

Crossed Tongues:
The Crisis of Speech
in the Prose Poems of Francis Ponge

by

Jane Elizabeth Monson

A Creative and Critical Writing Thesis

Submitted in candidature for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Cardiff University 2008

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**This thesis is dedicated
to my mother
Sarah**

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Summary

This thesis is a critical, creative and part-biographical study of Francis Ponge's increasing self-consciousness around the spoken word, from his early prose poems through to his art criticism, and how his obsession with verbal inadequacy serves to undermine his stated ambition to 'side with things' and write from the object's point of view. My reading of Ponge is based primarily on observations of his neuroses involving speech, noting his first experience of being mute during a University oral exam as significant, and then exploring how his awareness of verbal inadequacy intensifies throughout his creative and critical texts and disturbs his intended phenomenological approach to things.

In the thesis, Ponge's oeuvre is mainly read as a diaristic account of his relationship with spoken expression, his difficulties changing and repeating themselves according to his choice of each object, and notably his decision to work within and against the prose poem. His writing is interpreted as being about the object giving Ponge a voice – or a host of voices according to the problems he encounters through each object – rather than about a poet who endows each object with a rhetoric of its own. I also explore where this 'crisis of speech' has parallels in the work of his contemporaries.

The present thesis draws new conclusions about the prominence of the spoken word in his writing and his development of the prose poem in Twentieth-century French Literature, based on a combined study of his life, his writing and fundamentally neurotic and obsessive relationship with the spoken word. At the same time, the thesis recognises Ponge as the motivation behind the collection of prose poems that make up the last part of the dissertation, where themes and objects from Ponge's texts resurface. The collection itself starts from a similar situation to that of Ponge in which objects and language conflate with the human subject's helplessness before various manifestations of the spoken word.

Introduction

Francis Ponge lived for nearly all of the Twentieth century (1899-1988) and was a French writer of prose poems, poetics, drafts, notes, reflections, and essays on European Modernist artists, including Pablo Picasso, Alberto Giacometti and Georges Braque. However notable this array of texts may sound, the small percentage of intellectuals, academics and poets who have heard of Ponge are aware that he is less known for his critical pieces than for his prose poems about objects, and his idiosyncratic focus on ordinary things that range from the cigarette to the crustacean. The fact that many of Ponge's critical and creative texts correspond to the point of being inseparable is essential to understanding his work. As he says of 'his so-called poetic texts and so-called critical or methodological texts' in an interview in Modern Poetry in Translation in 1971:

My critical texts, my texts on painters for example, are just as difficult, often more difficult, to write as those considered poetic. I make no distinction. My audacities and scruples are the same, whatever genre you assign to the text.¹

Given the 'difficult' aspect of his texts, the simplicity of Ponge's subject matter is therefore often misleading and in theory does little to aid the reader when confronted with the poems in isolation from his poetics. A pioneer of one of the first branches of prose poetry, the object poem in prose, which takes as its primary subject matter and focus the everyday or commonplace object, Ponge devoted both his poetry and poetics to a philosophical and semi-scientific scrutiny of the object and the complexities of the relationship between the ordinary object – man-made and natural – and language.²

¹ Francis Ponge, Interview in Modern Poetry in Translation, 21 (1974), 17, 16.

² It is important to clarify from the beginning of the thesis my particular use of the word 'object'. I am referring to the subject-matter of Ponge's prose-poems, the focus of which was the everyday object, which in turn was the impetus, and material for the wider subject-matter of language and phenomenology. Ponge's contemplation and meditations on the object itself, be it plant, stone or cigarette, became inextricable from the object, so 'object' refers to both the thing in front of him, and the use of his language as he observes. Language becomes the ultimate 'object' subject matter of the poem, but only through the 'object' thing that he contemplates.

Among Ponge's contemporary practitioners of the object poem were Gertrude Stein (1874-1946), Max Jacob (1876-1944) and Robert Bly (b.1926), although they are more commonly referred to as prose poets who wrote poems about objects, rather than as object poets. Ponge wore the title of object poet more convincingly because his poems do not appear to stray from the things themselves into the wider terrain and more general subject matter of prose poetry. The language of prose poetry is carefully accorded with the subject, and in this respect is as focussed on the object as the object poem, but it entertains a broader host of themes and discourses. In many ways, Ponge has as much in common with other poets of his time who were not object poets, but who were using language to communicate an awareness of a necessity to arrive at the essence of the thing, rather than displaying a metaphorical and symbolic use of the object.³ Fernando Pessoa's poem 'What we see of things is things' is a good example of what Ponge set out to accomplish. The following lines are a skeletal version of the poem, and provide a complementary vocalization of Ponge's ideal relationship with language and things, and precisely that which complicates or obscures, the pure name and character of the thing itself:

What matters is knowing how to see,
Knowing how to see without stopping to think
...
But that (alas for us whose souls are in full dress!)
That requires profound study,
An apprenticeship in unlearning
And an isolation in freedom from that convent
Whose poets say that stars are eternal nuns
And flowers convict of a single day.⁴

The American Modernist poet Charles Olson, who defined objectivism as 'the getting rid of the lyrical interference of the individual as ego, of the "subject" and his soul',⁵ also

³ I use the term 'thing' throughout the thesis, and it is interchangeable with 'object', in the sense of the everyday object, natural or man-made.

⁴ Fernando Pessoa (1888-1935), 'What we see of things is things', in *A Centenary Pessoa*, ed. Eugenio Lisboa, and L.C Taylor (Manchester: Carcanet, 1995), p. 57.

desired an authentic encounter with things in his poetry, and in line with Pessoa's despair of the soul that is 'dressed', in his *Maximus* poems Olson's wish is for 'the soul [to] be naked at the end of time'.⁶ What Ponge has in common with both these poets as well as the object poets above is a negative reaction to lyricism typified in the work of Nineteenth-century Romantic poets. Among the most quoted and skilled of these lyric poets are William Wordsworth, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, George Byron and John Keats, with the overarching exploration of the self as subject in Nineteenth-century poetry being generalised and 'denounced' by Ponge as 'romantico-lyrical-cancer'.⁷ However, where he distinguishes himself from the opposers of Romanticism is the extremity to which he takes this antipathy, his anti-lyricism culminating in one of his final poems, a book length scrutiny of soap (*Le Savon*, 1967), which looks at the pre-eminence of language through this particular object, rather than from a human perspective. The ambition of the project is partly reflected in the creation of the piece, which although published in 1967, was begun twenty-five years before when Ponge was in the Resistance during German occupation. The obdurate or determined nature of the project in part emerges through the extreme length and verbosity of the language during a time when soap itself was scarce.

