar ‘Poète mort’. Instead, they undermine and contradict both the rhythm and sense of the
previous lines (‘ici, jamais aucun poète/n’est mort’), an aspect of the poetry that is emphasised by the use of negative qualifiers (‘jamais’, ‘aucun’ and ‘ne’).

Equally, the poet sometimes stresses the apparent disparity between a specific poetic form and its content where, for example, a traditional form is employed to describe a contemporary context:

Vers les trois heures du matin, quand le barman
crache un poumon dans son whiskey et que, lassée
de s’offrir aux clients de l’hôtel, la putain
dévisse tout à coup son visage en carton

pour le jeter sur le tapis, ai-je le choix
entre l’ivresse et le sommeil? Je puis monter
au 308, lire un journal de l’avant-veille
ou boire avec dégoût une lune trop chaude.

(PED 448)

Here, the traditional form stands in sharp contrast to the subject matter and to the referents (‘le barman’, ‘la putain’), illustrating Bosquet’s poetic style where juxtaposition and dissonance are key elements. This feature of Bosquet’s poetry is also to be found in the way in which he employs unusual rhymes:

Ranimer les néants. Punir les roses.
Été perdu. Vendre le désarroi
Comme des fruits blessés. Myxomatose
Dans les cerveaux. Enfer numéro trois.

(PED 169)

Je passe inaperçu, météore bavard.
Tout est nul; mon esprit de nouveau se maquille.
Tout est perdu puisque les roses parlent d’art.
L’aurore est ironique et me tend des béquilles.

(PED 89)
J'éprouve une douceur sous ma souffrance:
est-ce un lilas qui veut me caresser ?
Shylock est employé au Gaz de France.
Au paradis, j’ai mon laissez-passer

car je suis avec Dieu dans les affaires:
il me donne 1 % sur l’au-delà.
Épilepsie. La dent qu’on doit extraire.
Ô Jeanne d’Arc, bois ton coca-cola!

(PED 536)

In the above examples, the regular rhythm and rhyming patterns are disrupted by
the semantic content of the poem, as Bosquet’s apparently arbitrary rhyme
incorporates many contemporary signs (‘coca-cola’, ‘Gaz de France’) with a
regular rhyme scheme (‘roses’/ ‘Myxomatose’, ’se maquille’/ ‘béquilles’, ‘l’au-
delà’/ ‘coca-cola’). In this way, the poet sets up a dichotomy between form and
content and creates a tension within the texts’ continual pattern of repetition and
reconstruction. Throughout the texts, there is an unusual alliance of form and
style and yet the poet’s challenge to established norms does not take the form of a
complete rejection of traditional form and rhyme. Rather, he employs traditional
poetic rules as structuring forces to give shape to the texts. Bosquet also exhibits a
great creative freedom in the way in which he applies these rules and, in this way,
he displays his ability and desire to cross the stylistic thresholds that exist
between various poetic forms and structures.

‘Entre le rêve et la réalité’

‘Je songeais au réel, je songeais à la fable’

Bosquet’s poems offer a strikingly wide range of images and impressions as the
poet flits from one subject to another throughout the texts. Bosquet also sees the
text as a liminal space in terms of relationships, for it is portrayed as a place into
which the reader is invited to enter:
In contrast to Réda’s interest in modern urban life, Renard’s preoccupation with spiritual matters and Jaccottet’s strong focus on the natural world, Bosquet’s poems do not privilege the everyday or the metaphysical. Rather, they depict a strange, fantastic Wonderland in which truth and fiction are absolutely intertwined. Bosquet continually seeks to bridge the gap ‘entre le rêve et la réalité’ and it is only by entering ‘à l’intérieur’ of the poetry that the reader may understand the internal logic of the texts. For Bosquet, the poem acts as a threshold between the individual and l’autre, while also being the point of passage between le rêve and la réalité, so that his poetry has continually hovered on the threshold that divides truth and fiction. Yet despite the fantastic scenarios sometimes described in the texts, Bosquet consistently uses commonplace objects and contemporary references throughout, in an attempt to write poems that are more readily accessible to his readership. This approach to poetry is outlined in the introduction to *Sonnets pour une fin de siècle*, where Bosquet expresses his frustration with what he perceives as being the disparity between contemporary poetry and contemporary existence:

Le réel a disparu depuis trente ans de notre poésie. [...] Je ne vois dans aucun poème nos vérités terrorisantes, ou les mythes qui nous font vivre; personne ne les change en objets d’art. Notre poésie ne sait pas ce qu’est un P.-D.G., un magnat du pétrole, un événement télévisé, un sex-shop, une militante féministe, un obsédé entre deux sodomies, un tranquillisant bleu pâle, une assurance sur la sottise, un congé impayé, un placard publicitaire, une nymphomane, une génération inarticulée.

(BFS 7)

Bosquet wishes to create poetry in which ‘nos vérités terrorisantes’ and ‘les mythes’ co-habit, while also acknowledging the multifaceted nature of his own preoccupations:

Je vous invite à l’intérieur de mon poème.
Ne craignez rien; [...]
ici entre le rêve et la réalité,
on ne fait pas de différence;
tout est permis,
même de ne plus savoir,
de ne rien désirer.

(PED 305-06)
Ce poids du siècle, que je partage avec le premier venu, j’aimerais l’intégrer à nos préoccupations millénaires: émerveillement, amour des étoiles, désir d’être ailleurs, capture d’un idéal, granit de l’angoisse. [...] Je suis tour à tour romantique et féroce, soucieux de Dieu et de la sécurité sociale.

(PED 397)

His poetry marks an extension of these various concerns and appears to be a conscious process of integrating the banal and the extraordinary, in the belief that:

_Tout est permis à l’imaginaire, qui ne s’embarrasse pas de valeurs. J’invente donc une origine du monde, peuplé d’objets; pour ne point exclure l’absurde, je m’impose l’idée que si certains sont naturels comme le citron, la cascade, l’oiseau-mouche, d’autres précèdent la nécessité dont ils naîtront._

(PED 113)

While Réda focuses on day-to-day reality and Oster cocoons himself in an edenic _au-delà_, Bosquet marries the details of everyday existence with outlandish fiction within his poetic construct and envisages an absolute fusion of the banal and the extraordinary. Bosquet’s liminal mentality is made apparent in this poetic vision, for he uses the poem as a threshold into a space where defining boundaries between _le rêve_ and _la réalité_ can be challenged. Bosquet creates poetry in which he allows himself the freedom to explore a wide imaginative sphere, where everyday life is unrestricted by the usual forces of logic and nature. The poetry reflects Bosquet’s conviction that ‘being is difficult; imagining is fruitful’, as he responds to the complexities of life by ‘imagining a different sort of man, unknown gods, likely and unlikely links’ (_NM_ x). These ‘likely and unlikely links’ often possess a surreal quality, as Bosquet is continually challenging the reader’s expectations by situating ordinary objects in extraordinary contexts:

_L’ enfant attrape un papillon: cela se mange._
_Et le requin, l’enfant: cela se mange aussi._
_Et Dieu attrape le requin, pour le manger_

(SFS 18)

_La lune vagabonde a brisé sa mâchoire._

(SFS 73)
Je crois que ma casquette a des goûts littéraires

(PED 497)

As the above examples illustrate, Bosquet’s poems contribute towards the creation of ‘un univers de sa façon’, in which the poet claims that ‘je songeais au réel, je songeais à la fable’ (PED 456). In this way, Bosquet challenges distinctions between le réel and le rêve and he doggedly resists imaginative constraints, claiming instead that le réel is ‘notre unique jouet’ (PDD 204):^5

Le tigre dit: «Je lui donne mes yeux.»
Le tournesol: «Qu’il puisse voyager
comme voyagent mes pétales,
de l’orient à l’occident.»

(LDG 88)

Et la neige a si peur
d’imaginer qu’elle serait la neige!
Elle devient un vieux mouchoir,
et le mouchoir ne pense pas,
et le mouchoir n’a pas besoin de s’affirmer.

(LDG 29)

Je téléphone à Dieu
pour qu’il me prête un peu de foi.

(PED 638)

Here we see again the way in which the texts present a poetic Wonderland where commonplace objects and events take an absurd twist. It must be stressed that Bosquet’s poems do display many of the characteristics associated with a predominantly horizontal imagination for, in general, the poet places a deliberate focus on tangible objects rather than on a metaphysical autre. Nevertheless, the way in which Bosquet juxtaposes the commonplace and the extraordinary does

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^5 Hubert Juin comments that ‘ce qui requiert en premier lieu dans les ouvrages de ce poète, c’est le refus donné aux seules limites terrestres. [...] Tout s’illimité. Une femme contient les femmes. Le Il est nombreux. Le Je est pluriel. Le Vous et le Nous s’embrasent de peuplades à l’infini’, ‘Une lecture’, in Alain Bosquet, pp.9-17 (p.10).

^6 As a result, the reader undergoes an experience akin to Alice’s, whereby ‘so many out-of-the-way things had happened lately, that Alice had begun to think that very few things indeed were really impossible’, Lewis Carroll, Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland and Through the Looking-Glass (Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Editions, 1993), p.21.
seem to offer the poet a threshold into *le vertical*, as he states that ‘j’habite l’improbable; en lui tout est sacré’ (*QT* 142).