Soap is Ponge's attempt at verbally translating the sounds and visual changes in the object during its immersion in water, using soap's interaction with hands and liquid as an analogy for the various stages, processes, potentials and dramas of speech from dry silence to foaming words. As part of its emphasis on dialogue and communication the poem includes a brief play, an extract of a letter from Albert Camus about the poem, and reflections from Ponge about Camus' response and Jean Paulhan's silence when they

⁵ Charles Olson, *Selected Writings*, ed. Robert Creeley (New York: New Directions, 1966), p. 24.

⁶ Olson, *The Maximus Poems* (New York: Jargon/Corinth Books, 1960), p. 132.

⁷ Jean-Michel Maulpoix, 'New Horizons of Contemporary Lyricism in France', trans. Catherine Lieder. Excerpt from *La poésie comme l'amour* (Mercure de France, 1998). Here cited at: www.maulpoix.net/newlyricism.html.

were each sent the draft, Paulhan being his friend and editor. These personal apparent extras to the poem itself are significant inclusions which argue against Ponge's intention to remain purely objective, but the success of the poem lies in the poet's tenacity when it comes to trying to distinguish between an essential language of an object and a language determined by human observations and preconceptions. Ponge would prefer to see himself, and in the case of soap, his hands, as a catalyst, or release, rather than a reason or determinant for the soap's dry tongue. The reality of the outcome, in varying degrees, is quite different. It is precisely Ponge's resolve – which increasingly borders on obsession – to create a language of and for objects which not only isolates his poems from his peers, and antecedents, but also from the objects themselves.

Although he was not the first writer of object poems – Rainer Maria Rilke's 1907 collection, Neue Gedichte (New Poems) is generally considered to be 'the first modern and fully developed occurrence of the so-called "object poem"'⁸ – Ponge was the first object poet of the Twentieth century to devote most of his creative and critical writing to things and what he called 'le parti pris des choses' (taking the side of things),⁹ a phrase he used for the title of his first major collection of poems in 1942. 'Le parti pris des choses' is a guiding dictum and philosophy in an attempt to create 'la rhétorique de l'objet' (the rhetoric of the object),¹⁰ whereby Ponge aimed at disciplining his imaginative and subjective responses to the object, in order to allow the inherent properties of the object itself to dominate the poem. Each poem, therefore, rather than offering mere objectivity

⁸ Michel Delville, The American Prose Poem: Poetic Form and the Boundaries of Genre (USA: University Press of Florida, 1998), p. 73. (Delville's book was the first full-length critical and historical survey of the American prose poem during the whole of the twentieth century).

⁹ Ponge uses this phrase on numerous occasions in his book of critical texts on writing, Pratiques d'écriture, one chapter of which is entitled thus on p. 74. In this chapter are two versions of an introduction to 'Le Parti pris des choses', the first discussing his desire to turn to things and not himself, the second expressing his wish to create a more harmonious relationship between 'man' and nature, both of which were written in 1928, several years before the collection itself. These texts seem to mark his first conscious use of the phrase.

¹⁰ Francis Ponge, 'Tentative Orale', in Le Grand Recueil: Méthodes (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1961), p. 260.

records Ponge's attempts at detecting the particularities of each object, and his efforts to grasp an equivalent of the object in words.

At times, his search for a language-object equivalence is successful, particularly when it comes to Ponge's use of etymology. As part of staying as close as possible to the properties of the object, Ponge draws on the origins of its name and uses the sounds and letters of its original title to influence and shape the words and sentences and pack the poem as densely as possible with details that reveal the object's inimitable sounds and features. In the same way, the language is focussed on creating a mimetic experience of the object itself and aims for a new expression of the object as Ponge uses words that will always 'lead the mind back to things'.¹¹ Ponge's poem 'L'orange' (1935), for example, in part verbally achieves a mimetic density of the thing through echoing the 'o' (and the 'ange') sound and shape of the fruit's name throughout the poem by repeating various words, among them: 'l'éponge', 'odorant', 'l'opression', 'ovale' and 'l'explosion'.¹² In the way that Ponge uses the sound of the word to retain the sense, shape and word of the object throughout the poem, 'L'orange' is fairly typical, but the use of sounds and letters in this way is only one part of Ponge's aim to side with things, and in many ways is one of his more successful, or straightforward ways of communicating the object's essence, or rhetoric.

'L'orange' is also an example of Ponge's poems where overall the English translation does not lose this mirroring and echoing effect. More often than not his concentration on the sounds of words as a way of informing the poem is a constant challenge for the translator. For example, C.K Williams has translated many of Ponge's poems, including 'L'orange', and his response to my question regarding the difficulties of

¹¹ Francis Ponge, 'Reasons for Living Happily' in *The Power of Language: Texts and Translations*, trans. Serge Gavronsky (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979), p. 61.

¹² Francis Ponge, 'L'orange', in *Francis Ponge: Selected Poems*, ed. Margaret Guiton, trans. Margaret Guiton, John Montague and C.K. Williams (London: Faber, 1998), pp. 22, 24.

translating Ponge was that the process was often deceptively difficult – ‘harder than it might look’, and that ‘because of his word-play, it was all but impossible, or impossible’.¹³

In working predominantly with translations of Ponge’s work, one of my main reasons for doing so is not only to draw comparisons between different translations and the original text, but also to observe where the translators do or do not achieve an adequate understanding of Ponge’s ambition to side with things, or lead the mind back to objects. Robert Bly, one of Ponge’s main translators in English, has a tendency to anthropomorphise some of Ponge’s objects, which can be read as going against Ponge’s determination to keep humankind out of his work. On the other hand, this aspect of Bly’s translations points to the fact that Ponge’s relationship with humans in his poetry is often ambiguous, as seen in his critical work in which he often seems aware that pure objectivity is impossible. As he says of objects in one of his earliest texts ‘Metatechnical Fragments’ (1922): ‘Où les voyez-vous qu’en vous-mêmes, où les verrais-je qu’en moi?’ (Where do you see them if not in yourselves? Where would I see them if not in myself?)¹⁴ By 1933, however, Ponge was expressing the desire for quite the opposite approach: ‘Le meilleur parti à prendre est donc de considérer toutes choses comme inconnues’ (the best solution is to consider all things as unknown).¹⁵ Given Ponge’s contradictions, many of his translators deal with the place of humans in Ponge’s work on a slightly more subtle level than some of Bly’s translations which, although they convey Ponge’s striking use of words and devotion to objects, at times seem more attuned to his own rather than Ponge’s style.