‘C’est pour dire tout cela [...] pas besoin de comprendre’

In the poetry examined thus far, a liminal thematic study has revealed some underlying tension in the poets’ imagination, whether that be in Réda’s representations of the wall image, Renard’s uncertainty when confronted with *l’abîme* or Jaccottet’s quest to use language ‘sans images’. Even in the case of Oster, the irenic poetic construct presented in the texts marks a wilful denial of any problematic within the poems and yet, paradoxically, there is a clear disparity between this isolated bucolic paradise and the poet’s frustration as he tries to interact with nature. In the case of Bosquet, it could be argued that the poet is tightly controlling the Wonderland he has constructed, in order that everything in this imaginary world may be contained and that no threatening or unknown element may intrude. Thus, Bosquet’s foray into the surreal does not mean that he abandons himself utterly in a realm without rules. While it is true that the laws of nature and of logic are, at times, suspended in the texts, that is not to say that all controlling forces have been completely disregarded.

An open acknowledgement of paradox and conflict is often expressed in Bosquet’s poetry through the juxtaposition and contradictory elements that run through the texts. Yet these are not presented as being a source of concern for the poet in any way. For the other poets in this study, the threshold reveals itself as a fearful image as well as an enticing one and even Oster’s attempt to exclude almost all representations of the threshold in his work suggests its problematic nature as an image. However, in Bosquet’s poems, the poet seems to combine an acknowledgement of the threshold’s ambiguity with complete acceptance, so that incongruity and contradiction appear to be the hallmarks of his liminal mentality. This stance can be seen on a number of levels in Bosquet’s work, where presupposed boundaries are challenged through the calling into question of grand narratives and the blurring of the lines between truth and fiction, as Bosquet states that ‘entre mes tempes/Tout est mensonge et simulacre’ (*QT* 174). This assertion acts as a form of self-critique whereby the poet appears to be denying any ultimate
responsibility for his work. This attitude is manifested in other ways in the texts, as Bosquet denies himself any privileged voice or position in his poetic creation, as can be seen in the poem ‘La Vérité’:

Le réel gagne l’ombre  
qui lui dira si le réel est acceptable. [...]  
Comme une éponge, la parole  
efface les sordides vérités  
pour devenir la vérité prise à son piège.  

(LDG 84-85)

In contrast to Renard’s portrayal of the poet as a one who proclaims ultimate truth, Bosquet’s perception of language is perhaps somewhat less visionary (‘la parole/efface les sordides vérités/pour devenir la vérité prise à son piège’). Throughout the texts, Bosquet openly states contradictions and doubts rather than trying to resolve them and there is a definite trend of acceptance rather than resolution. The poet’s recognition of the ambiguities and complexities of life is often expressed in the poems through the use of juxtaposition:

Pour devenir poète, il faut d’abord aimer  
– d’un amour cultivé mais parfois très débile –  
la pierre et le poulain, le jour et le brouillard,  

la lune et l’infini, la foule et le silence,  
puis, comme ici, le dire avec simplicité,  
en admettant que chaque mot est un mensonge.  

(PED 406)

Here, the poet sets up a series of contrasts that are ordered in the style of oppositional pairs (‘pierre’/‘poulain’, ‘jour’/‘brouillard’, ‘lune’/‘infini’, ‘foule’/‘silence’) and yet the links between the various elements are not always clear. This pattern of non-oppositional contrasts demonstrates the way in which the different factors are inter-related and yet their relationships cannot necessarily be defined or logically explained.

Bosquet’s liminal mentality prompts him to construct a poetic realm in which any distinction between le reel and le rêve is blurred. In this respect, the poems work within their own self-referential framework, in which the poet
portrays an improbable world where fancy and fable are privileged over ‘la prose, exacte et raide/comme la guillotine’:

Le réel a mangé notre chimère
car tout le temps que nous dialoguons,
le monde sans honneur nous dépossède
de notre fable et de notre chanson.

(PED 681)

Bosquet openly states his weariness with metaphysical matters and, in this respect, his work differs greatly from the poetry of Renard (and to a lesser degree the poetry of Oster). Instead, similar to the haïku philosophy conveyed in Jaccottet’s poems, Bosquet expresses a desire to use poetry as a means of representing life rather than interpreting it:

Le poème du poète,
c’est pour dire tout cela
et mille et mille et mille autres choses:
pas besoin de comprendre.

(PED 303)

**Le je and l’autre**

‘Pourquoi ne pas peupler de personnages/notre poème?’

One of the most striking differences between Bosquet and the other poets in this study is the fact that Réda, Renard, Oster and Jaccottet make little or no reference to people in their work (with the exception of le je and le tu form). In marked contrast, Bosquet populates his work with a vast range of diverse characters such as businessmen, gods, millionaires, diplomats, and lovers, reasoning ‘pourquoi ne pas peupler de personnages/notre poème: ils le rendraient vivant?’ (PED 696). Indeed, Bosquet does not simply limit the characters depicted in his poetry to humans, for he often chooses to personify objects and animals in the texts. In this
way, the poet can contribute to the Wonderland that his poems describe, where the natural order of things has been displaced:

Objets,
devenez animaux!
Je l’exige, animaux,
devenez hommes

(PED 94)

The poetic world established by Bosquet is governed by new laws beyond the boundaries of realism, where the defining lines between humans, animals and objects are blurred (‘J’accepte le tabouret, la cravache, le téléphone, êtres indépendants, choses très libres’, PED 113):

La guêpe ordonne:
«Écris-moi une Bible;
je veux être une guêpe inspirée.»

(PED 622)

Je lis sur mon journal:
des hooligans ont attaché une comète
à la crinière des pouliches.
Je lis sur mon journal:
{l’île adultère a demandé pardon
à l’océan, son vieux mari paralysé.

(QT 153)

Quelquefois dans la nuit, le téléphone a peur
et se met à parler aux punaises qui montent
sur les grands lits tout noirs où les amants sordides
font des taches d’amour.

(PED 406)

‘Je ne supporte pas d’être moi: je m’invente!’

Having crossed the threshold into a new imaginative space, the reader discovers that within this space, all definitions and boundaries are continually being undermined. Perhaps most fundamentally, Bosquet deconstructs the traditionally unified identity of the first person, by assuming a myriad of personae:
J’ai dit «girafe»:
je dois devenir cette bête

Je suis un arbre. Croyez-moi: voici mes feuilles; [...] 
Je suis un aigle. Croyez-moi: voici mes plumes. [...] 

Je suis le porte-plume et le bas-ventre,
ne me demandez pas de qui! la glu,
le parapluie, le cercle sans le centre,
le vieux fourgon, le livre le moins lu.

Throughout the texts, there are innumerable examples of the poet assuming another persona and insisting on his ceaselessly changing identity. As the above examples illustrate, at times this insistence is done so with some vehemence (with phrases such as ‘je dois’, ‘Croyez-moi’, ‘ne me demandez pas de qui!’). This process of identification allows a plurality of voices to emerge, with the result that the identity of the narrative je is constantly shifting. Le je who speaks is no longer a fully integrated whole, but a subject pronoun that moulds and grafts itself into any number of other forms.  

Whereas the other poets in this study have maintained a relatively consistent portrayal of le je, Bosquet speaks through a vast array of personae and objects. This ranges from the figure of the deity depicted in ‘Le Dieu-Treize’ (LDG 115) to the voice of a grain of sand represented in ‘Légende du grain de sable’ (LDG 80) and in each case, the poet adopts and adapts the personality of le je according to its subject. Therefore, through the medium of poetic discourse, Bosquet discovers a realm in which subject and object, dream and reality are fused and redefined and where he engages in an intimate process of identification with the animals and objects that surround him:

7 Juin comments that ‘il est manifeste que son Je ne veut du tout se confondre avec le Je’, Alain Bosquet, p.12.
8 Robert Lohro remarks that ‘cette identification est poussée si loin qu’il s’établit entre la nature de l’homme (sa nuque, son ventre, ses vertèbres, son souffle…) et l’univers d’insolites échanges et qu’on ne distingue plus ce qui est de l’essence de l’homme de ce qui est du monde’, ‘Alain Bosquet’, in Alain Bosquet, pp.205-210 (p.207).
Je ne vois pas pourquoi j’aurais plus d’importance
que ce demi-citron
qui pourrit dans mes doigts. [...] 

Je suis brisé; je m’assimile à quelque assiette,
pour me tenir plus coi.

(PED 496-97)

J’habite à l’intérieur d’un pain de campagne:

nous moisissons ensemble. Cela lui apprendra à se croire
comestible!

(VN 34)

Bosquet not only evokes another world through his poetry, he also situates
himself in the very centre of his creation and grants himself the power to assume
the identity of anything he may choose with these ‘adjectifs amicaux/comme des
clowns dans une gare./Adjectifs soupçonneux/comme des comédiens’ (PD 153).

The poet thus becomes commentator on and interpreter of this poetic realm:

J’explique
les arbres qui galopent.
J’explique
l’océan qui se lèche les blessures. [...] 
J’explique
le feu qui se croit glace; et la glace, le feu.

(PED 307)

Throughout the texts, le je flits from subject matter to subject matter, adapting
and merging with the images portrayed. Bosquet’s use of this multi-faceted je
suggests the poet’s desire to fully integrate himself into those things which
surround him, using the poem as a point of passage into the characters, animals
and objects that fill his work. There is a wilful passing over differences, with the
result that the self becomes so variegated that l’autrui becomes fully accessible
and imaginable using the subject as a springboard to otherness. Thus Bosquet’s liminal mentality is revealed as involving a process ‘de passer outre, de vouloir à
tout prix annuler cette différence, se confondre avec l’arbre, l’oiseau, la pierre’, Roger Vrigny in a
press article from 12 August 1974 on Notes pour un pluriel, Alain Bosquet, p.193.
Bosquet resolutely avoids philosophical introspection in his poems and instead he uses them to play with the concept of identity by trying to deconstruct the presupposed barriers that delineate the subject and the other. In contrast to the Osterian focus on being at one with the natural world and on losing oneself in *la Source*, Bosquet's poems contain no suggestion that an attempt to completely identify with objects in the world around will lead to revelation or self-discovery. Indeed, it would seem that Bosquet's representation of the variegated self sometimes offers nothing but disenchantment ('Je vagabonde entre moi-même et moi/sans réussir à me trouver', PED p.287). For the poet, the process of creating poetry is intrinsically linked with thresholds and barriers as Bosquet plays with the concept of otherness as an aesthetic tool:

> Je publie des poèmes depuis quarante ans. Ils correspondent à un besoin que, loin des métaphysiques, je dois qualifier de corporel. Les sens, les nerfs et l’illusion de me libérer de ma peau y participent [...] On aime s’investir d’un pouvoir extérieur à soi.

*(JAV 7)*

By playing out a multitude of selves through the writing, Bosquet uses language as a point of passage to an infinite number of personae and thus it is a threshold to a continual process of renewal:

> [...] Puis je rentre au poème, où c’est moi qui m’attends, affable, ironique, verbal; je m’aime de vivre hors de mon temps.

*(JAV 32)*

There is an underlying preoccupation with alterity throughout the poems, as Bosquet assumes different personae through a process of intimate identification with a wide variety of creatures and objects. In this way he can find himself ‘au seuil d’un univers meilleur’ (*JAV* 17) in which there is a continual blurring of the boundaries between *le je* and *l’autre*, as self-representation becomes increasingly blurred with the language of representation:
Table, dis-tu? [...]  
Pour la comprendre,  
je vis en table,  
je suis la table.  
O esclavage de l’objet  
ressuscité dans l’homme!  

(QT 97)

The impulse that drives Bosquet to lay claim to these myriad identities also entails that the poet convince the reader of the validity of the fictitious construct that he sets up in the poems. That is to say, he seeks to draw the reader over the threshold that divides la réalité and le rêve in order that this poetic Wonderland is sustained:

Massacre ou mascarade, allons nous expliquer!  
Je ne supporte pas d’être moi: je m’invente!  

(QT 110)

He draws the reader into the poem by implying that the reader is also involved (as illustrated here by the use of the first person plural pronoun ‘nous’). In this way, the reader is encouraged to cross over the point of passage between reality and Bosquet’s poetry. The link in Bosquet’s imaginative framework between the violent connotations of ‘Massacre’ and the suggested deception of ‘mascarade’ is implied by the striking visual and oral similarities of the two signifiants. However, despite this association between masquerading one's identity and annihilating it, Bosquet appears to be unimpassioned about the whole notion of identity. Indeed, his poetry suggests that he regards deception and deceit as a fact of life (‘Je masque,/Tu masques, nous masquons. Race de magiciens’, PED 152):

Mon œuvre d’art  
est de mettre le masque  
sur mon esprit qui connaît le déclin.  
J’oppose à l’horreur d’être un honneur de paraître.  

(JAV 62)

For Bosquet, the poem is a means whereby he can ‘mettre le masque/sur mon esprit’, and he expresses a clear preference for artifice over reality. This
privileging of appearances is highlighted by the visual and oral similarity between ‘horreur’ and ‘honneur’ and by the fact that ‘paraître’ is emphasised syntactically (as it is this verb that resounds at the end of the line).

‘Se connaître est enfer/S’imaginer est paradis’

The poet’s fascination with artifice is closely linked to his dismissal of an objective authorial voice, a view that is communicated in the poems through the multi-voiced world that he has created. On reading Bosquet’s work, one becomes increasingly aware of the ludic nature of the poetry and of the games that the poet plays with himself and his readership. As Bosquet juggles the many personae in his poetry, to a large extent he succeeds in eluding introspection on any profound level by presenting a world of images in which ‘réfléchir n’est pas résoudre mais dissoudre’ (NV 15). Indeed, the poet openly states his suspicion of any search for identity, as he equates it with a potentially lethal disease (‘L’identité, cancer’, LDG 142). Rather than assuming a single identity, Bosquet wishes to render himself open to a plurality of voices:

Il faut rester possible.
Il faut rester pour soi un autre.
Se comprendre, ô prison!
Se trouver meurtre.
Se connaître est enfer.
S’imaginer est paradis.

(LDG 142)

Here, the poet makes explicit his lack of interest in self-analysis (equating it with prison and with hell) and his preference for the imagination. One of the consequences of the process whereby ‘il faut rester pour soi un autre’ is that le je is no longer encapsulated in an irrefutably integrated whole (‘Entre moi et moi, quel est cet individu qui tantôt nous réconcilie?’, VN 76). Instead, every poem offers new voices and new ways to reinvent the self in a poetic world where ‘partout l’indéfini/ décide enfin de se créer’ (LDG 33).

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10 Juin states that ‘le Je est lieu de questionnement [...] l’invention de Je, c’est l’invention de Tu, c’est l’invention du poème de Je par le Tu silencieux – qui est dehors. C’est le dehors qui invente le dedans’, Alain Bosquet, p.15.
Moi face à moi, nous devenons ces grands rivaux
Qu'à jamais la raison irraisonnée sépare.

Chaque jour je m'obstine à me redéfinir
Et je réécris le monde. Je m'oppose
Aux moindres vérités! Nous sommes leurs martyrs.
La chose n'est jamais qu'un prénom de la chose.

(Quimper 112)

Continually questioning the notion of the unified subject ('Entre moi et moi,
quel est cet individu qui tantôt nous brouille et tantôt nous réconcilie?', VN 76),
Bosquet highlights the power that language has to cross the threshold between le réel and l'irréel:

Tu recomposes le réel
avec un cheval triste,
un navire qui va jusqu'aux dimanches [...]  
Tu recomposes l'irréel:
le pain se dit que vivre est douloureux,
les mots se nourrissent de sang [...]  
Va-t'en:
qu'irréel et réel
pendant un siècle s'entre-tuent...

(Poisson 199)

Bosquet’s refusal of the notion of any absolute truth ('Je m'oppose aux moindres vérités') leads him to use poetry as a means of representing a world in which relativism and uncertainty reign and where ‘le feu n’est pas universel,/ni saisissable cette bouche./L’azur a ses mensonges’ (LDG 55). The texts are replete with contradictions and uncertainties and, throughout the poems, one can detect a tone that wavers between willing compliance and resignation, as Bosquet accepts a perpetual shifting state of being (‘Il faut être propice./Il faut être complice’, LDG 55). Rather than using the poetry as a threshold to a deeper understanding of the self or of truth (as is the case in the poetry of Renard and Oster), Bosquet uses it as a point of passage into a kaleidoscope of personalities:
The typeface and punctuation in the final line draw the reader's attention to Bosquet's summary of existence and yet the reader is left unsure as to the nature of this pronouncement. As is the case with so much of Bosquet's poetry, the highly ambiguous nature of the texts means that they reveal almost nothing about the poet's personal opinions. Here, the phrase 'L'identité, quelle menace!' hovers between being a flippant, humorous remark and a serious pronouncement on existence. This indeterminacy pervades Bosquet's poetry, rendering the texts themselves a type of threshold between the ludic and the gravely serious. Moreover, the poet appears to delight in generating this ambiguity, for he uses it as a type of veil behind which he may shield his own identity and opinions. The above poem forms part of the collection 'Effacez-moi ce visage', a title that signals the poet's desire for a certain type of anonymity. This collection illustrates precisely how Bosquet's quest for anonymity involves a complicated network of various personae, as can be seen in the above example, where le je refers to 'moi', 'l'autre', 'personne', 'un nouveau-né'. The poet questions the concept of authenticity, describing it in terms of conjecture ('devenir') and he chooses to embrace both 'de faux et de copies', viewing them as equally valid components of what he terms 'mon existence'. More so than any of the other poetry explored in this study, Bosquet's poems deconstruct both le je as a mythical signifier and the concept of authorial objectivity, as the poet represents himself as nothing more than a bewildering collection of various voices. Bosquet's approach to literature is closely aligned with his liminal mentality, for it is through poetry that he seeks to enter the gap between le je who enunciates and le je who is enunciated. Whereas,
for the most part, the other poets in this study have chosen to elide this gap, Bosquet stresses it again and again, as *le je* is perpetually changing. The texts hover on the threshold space between these two representations of *le je*, as Bosquet shies away from committing to any one consistent manifestation of the self (‘L’identité me fait peur’, *SFS* 188), changing his identity to adapt to his social setting:

*Quand vous m’inviterez à vivre parmi vous
une autre fois, j’éviterai la forme humaine.
Agneau parfait, pivoine pure, insecte fou,
tel sera mon destin; ou quelque étoile naine.*

(*SP* 32)

Bosquet’s representations of multiple subjects prove particularly difficult to delineate, for the *le je* continually eludes its defining boundaries (‘Je dis, je dis, mais je ne suis personne’, *QT* 15), to the point where it even makes claims of non-identity:

*Je suis l’absence,
La vacuité*

(*QT* 187):

*Je suis l’ombre et le vent; je suis la chiffre
et ne reconnais pas l’identité.*

(*JAV* 161)

Bosquet’s preoccupation with the negotiation of identities indicates the centrality of this theme in his work, as the texts continually redefine the relationship between *le je* and *l’autrui*, and yet the poet is perpetually caught in an entirely self-reflexive poetic universe. This transcendence of Cartesian logic in which *le je* is an infinitely variable term roots Bosquet’s poetry very much in a late-twentieth century context, and in *La Quête*, Bosquet portrays the search for identity as an entirely futile one:
Je suis parti à la recherche de moi-même.
J’ai quitté ma maison, ma femme et mes trois fils. [...] 
J’ai inventé des mots
pour me sentir moins seul. [...] 
J’ai mal vieilli: je ne me suis jamais trouvé.

(PED 458-59)

Here, the character expressed by le je leaves both his physical and emotional security (conveyed in the form of a house and family) ‘à la recherche de moi-même’. Despite his many adventures and victories (‘J’ai fondé des royaumes/J’ai négocié l’achat de mille républiques’), ultimately his search proves to be in vain (‘J’ai mal vieilli: je ne me suis jamais trouvé’). Nonetheless, it is important to note that words play an important role in the subject’s search for meaning for, while they may not provide answers, they do offer a measure of solace (‘J’ai inventé des mots/pour me sentir moins seul’). Elsewhere in the poems, while Bosquet makes no claims to present an exclusive truth through his writing, there is the suggestion that he does acknowledge a positive link between identity and poetry:

Suis-je l’individu que parfois je rencontre
au bout de mon poème et qui se sauve avant
le premier geste, par pudeur, ou par refus
de s’attendrir?

(SFS 184)

Here, the text openly questions the notion of identity by drawing attention to the multi-faceted je and the plurality of the first person pronoun, so that the poem itself allows dialogue between self and self.

Language as a Threshold

‘Chez moi dans la peau d’un poème’

While Bosquet perceives the notion of identity as being highly problematic, the written word is seen as being able to provide some resolution of the question of
identity (‘l’écriture m’apporte/de mot en mot l’identité/de mon être introuvable’, 
*SFS* 184). The writing act is not a means of finding or expressing ultimate truth, 
but it does set up an interdependent relationship between the poet, word and 
world that is vital to Bosquet (‘I take poetry very seriously. It justifies me’, *NM* ix). This interdependency is a crucial factor in the poet’s expression of his liminal 
mentality and in his exploration of l’autre through language:

La pierre pense:
«Pour être pierre 
j’ai besoin d’un langage, 
et mon langage aura besoin d’un dieu 
pour l’imposer à cette pierre que je suis 
et que je ne suis pas encore.»

(*LDG* 28)

In two respects, language acts as a threshold to the world beyond, for it offers 
both a means of conceiving l’autre and then of interacting with it (‘j’ai besoin 
d’un langage./et mon langage aura besoin d’un dieu’). Moreover, for the poet who 
uses language as the tools of his trade, it provides both a function and a product, 
and therefore contributes to forming the poet’s identity and understanding of self:

Après toi, mon poème, 
il n’y aura plus rien: pas de poète, 
 pas de langage.

(*JAV* 187)

Bosquet does not purport to use language as a means of expressing 
Reality, but he does use it to establish a reality in which the poet can insert 
himself and adopt any given persona. It is therefore possible for Bosquet to 
construct a meaning through the poetry, rather than trying to find meaning within 
the poetry. That is to say that the texts set up an alternative reality into which 
Bosquet may enter:
Je retourne à ma page, où se joue le concert
de mes syllabes folles.
   Il vibre, l'univers
   à se sentir enfin compris de mes paroles.

(JAV 113)

Je m'enfonce chez moi dans la peau d'un poème
où je me tiens au chaud,
et j'interdis au monde
d'y pénétrer.

(PED 649)

Creating his own univers, the poet wilfully cocoons himself within the written word, and the imagery used in the second example illustrates his perception of the poem's protective environment ('la peau', 'chaud'). However, the soft nasal sounds in the first line ('en', 'on', 'an', 'un') gradually give way to harsher consonants ('-ter', '-dis', 'd'y', '-trer'), as highlighted by the contrast between the gentle 'peau d'un poème' and the urgency of 'pénétrer'. This reflects the tension between the world of the text and the world outside, as the latter threatens to destabilise the security of Bosquet's Wonderland.

'J'entre en moi, me retourne et me vois au-dehors'

Within the texts, Bosquet acknowledges that a representation of the multiple je can bring with it its own problems ('En moi, c'est la guerre civile', QT 151). In contrast to Oster's edenic construct that denies any knowledge of a world outside the poem, a sense of conflict can be detected in Bosquet's work because of the poet's need to create a world that is manifestly distinguishable from reality:

Qui me dira ce qu'est ce besoin de rêver
d'un royaume inconnu où je n'ai pas ma place?
Qui me dira s'il me faudra un jour braver
un temps hors de mon temps, un impalpable espace?

(SP 36)

There are strong Biblical overtones in Bosquet's search for 'un royaume inconnu' and yet his poetry is a far cry from Renard's strident religious conviction. As a
result, Bosquet’s longing is counterbalanced by his uncertainty (as expressed through the questions and punctuation). In the above example, both sentences begin with ‘Qui’ and end with a question mark while the use of the future tense highlights the fact that the poet still awaits answers. There is an all-pervading sense of uncertainty (‘rêver’, ‘s’il’, ‘je n’ai pas’, ‘impalpable’), indicating that Bosquet is not entirely at ease within this imaginative construct. The poet has obtained a precarious balance between function and meaning and has established a new system of rules within poetry (‘J’entends dans le irréel/une promesse de logique’, JAV 83). However, the distinction between le réel and le rêve continues to be a problematic one as the poet wrestles with the concept of identity:

Combien sont-ils au fond de moi ? Une peuplade:
le je, le toi, l’alter-ego

(JAV 122)

Bosquet has become what he terms the ‘troisième personnage au milieu du poème’, for ‘je ne suis ni l’écrit ni l’écrivain/observateur qui se débat dans ce dilemme’ (JAV 124). Throughout the poems, Bosquet must continually contend with the plurality of self because he sees the very nature of poetry as being one that demands a move beyond a unified subject:

Cette existence en vers, je ne l’ai pas choisie.
J’entre en moi, me retourne et me vois au-dehors.

(QT 112)

Présente, absente, irréelle, réelle,
je suis de n’être pas. Me définir
serait me condamner.

(PED 695)

‘J’ai ma sécurité/Dans la fable et la rime’

While Bosquet’s attitude to language is often playful, nonetheless he constantly draws the reader’s attention back to the inextricable link between the poet and the poem. In a poem entitled ‘Dire pour être’ (PED 484-85), Bosquet asserts that ‘je suis ce que j’écris’, while elsewhere he states that:
It could be argued that the 'raison' attributed to language is based both on the cohesive internal logic found within linguistic structures and on the fact that words give the poet a function. In 'ce monde imparfait' that often lacks consistency and order, words offer a system (and by extension, a type of security) that ultimately foster a sense of belonging in Bosquet:

Je n’ai qu’une patrie: c’est mon langage.
J’habite le français.

For Bosquet, the creative process is intrinsically linked with life, so much so that he claims that ‘vivre est pour moi chercher une image insolite’ (QT 110):

Pour être moi j’écris:
C’est aux mots de comprendre [...]”

‘Nommer./c’est construire des murs’

One of the dichotomies in Bosquet’s poetry lies in the ultimate limitations of language. Poetry is portrayed as acting as a threshold into a space where Bosquet may adopt a variety of personae and where he can challenge notions of identity (‘J’apprends l’anonymat’, JAV 175). Undoubtedly, Bosquet is fascinated by the power of language and his ability to manipulate it.
Nonetheless, Bosquet is also keenly aware of its limitations (‘Le poème capte, mot à mot, le sacré mais ne peut le retenir’, *LDG* 12):

J’écris (je pense écrire), donc je ne sais pas.
Je dois (mal dirigé) m’écrire avant d’écrire.

As the following examples illustrate, Bosquet often brings these limitations to the fore by drawing attention to the very process of signification:

Tous les matins le mot «cheval» se lève et boit son café-crème.
Dans la maison d’en face, le mot «saison» prend une douche et songe aux lointaines vacances

Je dis «soleil», et le mot brille;
Je dis «colombe», et le mot vole;
je dis «pommier», et le mot est en fleur.