The varying ability of the translator to sacrifice the self when focussing on the object of their task imitates in many ways Ponge’s fluctuating successes and failures within his own ambition to lose his voice, and gain the object’s. At the extreme end of

¹³ C.K.Williams, brief email interview, 31.05.06.

¹⁴ Ponge, ‘Metatechnical Fragments’, in *The Power of Language*, p. 57.

¹⁵ Ponge, ‘Introduction to the Pebble’, in *The Power of Language*, p. 81.

the opposite case, where the translator's voice seems to interpolate, even speak over, the original voice, Lee Fahnestock, arguably Ponge's most astute translator, has been referred to by the renowned translator Barbara Wright as 'Ponge's voice in English'.¹⁶ One of the reasons for Fahnestock's success is her attention to his word-play and sense of rhythm, and, above all, her ability to focus and detect where Ponge struggled with language and where he enjoyed its flow when it surfaced. In my letters and discussions with translators, one of my questions relates to the extent to which they feel the need to iron out Ponge's verbal struggles for the sake of presenting a polished poem. Some of them acknowledged an initial tendency to smooth out the awkwardness in his work, but soon learnt that this is not the point of his poetry. At least this is the case with his later work where, as his poems become longer, his inclusion of drafts and broken speech becomes more overtly and frantically bound into the work itself, the idea of a final piece being far less important than the process of trying to communicate.

One of the other reasons for not working solely with the original texts is that my French is not advanced enough to tackle Ponge's word fusions. To return at this point to Williams' experience of translating Ponge, although he did not elaborate on a particular example, we can cite numerous challenges of this nature – Ponge's word 'Nioque' in the title of one of his late works, 'Nioque de L'Avant Printemps'¹⁷(1983) (approximate translation: Knowledge before the Spring), would fall into the kind of impossibility presented through his puns and word games. 'Nioque' is a visual and aural play on the words 'knowledge' and 'gnosis', Greek for knowledge. However, without complete understanding of Ponge's particular use of puns and word fusions based on the etymology of words, the translator's task is all too often tested, and arguably the translator is put in his or her place as being on the outside rather than inside of the text.

¹⁶ Barbara Wright, review of *The Nature of Things*, trans. Lee Fahnestock (New York: Red Dust, c1995), on Amazon website: www.amazon.com/Nature-Things-French-Francis-Ponge/dp.

¹⁷ Francis Ponge, *Nioque de l'Avant-Printemps* (Gallimard: Paris, 1983).

Indeed, with the above example, Ponge can give the impression that he does not wish to be translated, or at least that the use of words that are absent from the dictionary somehow parallels his own inclination to be absent from the text.

To what extent Ponge was aware of the strength of his presence rather than absence in the text is often made intentionally, or unintentionally, ambiguous in the relationship between his poetry and his poetics. It is the contradictions – and again, we question whether or not he was aware of them – between the creative and the critical texts that seem to indicate he was not always attentive to his inconsistencies when it came to absenting humankind, and himself, from the text. In a piece of critical writing, 'Reasons for Living Happily' (1928-29), Ponge acknowledges that to side with things, and write objectively, is 'an impossible goal or enterprise', further stating that 'man must always be reckoned with' as long as it is the case that 'things do not speak among themselves, but men among themselves speak about things'.¹⁸ In other texts, however, he announces his ambition as predominantly anti-subjective, a-lyrical and non-anthropomorphic, saying on a number of occasions, and notably in an interview, that 'lyricism in general disturbs me'.¹⁹ Notably, this anti-subjective stance is considered one of the main characteristics of the prose poem. Margueritte Murphy, in her study of the prose poem in English, acknowledges that 'the prose poem demonstrates a departure in poetry from the tyranny of the lyric "I"',²⁰ and in this respect his development of the object poem within prose poetry seems an appropriate choice for Ponge, but although he does not exploit the 'I' in the emotive sense of the Romantic poets, the attention to self is far from rare during his observation of the other.

¹⁸ Ponge, 'Reasons for Living Happily', p. 63.

¹⁹ Serge Gavronsky, ed. 'Interview with Francis Ponge', in *Poems & Texts*, trans. Serge Gavronsky. (New York: October House, 1969), p. 37.

²⁰ Margueritte Murphy, *A Tradition of Subversion: The Prose Poem in English from Wilde to Ashbery* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1992), p. 90.

In another practitioner of the object poem, Gertrude Stein (1874-1946), the objects in her collection of still life poems, Tender Buttons (1913;1914), have been noted by Michel Delville to not 'refer to anything but themselves',²¹ resulting in the 'disappearance of the lyric self'.²² In this sense, alongside her intention to 'express what something was, a little by talking and listening to that thing, but a great deal by looking at that thing',²³ Stein's visual and aural focus on the object resembles Ponge's scrutiny of the object. If we compare two object poems, one by each poet, and both about the same subject, we can see how they differ in their ability to deflect lyricism in their focus on the object. Both poems are short and worth quoting in full.

The first example, by Ponge, was written early on in his career in 1924, two years before he was first published, and was released as part of a later collection, Pièces, in 1961:

The Dog

Loping along, I read a lot, or feel obliged, forsooth, to go back over those tracks, to think again.
Friends..., here goes...!
(If I expressed myself, I shall have some readers.)²⁴

Ponge's use of the dog's tendency to return to the same ground and retrace its steps is less about his observation of the dog, than it is a way of reflecting on and then subsequently using that habit or trait to mock his own action or methods as a writer, or speaker. The references to reading, obligation, thinking, expression, the self, and readers, outbalances the 'loping' that he assigns to the dog as its individual characteristic. In addition to this, the last line of the poem hints very early on at Ponge's lack of confidence in his ability to express himself satisfactorily, and the frustration of repeatedly

²¹ Michel Delville, The American Prose Poem: Poetic Form and the Boundaries of Genre, p. 72.

²² Delville, The American Prose Poem: Poetic Form and the Boundaries of Genre, p. 73.

²³ Gertrude Stein, Look at Me Now and Here I am: Writings and Lectures 1909-45 (London: Penguin, 1971), p. 114.

²⁴ Ponge, 'The Dog', in Francis Ponge: Selected Poems, p. 115.

failing to communicate the nature of the object. There is more to say about this poem in relation to Ponge's writing process, but for now this is to be used merely as a comparison to Stein's poem, called 'A Dog', published as part of her collection, Tender Buttons (1914). 'A Dog' is in the first section of the collection, entitled 'Objects':

A Dog

A little monkey goes like a donkey that means to say that more sighs
last goes. Leave with it. A little monkey goes like a donkey.²⁵

The movement in this poem is similar to that of Ponge's poem in the way the last line returns to the first and mimics the action of going over tracks and thinking again. In this respect, both poems capture the sense of the dog, but where they differ is that Ponge's version is less anti-lyrical than Stein's, and in this sense of the two poets Ponge illustrates where he is less successful in the de-personalised aspect of the object poem, and what each poet set out to achieve in language. Stein's poem at least stays close to the dog by the mention of other animals to whom she compares its movement. The rhythm of the three animals, monkey, donkey and dog, is captured in the running and stopping pace of the words and sentences. We do not forget Stein during the reading of the poem because of her distinctive use of language, but it is because the poem is short and clean in its prose that we immediately think of the object as subject and visualise the object before, not after, the writer, something not always possible in Ponge's texts.