J’ai dit «poète»: je dois...
mais je reste girafe,
jeste volcan.

Similarly, Bosquet expresses his awareness of the fact that every word he employs places boundaries and limitations on the imagination:

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11 Juin draws attention to the paradox that ‘plus le poète parle et plus il ouvre le monde, mais également: plus il parle, et plus il se limite! Il donne existence à l’univers au détriment de soi’, *Alain Bosquet*, p.14
Dire est diminuer; parole, tu deçois!
Dans le mot le plus doux sommeille une panthère.
Le poème est un art de penser contre soi.
Mon langage, c’est toi qui tues l’imaginaire!

(QT 141)

On écrit un poème, et tout est louche
dans chaque mot comme dans chaque vers.

(PED 703)

In this way, Bosquet emphasises the unpredictable nature of signification and therefore acknowledges that the writer can never assume a governing narrative position. This leads the poet to a great deal of questioning and contradiction, as conveyed in the poem Le signifiant, le signifié:

Fermez cet œil – mais s’il ne vous appartient pas?
Remplissez ce bourgeois – mais s’il n’est pas à vous? [...]
L’infini, le fini, comme un combat de coqs.
L’appartenant contre l’appartenance:
l’ombre qui mord jusqu’au sang la lumière.
Ce qui se meut pour sembler immobile.
L’Un plus multiple que les tarentules
fuyant devant le feu.
Une moitié plus grande que le tout.

(LDG 63)

Here, the uneasy alliance between the two components of the sign is very clearly portrayed through the images of violence (‘combat’, ‘l’ombre qui mord jusqu’au sang’, ‘les tarantules’, ‘feu’). Similarly, these lines set up a series of contradictions and paradoxes (‘L’infini’/‘le fini’, ‘L’appartenant’/‘l’appartenance’, ‘l’ombre’/‘la lumière’, ‘L’Un le plus multiple’, ‘Une moitié plus grande que le tout’) that remain irreconcilable:

12 By ‘signification’, I refer to the process that produces meaning and not the meaning itself.
Le signifiant, le signifié:
deux fois le chiffre quatre
qui se veut seul pour mieux tromper sa propre loi.
La vérité doucement endormie
sur son mensonge, coussin si moelleux. [...]  
Donnez au vent cette crinière – et si
au lieu d’un grand cheval il y avait
le mot «cheval» ruant
contre la nuit qui le poignarde?

(LDG 63-64)

Likewise, in *Nommer* Bosquet refers to language, not in terms of its liminal function but rather as a limiting force:

Nommer,
c’est construire des murs,
c’est en défendre tout accès,
exclure la lumière et congéدير le ciel.
Car la parole écrase
et en définissant appauvrit
la chose qui voulait être plus que la chose,
l’esprit rêveur qui s’en allait en rêve.

(LDG 189)

‘Je voudrais vivre à l’abri du langage’

Bosquet’s poetry emphasises the unreliable mediation of language and illustrates the fact that language is, by its very nature, ambiguous and that writing operates as a conflictual differential force. Bosquet acknowledges this is not a resolution of conflicting forces that will lead ultimately to a reconceptualisation on a higher level. Rather, he sees it as the element within language that allows the poet to articulate, structure, create and eternally recreate his own reality. By accepting this, and not continually striving for ultimate meaning, reality within the texts is no less true than that which lies outside:
The parallel structures of these two phrases invite comparison. The wall to which Bosquet refers in the first line (‘Voici le mur’) is one that is constructed by his craft of poetry writing. By erecting this wall, the poet establishes a barrier between himself and the world (‘Je voudrais vivre à l’abri du langage/et des idées’, PED 672). It is due to the impervious nature of the wall that a protective environment is created in which Bosquet feels secure:

L’identité me faisant peur,
je me sens mieux en mur de ma maison

These self-imposed thresholds and barriers are a vital component of Bosquet’s paradigm and stand in striking contrast to the liminal mentality of the poets studied thus far. A particular contrast is evident between him and Renard and Oster, for the latter two both perceive a spiritual realm existing beyond the self and regard poetry as a means of accessing spiritual power. In this way, Renard and Oster use their poems as a point of passage between the profane and the spiritual. Conversely, Bosquet does not seek a spiritual experience, but rather he hopes to construct a hyper-reality that provides a forum for change and development:

My wild notions can be summed up in a sort of doctrine: the poem is totally useless, but it offers the reader a secular prayer, through which he can imagine new rapports between man and the universe, man and the void, man and himself. [...] Art is the radiant promise of a life beyond life. I write not to communicate what is known to me, but rather to become someone else, after the writing. The poem is guarantee of metamorphosis.

(NM ix)
For Bosquet, art is not a means of accessing a spiritual realm, but of creating a space where he can ‘changer de forme et de nature./Être n’importe quoi, sauf l’être humain’ (JAV 102). Bosquet sees poetry as a place in which metamorphosis is eternally possible and, while the poetry is firmly rooted in an understanding of truth, this truth is itself a negation:

These days I say that my poems consist of verifiable truths, of wild notions and a challenge.

The verifiable truths are these: I am mortal and fragile. I find no precise meaning to this world.

(NM ix)

‘Mon verbe me traverse’

While Bosquet’s poetry is not spiritual in the same sense as either Renard’s or Oster’s, words undoubtedly contain a certain power for the poet:

Le verbe est à tous: je ne prétends m’y insinuer qu’en locataire provisoire; il m’expulsera à son gré. Par l’écriture, je puis aller à moi, itinéraire banal. Par le verbe, je puis aller à Dieu, chemin plus ivre.

... Mon écriture est à moi. Ma parole, je l’emprunte. Mon verbe me traverse, sans que j’aie le droit de l’accepter ni de le refuser.

(LDG 12)

Here, the liminal potential within language is expressed through the images of journeying (‘je puis aller à moi’, ‘je puis aller à Dieu, chemin plus ivre’, ‘Mon verbe me traverse’). While Réda places an emphasis on physical journeys and Renard is almost exclusively concerned with the spiritual journey, Bosquet establishes a strong imaginative link between language and movement from one space to another, as words are portrayed in terms of a threshold between self and other. More specifically, le verbe becomes the threshold between man and God for it has the power to capture the essence of the divine (‘Le verbe définit Dieu’, LDG 8, ‘Le verbe est oracle’, LDG 12). By means of the texts, Bosquet constructs a universe that follows its own rules and laws, wherein the poet may continually reconstruct the boundaries. As a result, while Renard struggles to reconcile his belief system with his experience of the world, Bosquet seems to be content to
accept the inconsistencies of his belief system (‘J’ai fait Dieu à mon image’, GDR 117, ‘Je dialogue avec Dieu, qui finit par m’obéir’, FF 108). Rather than masking his doubts and fears, Bosquet openly states and examines the contradictions in the texts (as the collection Le livre du doute et de la grâce illustrates with titles such as Ce qui n’est pas, Désaccord, Interrogations, Un long désir, Doutes, L’âme la plus pure, Vérité, La vérité, Le dieu solitaire, Vénération). At no stage does Bosquet appear to be troubled by the inconsistencies in his work, but rather they reflect the paradoxes that the poet sees as being intrinsic to the human condition:

Je trouve que toute contradiction est preuve de vie, à la fois physique et spirituelle.

...

Dieu n’existe que traduit par un verbe, qui dit combien Dieu est intraduisible.

(LDG 7)

Within these contradictions and doubts, language is portrayed as the one element that may lead to a spiritual encounter (‘Quelques vers me suffisent pour invoquer Dieu, et même le convoquer. L’imaginaire est la maladie de la foi’, LDG 9). Throughout the poetry, Bosquet simultaneously suggests and denies a transcendental other, thus undermining his own statements by openly admitting a self-engendered paradox whose logical insufficiency is made public (‘Je suis assez adulte pour créer les dieux que je désire, quitte à les renier’, VN 11):

Imaginer Dieu? Il est abstrait comme un azur sans horizon, une montagne sans cime, une mer sans rivage. Et déjà je me reprends: il est concret comme un ciel aux dix mille bords, une montagne aux dix mille sommets, une mer aux dix mille contours. [...] Je vais de dieu en dieu, comme d’arbre en arbre, ou de ruisseau en ruisseau. Le sacré, lui, est unique.

(LDG 9)

Here, Bosquet oscillates between belief in theism (as represented by ‘Dieu’ with a majuscule) and multiple gods (‘de dieu en dieu’). However, the one overarching characteristic is the fact that Bosquet envisages a divinity who is seemingly limitless and who will not be constrained by barriers (‘sans azur’, ‘sans cime’, ‘sans rivage’, ‘aux dix mille bords’, ‘aux dix mille sommets’, ‘aux dix mille contours’). There is an unresolved paradox in Bosquet’s portrayal of the divine,
for it becomes immediately apparent to the reader that there is one threshold that
the deity will never cross. For while Bosquet, Oster and Renard all deal explicitly
with concepts of the deity, Bosquet does so in a way that is strictly contained
within the limits of the poem:

Dieu existe, puisque tous les jours je l’invente. Dieu
n’existe pas, puisque tous les jours il me faut le réinventer.
*(LDG 7)*

Any notion of a deity is only permitted within the confines of the texts and
Bosquet contains his perception of God carefully within clearly delineated
boundaries (‘j’admire plus le platane et le fleuve que Dieu’ *(LDG 9).*

‘Dans le verbe ma chair a trouvé sa raison’

While Bosquet strictly limits his portrayal of the divine, the poet is forced to
acknowledge his inability to fully control language and its significative role
beyond the writer’s intention. The power of the deity may be perceived as being
restricted, yet Bosquet is keenly aware that language is not so easily contained. It
is interesting to note that the poet often portrays language in terms that are
associated conventionally with representations of deity. Consequently, for
example, Bosquet makes reference to language’s power over life and death
(‘chaque verbe conduit au suicide’, *PED 17*) and to its dominating presence (‘Il
faut haïr le mot/car il invente le présent’, *LDG 148*). The comparing and
contrasting within the poet’s perception of God and of *le verbe* emphasise this:

*Le verbe définit Dieu; l’écriture le supplicie.*

*...*

*L’Église emprisonne Dieu; le poème emprisonne le verbe.*

*(LDG 8)*

Similarly, the association between spirituality and language can be seen in the fact
that *le verbe* eludes definition, in a manner that is reminiscent of Renard’s
representation of God in abstract terms:
Le verbe bleu pour le vertige.
Le verbe vert pour le départ, […]
Le verbe bleu pour le contraire du vertige.
Le verbe vert pour la venue, […]
Mais le verbe proteste :
« Je ne suis pas couleur,
je suis musique et je suis forme,
le chant et le carré,
le murmure et le cercle
au cœur des symphonies […].»

(LDG 90-91)

As this example illustrates, language is personified and is portrayed as having its own identity outside the poet. As a result, language is depicted as granting life to the poet, rather than the contrary:

Vivre ou écrire, écrire ou vivre? Je soupirer:
Dans le verbe ma chair a trouvé sa raison.

(PED 41)

The regular rhyme scheme of the rime croisée and repetition of contrasting elements highlight the imaginative link between words and life (‘vivre’, ‘écrire’, 'soupire’) for, in Bosquet’s paradigm, he feels he must choose between living and writing. In contrast to Réda’s and Jaccottet’s desire to portray accurately the scenes they perceive around them, Bosquet constructs an imaginary universe in which the role of words themselves is brought to the fore. He describes the poem as being ‘mon seul sorcier’ (FED 41) and, to a certain extent, Bosquet feels that he owes his existence to the power of words:

S’il faut que le poème écrive son poète,
Dis-moi, mon livre, est-ce de toi que je suis né?

(PED 42)

In this way, the poet relinquishes responsibility for his own work and claims that it is the poem that dominates (‘Je joue un rôle secondaire dans ma vie;/Mon poème est le seul à comprendre pourquoi’, PED 58). Thus the poem is of great value (‘– Ça vaut combien, notre poème?/– Ça vaut beaucoup;/votre cœur et le mien’, PED 304), for it is seen as endowing the poet with meaning in his life.
Words are not portrayed as a sacred tool used to convey essence and Bosquet can envisage neither a happy alliance nor a complete rupture between life and poetry, for he is acutely aware of the problematic relationship between the two. He claims that ‘the poem is an act of innocence with diabolic savoir-faire’ (NM x) and so ‘pour devenir poète, il faut être imbécile’ (PED 405). Yet Bosquet continues to see language and the process of signification as a protective barrier from direct engagement with that which exists beyond the poetic realm:

Quand j’écris: «La rosée»,  
je n’ai besoin  
ni d’aimer ni de vivre.  

(PED 643)

The hyper-reality of the poem is governed by a new system of codes and is not subject to the rules of reality, and Bosquet uses this constructed poetic space to explore the possibilities and limitations of language. The poet does not wish to create a poetry of realism or philosophical expression, but one where he can play endlessly with representations of the self (‘Le «je» est suspect; le «moi» est insaisissable’, VN 54) and blur the boundaries between le je and l’autre, stating the desire that:

Bientôt  
il y aura un nom tout seul  
pour le poème et la réalité.  

(PED 305)

Bosquet establishes an underlying pattern of contrast throughout the corpus, where the surface and the symbol interact and react with each other. The poet’s liminal mentality can be found at the centre of language structure, for his poetry proposes a threshold within the sign itself, as it focuses on the problematic process of signification. The poetry presents a seemingly endless stream of changing images and yet the essential components of irony and paradox remain consistent throughout the texts. Denying any suggestion of ultimate truth or reality, Bosquet continually glides between le réel and le rêve, in an attempt to gain access ‘au seuil d’un univers meilleur’ (JAV 17).
CONCLUSION

'Une tension irrésolue entre le Même et l’Autre'

Amongst the immense diversity of poetry from the latter half of the twentieth century, a common preoccupation with alterity can be detected as poets engage in the process of negotiating identity and of seeking to understand and express the world around them. As a starting point, this exploration is often initiated by the poet's own questions and doubts and, as such, may be expressed in terms of division and tension:

[...] la chute dans le discontinu, le démembrement, la séparation sont notre lot. L'accélération de la division [...] la multiplication des miroirs, quelle ellipse nous en guérira?¹

The above excerpt from the writings of Gaspar typifies a prevalent theme in a great deal of contemporary poetry, where a deep sense of metaphysical 'séparation' is counterbalanced by the hope (however vague) of some sort of resolution ('quelle ellipse nous en guérira?'). Throughout contemporary poetry concepts such as identity, belonging and a deity are frequently conveyed in the portrayal of conflicting forces and an attempt to then resolve those conflicts.² This can be seen, for example, elsewhere in Gaspar's work, where he expresses his desire to:

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¹ Gaspar, *Approche de le parole*, p.10.
² Éric Gans highlights this link between poetry and alterity, stating that 'le rapport originaire à l’Autre [...] est le lieu de naissance de la poésie', in *Poésie et alterité*, pp.45-51 (p.51).
Abolir des cloisons, franchir le cercle étroit d'une fonction, d'un moi fictif, ou réel, pour se solidariser un instant avec l'ample courant qui vient à nous et nous quitte, nous soulève un instant et nous oublie [...] lui sans limites.[4]

While neither specifically stylistic or idealistic, the theme of alterity seems to act as a creative impetus whereby 'la seule progression que nous vivions cette poussée vers le seuil au-delà'.[4] Representations of l'autre vary from poet to poet, ranging from the emphasis on physical explorations in poets such as Caspar and Réda to the metaphysical concerns found in the writings of Emmanuel and Renard (to name but two). The variety of images used to convey alterity reveals its highly subjective and often ambiguous nature as a concept, and yet it is its very non-specificity that renders it such a powerful theme. Indeed, it is often through representations of alterity that poets describe their poetry and, as such, it seems to be intrinsic to the process of writing poetry. Thus, for example, Jabès associates poetry with an unknown other as he describes the poet's task as one where he infiltrates an unfamiliar world ('un monde défendu dont il ignore les limites et la puissance').[5] For Renard too, there is an explicit connection between poetry and alterity, as he believes that the poem itself embodies the point of contact between that which is known and the unknown ('chaque poème est toujours à la fois le même et un autre', AN 65). In this sense, a poet's perception of poetry seems to mirror that of his understanding of life, where 'l'expérience poétique est donc, comme l'existence elle-même, une totalisation toujours inachevée'.[6]

As the above examples indicate, within contemporary French poetry one can detect 'une tension irresolue entre le Même et l'Autre'[7] as poets engage in a perpetual exploration of the point of interaction where le je is confronted with alterity (in whatever form that may take). Given the vast array of representations of alterity that seem to exist, this thesis has proposed a thematic study of the threshold image as a means of ascertaining the poet's perception of alterity and, consequently, his imaginative framework. It has been my aim to offer a viable

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reading of contemporary poetry by demonstrating the ways in which representations of the threshold can convey an awareness of alterity on a physical, spiritual and linguistic level.

‘Son infini intérieur et son quasi-néant extérieur’

It has been the premise of this thesis that, through a tracing of patterns of liminal images, it is possible to locate the point at which the poet confronts alterity (where ‘le je découvre simultanément son infini intérieur et son quasi-néant extérieur’) and thereby to determine the poet’s broader preoccupations. Thus, for example, in Réda’s poetry we can see how l’autre is conveyed primarily in geographical terms, as is reflected by the fact that the thresholds he perceives are represented through a proliferation of door, window and journeying images in the texts. Réda’s poems contain a series of horizontal thresholds as every destination is transformed into another potential point of departure, thereby revealing the poet’s interest in exploring the world around him and his underlying awareness of a geographical autre. In utter contrast to Réda’s predominantly physical representation of le liminaire, Renard’s portrayal of the threshold is, first and foremost, as the vertical point of passage that is possible between man and God. Thus, Renard’s perception of le concret seems to function automatically as a springboard to metaphysical reflection and there is a continual focus placed on movement upwards towards le sacré.