This thesis examines how Ponge struggles to function on a verbal level within a fluctuating and contradictory awareness of the impossibility of pure objectivity, and investigates the variety of his neuroses around the spoken word, objects, writing, writers, and the prose poem, and his role as creator, destroyer and perverter of his own ambition.

²⁵ Gertrude Stein, 'A Dog', in Tender Buttons (UK: Dodo Press, 1914), p. 13.

The argument goes against Ponge's dictum of 'siding with things' and does so for a particular reason, which is to reveal the ways in which his physical and intellectual self-consciousness in relation to the spoken word are increasingly manifest in his poems, and disable Ponge as a writer from writing purely from the point of view of the object, and achieving a rhetoric of the thing itself. It is important to note here the irony of Ponge failing to achieve what is anyway impossible – allowing objects to speak without the intervention of human language – and it is, therefore, part of my intention to unpack and reconfigure the different registers, intentions and meanings of 'siding with things' as Ponge's work changes and develops. The phrase does not mean writing objectively, but asserts that the emphasis of the poems rests more affirmatively on the object, rather than the human, or on details from Ponge's personal life.

At this point it is important to clarify that when I use the term 'speech' I mean the sentences and phrases Ponge uses that interrupt the writing process – the points when he checks his work and is conscious of his use of language in relation to the reader, and when, as a reader, I feel as though I am interrupting a private conversation as the poet tries to explain himself during his contemplation. A typical example of this occurs in one of his longer poems, 'Swallows', written between 1951 and 1956, in which he moves suddenly from a description of the subject, to himself:

With sudden changes of direction, hairpin turns, rapid wing-glides,
accelerations, gear shifts, the way a shark swims.

Ah! I know it by heart, this strange poem! But I shall no longer
leave it to express itself,
Here are the words, I have to say them.²⁶

Ponge often uses the verb 'dire' (to say) rather than 'écrire' (to write), when he is trying to explain himself in his writing, and 'Swallows' is no exception 'il faut que je les dise' ('I

²⁶ Ponge, 'Swallows', in Francis Ponge: Selected Poems, trans. Margaret Guiton, p. 177.

have to say them' rather than 'write' them). The extensive reliance on 'dire' gives the impression that speech is an important and highly conscious part of Ponge's writing, and one that often interferes with his written ability to describe the object. Admittedly, this use of the term 'dire' may not be a conscious physical discrimination between writing and speaking on Ponge's part, and 'swallow' is, of course, a translation which is far closer to the mouth and tongue than the French 'hirondelles', but that Ponge is aware of the significance of the mouth and voice of this subject is evident throughout the poem. For example, he follows the line 'Here are the words, I have to say them' with '(Vite, avalant ses mots à mesure)' (Quickly, swallowing the words as we go along),²⁷ no doubt playing with the English 'swallow', and later he uses the image of words as birds (the English translation seems to suit the original in terms of sounds) crying out to be fed: 'the famished family of little words with their big heads and gaping beaks'.²⁸ The final example shows even more signs of physical discomfort when it comes to the mouth, describing the mouth of the swallow as having been 'slit' (fendues), 'as though slit by a sword; the sword of speed' (Fendues comme par un sabre; le sabre de la vitesse).²⁹ Ponge uses the word 'fendues', which can also be translated as 'crack', but with both versions, the combination of language and violence is witnessed in the mouth being formed through external force; broken into rather than allowed to open naturally.

The mouth is a recurring image in Ponge's poems, and there are other examples amidst his later, more 'open' texts that point to some kind of relationship, or association between violence and the mouth³⁰. In his poem 'The Carnation' (1941-1944), Ponge implies that the verbal stumbling blocks in writing are not only to do with self-

²⁷ Ponge, 'Swallows', p. 177 (brackets are in the original.)

²⁸ Ponge, 'Swallows', p. 179 ('la famille famélique des petits mots à grosse tête et bec ouvert'.)

²⁹ Ponge, 'Swallows', p. 181.

³⁰ The following is an important distinction between Ponge's early and late use of the prose poem. The 'closed' texts are known as the short prose poems, or object poems, most of which are collected in the 1942 collection, *Le Parti pris des choses*, and whose primary focus is on the everyday object. These vary in length, but most of the short poems occupy half a page, while the longer poems which he is writing predominantly after the Second World War are known as 'open' texts and read more like essay-poems, some of which are as long as nine full pages. *Soap* is his longest and most ambitious 'open' text.

consciousnesses or worries of being misunderstood, but derive from a physical impediment of the tongue, and within the poem there are numerous images of the tongue as being the enemy, rather than the ally of speech:

Trumpets full gorged up
by the redundancy of their own expression

Throats utterly choked up by tongues

Their mouthpieces their lips torn
by the violence of the cries of their own expressions.³¹

The poem itself is broken into fifteen sections or verses, many of which are variations and reconfigurations of each other. The above image, therefore, is repeated, as though Ponge is translating himself:

Little tongues...
twisted and torn
by the violence of their purposes

A trumpet choked
by the redundancy of its own cries
with mouthpiece torn by their very violence.³²

The poem is an important one, because it alerts the reader not only to Ponge's consciousness of the role of speech in writing, but also to the fact that the objects he chooses are not random in relation to this awareness. Ponge states at the beginning that 'these carnations defy language' and that not only does he undertake writing about something of which he is unsure his own language in turn can defy ('It is quite possible that I do not possess the qualities required to bring off such an enterprise'),³³ he then proceeds to illustrate his anxiety by writing this nine page poem over a period of three years, most of which is based on variations of repeated words and phrases that circulate

³¹ Francis Ponge, 'The Carnation', in *Things*, trans. Cid Corman (USA: Grossman publishers, 1971), p. 87.

³² Ponge, 'The Carnation', p. 88.

³³ Ponge, 'The Carnation', p. 83.

around suffocating images of tongues, cloths, and violence. The final section is an afterthought on the verbal process as compared with a specific part of the plant itself, and is characteristic of Ponge's use of parts of objects to illustrate the verbal process, particularly objects of a botanical nature.³⁴

The other way that this awareness of speech is measured in his work, but to a less extraordinary degree, is through Ponge's use of inverted commas that are used frequently, one or two poems completely encapsulated in quotation marks. Add to this the way that the constant questions he asks in his work render the poem as dialogical, as do the conversational interruptions and what could be construed as private mutterings, as he questions, reflects and deliberates over his expression and the choices he is making, and it is difficult for the reader to deny the prevalence of a spoken voice in Ponge's writing. Along a more obvious line of his neurosis,³⁵ and I use this term in relation to his obsessive and highly self-conscious relationship with language and objects, Ponge drew frequent associations between the spoken word and dirt, sloppiness, inadequacy, risk and fear. It is therefore no wonder that something he tried to avoid in his writing is so prominent. Writing, rather than offering an escape or solution to the negative aspects of speech, becomes increasingly infected by spoken expression, and eventually speech and writing merge to become inextricable.

My argument, however, is not so concerned with the fact that time and again Ponge fails the impossible – writing from the object's point of view – but that he is too

³⁴The image is a useful one to keep in mind in relation to later and more in depth discussions of other poems performing a similar act. Expression here is compared to what is described as a 'sort of long root horizontally underlining the soil surface, a kind of very resistant string, which baffles one trying to extract it, forces him to alter the direction of his effort. It very much resembles the phrase by which I am "right now" trying to express it, something that only unfolds as it is uprooted, that...is likely to snap (under my effort) before I can extract its principle. Aware of this danger I risk it savagely, shamelessly, at different times.' ('The Carnation', p. 90).

³⁵ Throughout the thesis, I use the term 'neurosis', and it is consistently applied to Ponge's highly self-conscious use of language, and often blinkered and obsessive search for the object's voice rather than his own. This constant return to objects as an (illusory) turning away from the self intensifies over time, and renders his neurosis more transparent as we note in his increasing distrust and nervousness around words and their value and use for his ambition to 'side with things'.

aware of his personal difficulties with language to prevent his own insecurities and individual traits from becoming part of the poem during his scrutiny of the object. In this respect, he fails to use the object in the way that he wanted, which is to put what he called a 'brake on [his] subjectivity'.³⁶ Ponge's self-consciousness around speech – which I believe partly stems from his personal experience of World War One and a possibly related incident at the end of the War when he failed two University oral entrance exams on account of an unexpected inability to utter a word – also interferes with some of his other ambitions within this objective of writing from a predominantly a-lyrical and anti-subjective stance.

One of the most significant of Ponge's other ambitions in poetry involves his desire to render the poem with as much solidity and density as the object in question. He writes of this material approach to language that 'I try in the verbal world to do something which has as much concrete existence as the objects that I describe'.³⁷ I argue that what occurs in his poetry – in progressive stages of intensity between the early short prose poems and the later more open use of the form – is a language that becomes increasingly neurotic, fragile, destabilised, vulnerable, violent and awkward.³⁸ Ponge's chosen subject in its relative silence, simplicity, solidity, and stillness as compared with the challenges he saw in the faces and emotions of humankind became the most terrifying challenge of all to his determined objectivity, and his abject fear of being unable to speak.

³⁶ Ponge, 'Interview with Francis Ponge', *Poems & Texts*, ed. and trans. Serge Gavronsky, p. 37.

³⁷ Francis Ponge, *The Sun Placed in the Abyss, and other texts*, trans. Serge Gavronsky (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979), p. 96.

³⁸ To make the claim that Ponge's poems are interesting, often beautiful and surprising in their fresh and original analogies, but that they are far from reassuring for the reader, is obviously complicated by the fact that I am working in translation, and with a variety of different translations. However, this lack of stability is manifest in the original versions in a number of ways which defy translation, or rather fuse the original and the translation together. I am speaking here of punctuation and the visual look of the original, and the way Ponge's use of symbols and fonts unsettles the text. To name a few, the excessive use of brackets suggests hesitancy, and a desire to explain without explaining in full, and the switching between italics, bold and normal font give the text the impression that it is in a constant state of flux, and of highs propelled by over-emphasis. Ellipses also break up the text and give the impression of wanting to say more, but being unable to do so. The asterisk, which in itself connotes doubt or absence, appears in a number of poems, and visually gives the impression of restlessness and an unsure mind and relationship with language.

Ponge did not stutter, nor did he actually have aphasia, but there were certain incidents in his life, such as the University oral examinations, that prevented him from being physically able to speak, and subsequently intensified, or created a fear of the spoken word and the act of speaking. This neurosis around the act of speech is a visible and crucial part of his writing and use of the prose poem. Ponge has been described by Serge Gavronsky – critic, poet and one of Ponge’s most renowned translators – as someone ‘who found speaking nearly impossible’,³⁹ and it is notable that until the last few decades of his life he suffered from anxieties about speaking in public. His first public speech in 1947, when he was forty-eight years old, was appropriately entitled, ‘Tentative Orale’ (Verbal Attempt).⁴⁰

One of the most pronounced of Ponge’s neuroses around speech was the association that he made between speech and dirt, claiming he felt unclean after speaking: ‘often after a conversation, after talking, I have the feeling of dirt, of insufficiency, of muddled things’.⁴¹ The writer connected dirt with confusion and upheld a palpable fear of what he conceived to be the spoken word’s vagueness, sloppiness and ability to make him feel lost and vertiginous. In relation to another French prose poet before him, regarded as the pioneer of the prose poem, Charles Baudelaire, Ponge shared with him the view of language as an abyss, and silence as a terrifying unknown to be avoided. Baudelaire’s poem, ‘Le Gouffre’ (n.d.) (‘The Chasm’ or ‘The Abyss’), encapsulates this fear for them both:

Above and below, everywhere, distances, shores,
Silence, terrifying imprisoning space...
I fear sleep as one fears a great hole,

³⁹ Serge Gavronsky, introduction, *The Power of Language*, p. 11 (here Gavronsky also refers to Ponge’s oral exam failure.)

⁴⁰ Ponge, *Le Grand Recueil: Méthodes*, p. 227.

⁴¹ Francis Ponge, ‘The Practice of Literature’, in *Acts of Literature* by Jacques Derrida, ed Derek Attridge. (London: Routledge, 1992), pp. 356-7.