In the poetry of both Réda and Renard, the portrayal of the threshold is predominantly focused on either horizontal or vertical images, yet a thematic study of this kind also facilitates the tracing of liminal patterns between the two axes. This can be seen, for example, in the poetry of Oster, where the poet’s perception of le sacré is intrinsically linked to that of interaction with nature:

\[\text{\small\cite{John E. Jackson, \textit{La Poésie et son autre: essais sur la modernité}} (Paris: José Corti, 1998), p.14.}\]
(Mes yeux m'ont demandé, j'ai demandé aux pierres
Quelle force nous lie à l'effroi des rivières.
La mer m'a répondu d'un seul chant de rivière,
Un monde amoncelé m'a parcouru soudain...)  

(CM 76)

While Oster's pantheism involves a belief in non-directional immanence, nonetheless the texts depict an absolute union with la Grande Terre as a means of experiencing spiritual revelation and to this end the poet envisages nature as a threshold. It is his belief that the forces of nature then respond, thus allowing him to partake in a form of intimate communion with a spiritual autre (what he terms 'une pure alliance', NTN 26). This relational perception of the threshold is also very much in evidence in the poetry of Jaccottet, although vastly different from Oster's emphasis on a pantheistic fusion. Similar to Réda, he is fascinated by everyday objects and the details of the world that surround him, however this is also fused with a belief in a possible interaction between man and a deity through the natural world. Jaccottet focuses his attention on the often subtle balancing of le concret and le sacré, as seen in the texts in a number of recurring images. Thus, for example, the tree is portrayed in terms of a vertical line, while being firmly rooted in the horizontal, and therefore it establishes a link between the earth and less tangible elements such as sunlight and wind. Similarly the bird is depicted as being able to cross the boundary between the horizontal and the vertical axes and thus is used to represent the threshold between man and God.

In Bosquet's poetry, the application of the theme of the threshold functions on yet another level, as the poet is less interested in interacting with a metaphysical autre than he is in creating poetry in which the threshold between la réalité and le rêve is perpetually being crossed. Throughout the poems, there is an underlying pattern of contrast where normal rules governing day-to-day experiences are overturned as the most unlikely objects are juxtaposed. By doing so, Bosquet chooses to transform banal objects by placing them in extraordinary contexts in the poems and thus he constructs poetry that acts as a point of passage to a hyper-reality.
‘Ces abîmes infranchissables [...] le seuil annulé’

By tracing the patterns of representation of the threshold image, this study has revealed the poets’ perception of the threshold, while also indicating any problematical element within that representation. These problematical elements of the threshold image (which Gaspar portrays as ‘ces abîmes infranchissables [...] le seuil annulé’)\(^9\) provide not only a deeper understanding of the poets’ liminal mentality but, by extension, they expose more fully the imaginative framework that underpins the poet’s work. In Réd’a’s poems, for example, despite his focus on movement and points of passage, there are repeated references to diverse barriers (varying from a shut door to a shuttered window or even to a wall). These reveal an inherent tension in the texts, as Réd’a’s desire to continually cross thresholds and to explore a geographical autre is repeatedly challenged. Equally, Renard’s desire to cross the threshold from an existence solely in le concret to one founded in le sacré is continually counterbalanced by a deep sense of internal division (he refers to ‘mon corps d’ici, mon corps d’ailleurs’, M 67). Thus, there are many and varied allusions to l’inconnu in the poetry in representations of mazes, chasms and death, all of which indicate a deep sense of doubt and fear within Renard’s belief system and the tension between his assertions and his feelings.

Oster situates his poetry in an isolated bucolic paradise and it is through his appreciation and adoration of ‘l’Espace précieux’ (SL 38) that he hopes to place himself ‘au seuil et au sommet d’une complémentarité précieuse’ (OM xxii). However, within the poems can also be detected a problematic element as the references to silence and solitude suggest that his perpetual quest for a union between himself and nature is not so easily attained. Equally, while Jaccottet’s understanding of nature as a threshold to le spirituel differs greatly both from Renard’s Christianity and Oster’s pantheism, his poems reveal a continual tension as the representations of the threshold are also associated with borders and barriers:

\(^9\) Gaspar, Sol absolu, p.20 & 119.
In Bosquet's poetry, the poet evades introspection and adopts a persistently jocular tone throughout:

Horizon,
je renonce à comprendre.

Nonetheless, an investigation of threshold representations does illuminate the complexity of his liminal mentality, where a focus is placed firmly on playing with endless representations of the self. By assuming the identity of different characters, objects and even gods, Bosquet flits from subject to subject and object to object, using the poems as a means of denying the existence of any one governing narrative position. Nonetheless, within this game of multiple personae where artifice is privileged over reality and derision probes serious issues, a tension can be sensed as the poet calls into question the nature of identity and relationships ('J'écris pour le peuple sans savoir ce qu’est le peuple', VN 142).

'La poésie accède à un niveau tout différent'

Having used the thematic study of the threshold to determine both the poet's perception of alterity and any problematic element therein, this thesis has also been concerned with ascertaining a poet's understanding of language. As we have seen in the poetry studied, the contemporary poet often displays a keen awareness of the ambiguity of language, as he wishes to express his experience of l’autre and yet is conscious of the duplicity of language. It is this conflict that the

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11 C. A. Hackett highlights the fact that 'les poètes explorent, expérimentent, interrogent le langage, cherchent à lui arracher tous les sens et tous les secrets. Ils luttent, au corps à corps, avec des mots polysémiques, variables, ambivalents', 'Panorama de la poésie française contemporaine', in La Poésie au tournant des années 80, pp.13-23 (p.16).
poet's liminal mentality seeks to resolve, where language (and more specifically the poem) is often portrayed in terms of a point of passage for, however inadequate it may be, it does facilitate the poet's self-expression, so that 'avec les mots, nous longeons l'abîme'.

While Réda resists any overt introspection or philosophising in the texts, he expresses an awareness of poetry's liminal capacity and a desire that his poetry be one 'dont partout la source éternelle s'épanche' (RC 148). In the same way that Réda places an emphasis on the process of travelling rather than on a specific destination, so his understanding of poetry focuses primarily on the idea of poetry resembling a detour (he describes it as 'un éclatant ou au contraire imperceptible et humble mais nécessaire détour', CV 75). In this way, poetry allows the poet to explore not only his tangible surroundings in the suburbs of Paris but also to explore the liminal space between the imagination and the creative act, where 'chaque page ouvrirait une porte entre les signes de la pensée et le poème de la Création' (RP 80):

Il reste que la poésie accède à un niveau tout différent. Elle peut bien exprimer l'homme: en dernier ressort, à sa pointe la plus fine (la plus fragile), elle ne dit qu'elle-même, témoigne électivement de son propre passage à travers tel ou tel (et qu'ils en soient bénis).

(CV 11)

For Renard, poetry is seen as a means of escaping the realities of earthly life and of entering into the presence of le sacré:

L'activité poétique et son produit, le poème [...] sont un lieu de liberté mentale et verbale qui nous délivre des normes et des cadres aliénants de l'existence quotidienne, et constituent une lutte constante contre l'usure du temps, les drames de l'Histoire et la fatalité de la mort.

(AN 202)

Renard emphasises poetry's liminal function, stating that 'le poème [...] établit un pont verbal, un pacte, une «arche d'alliance» entre les irréductibles unicités de chaque être et chaque chose' (AN 28). Yet the poet is also constantly faced with

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12 Jabès, p.305. Similarly, Michel Collot makes the point that it is 'la confrontation avec l'Autre du langage qui conduit le poète à réinventer la langue, à faire entendre, avec la même langue, une autre parole', 'L’Autre dans le même', in Poésie et altérité, pp.25-32 (p.26).
the challenge of expressing a divine ineffable autre by means of the written word as he attempts to 'aller vers cela [...] au fond comme au-delà des mots/sacré par le mystère'. Similarly, Oster is continually frustrated by the limitations of language and his myriad re-workings of the same poem highlight the idea of poetry as a process, where there is no definitive version and each poem acts as an opening into the other poems. Oster's perpetual dissatisfaction with language is based on his sense of 'la terrifiante vacance qui s'introduit dans chacun de nos vocables' (MIU 30), as words are perceived as being whimsical, fickle and capricious, capable of leaving the poet feeling abandoned and rejected ('parfois le langage nous rejette, nous fuit [...] La nuit nous écarte de la route. Les mots parfois sont des errants', R 26). Nonetheless, the liminal function of language lies at the heart of Oster's understanding of poetry, where it is 'affirmation intermittente de notre intermittente proximité par rapport à l'être' (MIU 30).