Full of vague horror, leading one knows not where.⁴²

Resisting Baudelaire's Symbolism and allegorical treatment of socially bound themes, Ponge tried to anchor himself by turning to what he called 'le monde muet...notre seule patrie' ('the silent world... our only homeland').⁴³ However, although Ponge tried to free the object of cultural, literary and symbolic turns of phrase, as well as of its use value, he was not historically and culturally ignorant. Much of his awareness of culture and literature, rather than leading to a positive contrast to what he is doing with the object, was informed by his rage at capitalist institutions and judgment of how individual, or original language was subordinated by the weak and unquestioning acceptance of the crowd. Ponge illustrates this cynicism in a number of poems. Relative to what is essentially a battle between his desire for an object-centred language, and a business-governed, or political rhetoric which is sordid, and deafening and 'imposes itself physically'⁴⁴ on the individual's ear, Ponge's closed text 'The Augean Stables' (1929-30) gives the impression that he has lost this battle before he has even begun, given the text was one of his earliest prose poems:

There is nothing left to do but to fill ourselves up on imitations, artifices, headlines, deals; to arrange errors according to principles of bad taste, and in the end, attempt to bring out the filigree of an idea through artful lighting in the midst of this exhausting game of mutual abuses.⁴⁵

This particular impression of giving into the inevitable at the expense of his own aim is preceded by Ponge's awareness of his own understanding of what he is battling against: 'But having become aware of it we are nearly saved'.⁴⁶ This consciousness, however,

⁴² Charles Baudelaire (1821-1867), *Flowers of Evil and other works: A Dual-Language Book*, ed. and trans. Wallace Fowle (Dover Publications, Inc., New York, 1992), p. 115.

⁴³ Ponge, *Le Grand Recueil: Méthodes*, p. 199.

⁴⁴ Ponge, 'The Augean Stables', in *The Power of Language*, p. 69.

⁴⁵ Ponge, 'The Augean Stables', p. 71.

⁴⁶ Ponge, 'The Augean Stables', p. 69.

seems futile because of what follows immediately, and does nothing but draw attention to the difficulty and enormity of his task.⁴⁷

In this respect, Ponge's anger at a societal or more pertinently, a bureaucratic use of language is undercut, or challenged by something of a more personal relationship with language. Indeed, Ponge was an extremely self-conscious writer and although his critical texts document his commentaries on social restrictions over words, his actual poems are riddled with references to his own individual experience of silence or verbosity when facing the object. The object as subject-matter is a double-bind for Ponge, representing what he hopes will save him from silence, as well as presenting him with the risk of an attack of aphasia and inadequacy. As indicated in 'Tentative Orale', his own definition of things and why he has chosen them for his subject matter, is not dissimilar to a catch-22:

Voilà la définition des choses que j'aime: ce sont celles dont je ne parle pas, dont j'ai envie de parler, et dont je n'arrive pas à parler. (Here is the definition of the things I love: they are the ones about which I do not speak, about which I would like to speak, about which I cannot speak.)⁴⁸

Increasingly throughout his life, Ponge's private insecurities around speaking become more apparent in his writing, in spite of the distinctions he tried to draw between the spoken and written word. In this respect, I am arguing against, or rather re-exploring, Shirley Ann Jordan's assertion in her published dissertation on Ponge's art criticism, that by the time of his Post-War work during the Fifties 'his popular image as an author

⁴⁷ The last sentence of the poem indirectly refers to Ponge's ambition in comparison to Hercules', whose task according to Ponge was relatively modest and insignificant. In many ways, therefore, Ponge's battle between a social or cultural language and his own agenda with objects is confusing in this poem, as on the one hand Ponge seems defeated, while on the other he acts superior. The sentence that ends the poem leads to this confusion, where Ponge states that changing the language involves using the language he does not like or respect, which is 'exciting work which requires a stouter heart and more finesse and perseverance than Hercules needed for his task involving a simple and crass morality' (p.71). Is the language of the social order from which Ponge was trying to escape or revolt against, therefore, more useful to him than he indicates? In this respect, it is pointless to draw such contrasts or divisions between the object and culture.

⁴⁸ Francis Ponge, 'Tentative Orale', in *Le Grand Recueil: Méthodes*, p. 246 (my translation.)

concerned exclusively with objects...who found the act of speech inconceivable, was already out of date'.⁴⁹ That he was delivering public speeches later in life is true, but in terms of his writing, what had haunted him about the act of speech around the time of the closed texts continues into the open texts after the War, and becomes intensified rather than resolved.

The thesis also takes into account Ponge's experimental use of the prose poem form and focuses on how his transition from the closed texts, or object poems, to the more open prose-poem essay enabled his difficulties with expression to move from a controlled anger and violence that lies behind his focus on the object, towards a freer, more overt and idiosyncratic expression of the self which at times borders on the deformed and the monstrous. My use of 'deformed' and 'monstrous' pertains to the anthropomorphic and hybrid images in Ponge's poems which render the object and the language not simply ugly, but uncanny, perverse and awkward, and rather than the words and the object becoming closer to the essence of what they are, Ponge's things and in turn his use of language become estranged from the reader, and appear closer to something they are not. The result, to use the words of Hugo Friedrich on what he sees as Ponge's unrealistic language, is that of a 'spooky unreality'.⁵⁰

Viewing Ponge's use of language as a way of creating this 'unreality' is pertinent to my later discussion in Chapters Six and Seven of Ponge's longer poems and his art criticism. Here, though, I wish to elaborate on the ideas of the 'monstrous' and 'deformed' by aligning them with Ponge's negation of things, drawing upon the use of the term 'via negativa' used by David Williams in his book, Deformed Discourse, which discusses the function and effect of the monster in medieval literature, emphasising the

⁴⁹ Shirley Ann Jordan, introduction, The Art Criticism of Francis Ponge, MHRA Texts and Dissertations, Vol. 36. (London: W.S. Maney & Son Ltd, 1994), p. 14.

⁵⁰ Hugo Friedrich, in Michael Hamburger's The Truth of Modern Poetry, p. 29.

role of hybrids and juxtapositions and the idea of the monstrous other.⁵¹ In relation to Ponge's use of speech, this negation takes place in his tendency to un-say his sentences and assertions by commenting on and going back on what he has said within the poem. The poet's own monstrous or deformed verbal expression also reveals itself notably in his uncanny use of hybrids between the natural and the unnatural worlds. What is of particular interest with regard to these juxtapositions and visual surprises is how, as his texts become longer, Ponge increasingly upsets the reader's expectations of language both linguistically and visually, and produces a kind of deformed rhetoric that acts as a narrative of Ponge's own struggles with expression. What is lost in the longer texts is control, not only that of the writer's over language and the object, but of Ponge's siding with things – more than with the closed texts, the reader is left unsure of where Ponge is in control of the object and where the object is in command of Ponge.

The question of control is directly related to Ponge's choice of object, and the kinds of objects that challenge Ponge in different ways and bring him closer or further away from his fear of being unable to speak, and be understood. The extent to which objects were a therapeutic or aggravating part of this relationship with the spoken word at times, and as we have seen in 'The Carnation', seems to depend on which object he chose to focus. 'The Pebble' (written somewhere between 1927 and 1933), for example, seemed to produce more anxiety than 'The Suitcase' (1947) whose opening detail – 'My suitcase accompanies me to the Vanoise mountains and already its nickleplate shines and its thick leather exhales'⁵² – reads with ease in terms of his own place in the poem and his personal attachment to the object. This straightforwardness and air of simplicity towards his own presence in the poem is uncharacteristic of Ponge, while the strain of 'The Pebble' is much more familiar, opening as it does with a line that is part challenge, part

⁵¹ David Williams, *Deformed Discourse: The Function of the Monster in Mediaeval Thought and Literature* (Great Britain: University of Exeter Press, 1999), p. 24.

⁵² Ponge, 'The Suitcase', in *Francis Ponge: Selected Poems*, trans. John Montague, p. 157.

defeat and part defence: 'It isn't easy to define a pebble....So don't blame me for going back further than the flood'.⁵³ However, although in many ways it is easy to appreciate why a suitcase is easier to write about than a stone, overall throughout the history of his writing, Ponge's choice of object does not become any more peculiar in itself. In spite of this, while 'The Dog' (1924), 'The Crate' (1934), 'The Candle' (1935), 'The Cigarette' (1935, 1937-39), 'Bread' (1927-28, 1937) and 'The Mollusk' (n.d.) are all short prose poems which lend his language a focussed and relatively precise and effortless turn of phrase, 'Snails' (1936), 'Fauna and Flora' (1936-37), 'The Spider' (1942-48), and 'The Pebble' (1927, 1932-33) are not only longer works, but open up this abyss in language, which forces Ponge to look at himself. The consequences are interruptions in the poems' flow, and the poet turning from, or rather going through the object to his own failures in language. From these objects and words, he ends up creating monstrous renditions of words and things through direct and indirect allusions to monsters, and at times madness. More specifically, in terms of language, and the reader's relationship with the words and images, the effect of the longer poems is often strange, fragmented, exclusive, and at times inaccessible; in terms of the object's merger with that language, the result is that of nightmarish and frequently unexpected images and visions.

The issues outlined above are taken up in the main body of the thesis, which consists of ten chapters divided into two parts, while Part Three consists of a brief study of my choice of Ponge in relation to my poetry and a collection of my prose poems. Part One uses a biographical framework to chart Ponge's relationship with speech, exploring chronologically his discomfort around the spoken word, the effect Ponge's relationship with speech had on his writing, and how Ponge's choice of the ordinary object as his predominant subject matter challenged his use of language and reflected back the inadequacies and successes of his verbal expression.

⁵³ Ponge, 'The Pebble', in *Francis Ponge: Selected Poems*, trans. Margaret Guiton, p. 91.

The way I chart Ponge's physical relationship to speech begins in Chapter One with a brief sketch of the poet, and his influences at school and later as an adult in Paris. Overall, Part One considers how Ponge's inhibitions with speech were affected by his relationship with society, friends, writers, artists and the First World War, and cites his first experience of language and failure at the end of the War as an incident from which he never fully recovered, but explored in a variety of ways and on a number of different levels in his work. While Chapter One considers the seeds of his neurosis with language, the impact of war on language, and his consequential fear of silence, Chapters Two and Three look at where this neurosis turns to anger in his writing. During the Twenties, his rage of expression forms his anti-speech and pro-writing attitude in Paris where he produced most of his writing, and drew associations between the city, dirt, and speech, and the need for a textual cleansing of language. Throughout Ponge seems to distinguish between writing as clean and speech as dirty.

Chapters Three and Four cover the Thirties and look at Ponge's involvement and ultimate disgust with Surrealism, but also his ambiguous relationship with the unconscious when it came to language. Ponge's anti-unconscious stance is questionable given his choice of the prose poem and its historical and thematic associations with the unconscious and the surreal. Chapter Five covers important explorations of Ponge's attacks of aphasia and his general anxieties around expression, both written and spoken, and argues that his subjective experience of speechlessness is an intrinsic part of his decision to write about objects, rather than humans directly, and that his personal struggles with speech are manifest in his poetry far more than his critical work and obsession with the objective and the material would lead us to believe. In the interview with friend and translator, Serge Gavronsky, where Ponge claims his recourse to objects was to enable him to put a 'brake' on his subjectivity, I draw attention to verbal slips in the work that belie this assertion, and argue that Ponge himself is evident in his poetry

far more than his poetics suggest, which in turn brings up the issue of the contradictory and complex relationship between Ponge's creative and critical writing.

Chapter Six looks at Ponge's associations between language and death, the fear of misrepresenting and being defeated by the object, and that as the texts become longer Ponge's acknowledgements of his writing process become more of an obvious and frequent part of the text itself, and in turn his fear of misrepresenting the object becomes more patently a fear of misrepresenting himself. Increasingly in his writing Ponge not only slips, but becomes almost hysterically woven into the main body of the poem itself, as though he is losing control not only of language but also the boxed-like paragraph of the prose poem. Ponge's texts after the Second World War become more haphazard and open, his language more self-conscious, and his associations between silence, death, misrepresentation of object and self and the War more acute. Particularly, during the 1950s his obsession with the verbal and the object moves from a psychological and neurotic exploration of language and things, to a darker more sinister and disconcerting era explored through the objects of the longer texts and expounded in his art criticism.

Throughout Part One, I consider Ponge's choice of the prose poem and the ways in which his use of the form both accommodated and dissatisfied his main struggles with speech. In conjunction with the observations of the changing and perverse nature of Ponge's use of speech in his writing, I examine the way the prose poem itself has been referred to as monstrous not only for its hybrid form, but also for its absence as a recognised genre in poetry – in other words, its marginality. One of the more notable examples of this comparison between prose poetry and monsters is in George Barker's study of the prose poem 'The Jub-Jub Bird', where he compares the scarcity of the form to the Loch Ness monster, seeing the prose poem as 'a creature of whose existence we

have only very uncertain evidence'.⁵⁴ This lack of recognition throughout its history (notably in the UK rather than France) since the mid-Nineteenth century is partly due to the reputation of the prose poet's self-conscious defiance of conventional classification combined with the prose poem's self-referential nature, and partly to do with pre-established notions of the distinctions between prose and poetry, particularly in England. Although the genre prose poetry is more accepted in France, Francis Ponge, if anything, makes it even more difficult to classify prose poetry, not only by offering the object poem as another genre, or sub-genre within its otherwise unsure status, but also through his developments and explosions of the form, from a box-shape which occupies half a page to an essay of multiple pages, and ultimately the length of a small book.