Frustrated by the ambiguity of words (which he describes as being 'si peu puissants sur la réalité quotidienne?', AJ 28), Jaccottet claims to wish to write poetry 'sans images', in an attempt to facilitate the transparency of communication that he believes possible. It is by employing what Jaccottet calls 'ces paroles ailees' (I 78) that poetry becomes a parole-passage, whereby he may express 'une sorte d'éclaircissement' (PSA 79). In the poems, we see the extent to which the poet perceives the liminal potential within poetic expression as a point of passage between le je and a divine autre, as he refers to 'l'idéal de toute poésie, le point suprême qu'il lui arrive d'approcher, peut-être d'atteindre' (EM 36). Bosquet's writing stands in sharp contrast to Jaccottet's ostensible desire for transparency, as paradox and contradiction are governing features of Bosquet's poems. The poetry presents the reader with a seemingly endless stream of changing images and yet the deep sense of the absurd through the ironic tone that is sustained remains consistent throughout the texts. Denying any suggestion of ultimate truth or reality, Bosquet continually glides between le réel and le rêve.

\[\text{13} \text{Renard, Jean-Claude Renard ou Les Secrets de la Chimère suivi de Poèmes inédits par Jean-Claude Renard (Paris: Schena-Nizet, 1992), p.91.}\]
\[\text{14 The enormous liminal potential that Jaccottet sees in poetry is highlighted by Jean Onimus, when he remarks that 'la poésie occupe un intervalle entre le nombre et l'espérance, entre le multiple et le centre, entre la mesure et l'amour: elle établit des relations entre ces deux faces de nos consciences, si totalement différentes', Philippe Jaccottet: une poétique de l'insaisissable (Seyssel: Champ Vallon, 1982), pp.163-64.}\]
and explores the possibilities and limitations of language. The poet continually stresses the ambivalent nature of language, where the threshold is central to the very linguistic system that Bosquet employs as he highlights the fact that each semantic unit opens up a host of interpretations and associations. In this way, Bosquet’s liminal mentality lies at the very heart of language structure, as his poetry allows him to engage in ‘un art de la métamorphose’ (JAV 17).

‘Étrangeté légitime’

A detailed analysis of the poems selected for this thesis has demonstrated that the threshold proves to be a central image used to express a broad range of perceptions of alterity. In this way, it also functions as a valuable key to each writer’s poetic identity, enabling the reader to see the ways in which the poet develops his ‘étrangé légitime’. As this study has explored the representations of both physical and metaphysical thresholds, so it has enabled the mapping out of general patterns in the poetry. By tracing the configuration of metaphors in any given work, it is possible to determine patterns within the poet’s imagination and thereby ascertain the poet’s chief preoccupations. The threshold images are often employed unconsciously and subconsciously and therefore are particularly revealing as they uncover preoccupations of which the poets themselves are often unaware. Thus, from the down-to-earth urbanity of Réda to the frequently surreal world conveyed in Bosquet’s poetry, the poets’ liminal mentality emerges, not as a project, but a product of their subconscious.

The wide diversity of poetry featured in this thesis has been chosen in part to demonstrate the broad range of threshold mentalities that can be found in poetry written in the latter half of the twentieth-century. Moreover, the very fact that a study of the theme of the threshold can be applied to the panoply of styles and voices within contemporary poetry demonstrates that it is a valid and useful approach to poetry criticism. Indeed, the universality of this theme means that it has far-reaching implications for further lines of enquiry, as it is not restricted to contemporary poetry, French poetry, nor even the poetic genre. Therefore, the multiplicity of applications may involve other poets, other periods or languages,
all of which may benefit from critical analysis based on the theme of the threshold. Despite the universality of a thematic study of this kind and its application to a vast array of work beyond twentieth-century poetry, the image of the threshold has received very little critical attention as a theme in contemporary poetry *per se*. This study has been an attempt in some small measure to redress this imbalance and to offer a valid way of reading contemporary French poetry, while acknowledging the necessary limitations that are imposed on any project of this kind. This thesis does not claim to offer definitive answers to all the ambiguities and complexities of twentieth-century poetry, but it is a contribution to the ongoing research and debate and, it is hoped, a significant point of access into the contemporary poetic imagination.

APPENDIX

The following section lists works by Réda, Renard, Oster, Jaccottet and Bosquet that I have employed with a key to the abbreviations in alphabetical order. Full publication details are listed in the bibliography.

Jacques Réda

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Jean-Claude Renard

AN  Autres notes sur la poésie, la foi et la science, essai, 1995
CP  Choix de poèmes, 1987
CPR Ce puits que rien n’épuise, poèmes, 1993
DN  Le Dieu de Nuit, poèmes, 1973
DR  Dix runes d’été, poèmes, 1994
EI  L’«Expérience intérieure» de Georges Bataille ou la Négation du mystère, essai, 1987
LS  La Lumière du silence, poèmes, 1978
LV  Le Lieu du voyageur: Notes sur le Mystère, essai, 1980
M   Métamorphose du monde précédé de Origines, poèmes, 1991
NP  Notes sur la poésie, essai, 1970
NF  Notes sur la foi, essai, 1973
OM  À l’orée du mystère, 2000
QP  Quand le poème devient prière, essai en collaboration avec Marc Tardieu, 1987
SG  Sous de grands vents obscurs, poèmes, 1990
TI  Toutes les iles sont secrètes, poèmes, 1987
## Pierre Oster

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Philippe Jaccottet

All publications by Gallimard, unless otherwise stated.

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<td><em>La Promenade sous les arbres</em>, proses, 1980</td>
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Alain Bosquet

All publications by Gallimard unless otherwise stated.

JAV  Un jour après la vie, 1984
LDG  Le Livre du doute et de la grace, 1977
NM   No Matter No Fact, 1988
NP   Notes pour un pluriel, 1974
PED  Je ne suis pas un poète d’eau douce, poésies complètes (1945-1994), 1996
QT   Quatre testaments et autres poèmes, 1967
SFS  Sonnets pour une fin de siècle, 1980
SP   Stances perdues/Lost Quatrains, 1999
VN   Le Verbe est un navire, 1998
BIBLIOGRAPHY

This bibliography is organised as follows:

A. i Primary works by the poets
   ii Secondary works related to the poets

B. i Other primary sources
   ii Criticism related to general literary works
   iii Other critical works

A. i: Primary works by the poets

The following section lists works by Réda, Renard, Oster, Jaccottet and Bosquet. As this thesis has been organised thematically rather than chronologically, and for ease of reference, this list is arranged in alphabetical order. A number of the books are more readily available in subsequent collections than as originally published and, in the more significant works, original publication dates are included.
Jacques Réda

All publications by Gallimard, unless otherwise stated.

Amen, 1968
Amen, Récitatif, La Tourne, 1988
Beauté suburbaine, 1985 (Pierre Fanlac)
Château des courants d’air, 1986
Celle qui vient à pas légers, 1985 (Fata Morgana)
Hors les murs, 1982
L’Herbe des talus, 1984
Lettre sur l’univers et autres discours en vers français, 1991
PLM et autres textes, 1982 (Le Temps qu’il fait)
Premier livre des reconnaissances, 1985 (Fata Morgana)
Récitatif, 1970
Retour au calme, 1989
Recommandations aux promeneurs, 1988
Sonnets dublinois, 1990 (Fata Morgana)
La Tourne, 1975

Jean-Claude Renard

All publications by Éditions du Seuil, unless otherwise stated.

À l’orée du mystère, 2000 (La Maison de Poésie)
Autres notes sur la poésie, la foi et la science, essai, 1995
Choix de poèmes, 1987
Ce puits que rien n’épuise, poèmes, 1993
Le Dieu de Nuit, poèmes, 1973 (José Corti, 1990)
Dix runes d’été, poèmes, 1994 (Mercure de France)
L’«Expérience intérieure» de Georges Bataille ou la Négation du mystère, essai, 1987
La Lumière du silence, poèmes, 1978 (José Corti, 1990)
Le Lieu du voyageur: Notes sur le Mystère, essai, 1980
Métamorphose du monde précédé de Origines, poèmes, 1991 (La Différence, coll. «Orphée»)
Notes sur la poésie, essai, 1970
Notes sur la foi, essai, 1973 (Gallimard)
Quand le poème devient prière, essai en collaboration avec Marc Tardieu, 1987 (Nouvelle Cité)
Sous de grands vents obscurs, poèmes, 1990
Toutes les îles sont secrètes, poèmes, 1987

**Pierre Oster**
All publications by Gallimard, unless otherwise stated.

Alchimie de la lenteur, 1997 (Babel Éditeur)
Le Champ de mai, 1955
Les Dieux, 1970
La Grande Année, 1964
Un machine à indiquer l’univers, entretiens, 1992 (Obsidiane)
Un nom toujours nouveau, 1960
Paysage du Tout (1951-2000), 2000
L’Ordre du mouvement, esquisses, 1991 (Babel Éditeur)
Requêtes, 1977 (Fata Morgana)
Réquetes, version nouvelle, suivie de Pour un art poétique, ébauches, 1992 (Le Temps qu’il fait)
Solitude de la lumière, 1957
Vingt-neuvième poème, 1985 (L’Alphée)

**Philippe Jaccottet**
All publications by Gallimard, unless otherwise stated.

Airs, poèmes (1961-1964), 1967
Autres journées, carnets (1980-1984), 1987 (Fata Morgana)
Chants d’en bas, 1974 (Lausanne: Payot)
L’Entretien des Muses, chroniques de poésie, 1968
Gustave Roud, 1982 (Éditions Universitaires Fribourg)
L’Ignorant, poèmes (1952-1956), 1957
À la lumière d’hiver, poèmes, 1977
La Promenade sous les arbres, proses, 1980 (Bibliothèque des Arts)
Pensées sous les nuages, poèmes, 1983
Poésie (1964-1967), 1971
La Semaison, carnets (1954-1979), 1984
Une transaction secrète: lectures de poésie, 1987

Alain Bosquet
All publications by Gallimard unless otherwise stated.

Un jour après la vie, 1984
Le Livre du doute et de la grace, 1977 (reprinted, 1987)
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