Part Two looks at the transition between the closed and the open texts and the parallel change of Ponge's role in Post-War Paris during his writing on artists, and how his further use of the open form marks a change in Ponge's use of language, bordering on what I see as monstrous not only in the sense of deformed, or uncanny, but specifically in relation to the term Latin phrase 'via negativa' or negative way, which is used by David Williams in Deformed Discourse, his book on monsters and language. Arguing from the point of view that the things in Ponge's later poems are explored negatively, in terms of what they are not, I use Williams' exploration of the monstrous in relation to a negative and deformed use of discourse to examine Ponge's changing relationship with language and form. The subsections in the chapters are dictated by the names of the poems themselves. Chapter Seven is devoted to a critical examination of the closed texts, and in relation to his fellow writers, while Chapters Eight and Nine discuss the open texts. All three chapters chart the different manifestations of Ponge's efforts with speech in the prose poems themselves and note also the similarities between his use of speech in the closed poems and in the open texts.

⁵⁴ George Barker, The Jubjub Bird or Some Remarks on the Prose Poem and A Little Humouring of Lionel Johnson (Warwick: Greville Press Pamphlets, Greville Press, 1985), p. 1.

Chapter Ten examines Ponge's last open poems and his art criticism and looks at how many of his verbal difficulties and inadequacies culminate in his unconventional art essays on the art of Post-War painters and sculptors. Where in the poems I note how Ponge's personal difficulties with speech have not disappeared in the writing, but have instead emerged more significantly through the writing process, in the art criticism and the increasing inclusion of drafts in the poems during this time, I observe that rather than escaping what he sees as dirty and inadequate speech through the pure solidity of writing, it becomes increasingly difficult to separate what is being spoken and what is being written, and the drafts he includes with the 'finished' pieces are an essential and transparent part of his contradictory and painful dialogue between written and verbal expression.

Chapter Ten includes a discussion of one of the final and longest of Ponge's poems, 'Le Pré' ('The Meadow') (1960-64) as well as 'Le Fabrique du Pré' (The Making of the Meadow) (1971) which is then published as part of the poem itself, and is the first example of Ponge allowing the draft to be published as part of the actual poem. In line with this decision, Ponge was drawn to artists who were not interested in presenting polished and finished results, but instead expressed the importance of process in their work, with all its brutal insecurity, and rough-hewn appearance. I include the discussion of this poem and its draft in this chapter because of its collation of drawn sketches and written passages, and the bridging impact of its visual appearance as well as that of its content and verbal style.

Part Three begins with a crossing between the main thesis and my creative writing, noting my reasons for choosing Ponge and comparing my own understanding of the prose poem with Ponge's use of the form. I examine how our use of the subjective is separated by our differing use of the object. Where I use the object in relation to family, and isolated moments from my life, Ponge's use of the subjective concerns his

relationship with speech; his subjective is language based, rather than family based. I observe how my use of language changes according to how I use the object in certain situations from my life. These situations are often connected to my mother and I examine how Ponge has influenced my approach to her death and epilepsy and that focussing more on objects has helped me to step back from a language that for years was predominantly inward looking, and narrow. Although I acknowledge that my mother's death and illness taught me a new relationship with language, Ponge has been significant for helping me write about her indirectly through objects and things around her. The collection of prose poems, 'Speaking Without Tongues', is the final part of the thesis. As a practising writer, I deemed it necessary to explore Ponge both theoretically and in my own work, and understand and challenge the reasons for my creative attention to objects and speech through the poetry and critical work of an exemplar of this particular combination.

Overall, I am not so much interested in whether Ponge loses or gains his status as a prose poet (according to the few common definitions of the form) as the prose poems become longer, but more in how the conscious fusing of prose and poetry revises our awareness of language, and possibly confuses the focus between the objective, and the subjective, and the self and the other. If Ponge associated the closed texts with the prose poem, and the open texts, and unfinished drafts as a movement away from the prose poem, how are we to define the open texts, when they are quite clearly a development of these short pieces? Ponge's significance as a prose poet is largely due to the way he raises these questions about the form, and ensures the reader takes nothing for granted in the wider relationship between language and form, an issue that, as the next chapter suggests, we can trace back to his early life and development.

Part One: The Object of Speech

Chapter One: Language and Things

Francis Ponge: The Name

Francis Ponge was born in 1899 of Protestant parents in Montpellier, and died in 1988 in Le-Bar-sur-Loup, a small, quiet, well-restored medieval village situated on a rock overlooking the Loup river valley. The last twenty years of his life were spent here in relative isolation and although he died a fairly well-known writer and thinker among some French, American and English critics, poets and artists, receiving a modest number of respected literary prizes in the 1970s, it is somehow appropriate to his character and attitude towards published writing and other forms of public communication, that he withdrew towards the end of his life to a place where cars were forbidden, and populated by approximately two and a half thousand people. In his obituary in the New York Times, Ponge is described as having lived as a 'recluse for the last 20 years',⁵⁵ and although there are exceptions to this as a truth, there is enough evidence throughout his life to argue that Francis Ponge had hermetic tendencies cultivated by intensely private and angry phases which kept him away from the public literary scene in France.

Perhaps because of Ponge's unwillingness to flaunt his name as much as he could have given his position in Paris, his appearance elsewhere, particularly in England in both creative and critical books on French poetry and prose poetry, is often slight or non-existent. The poet's writing period, in terms of exposure to the public, emerged fairly late on in his life, with 1942-1967 as his most prolific phase. Ponge has a handful of loyal critics and translators in France, England and America, and between the three countries,

⁵⁵ The New York Times, August 9, 1988: 'Francis Ponge, Writer of 'Thing-Poetry', 89'. Here cited at: www.query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html.

there are some insightful and enthusiastic studies of the poet and his work. In spite of his non-appearance in the index of various critical overviews of French literature, he does appeal to students and academics interested in French poetry, and features more widely in a variety of scholarly articles whose subject matter is focussed on topics pertinent to modernism in French literature, among them, phenomenology, objects, Post-War silence, truth and prose poetry. When Ponge's name is recognised outside of literary circles in Paris, he is known in parts of America and Europe, mainly in university circles, as a poet who wrote prose poems that focussed on ordinary, everyday objects. In general, with the exception of a handful of texts in English, the majority of his other work, which includes his extensive poetics and pieces on modern artists, is either unknown or merely alluded to in texts. In Paris, where he spent most of his writing life, Ponge's influence on French literature and culture was relatively modest compared to that of the writers and artists he knew, among them, Sartre, Camus, Picasso, Braque and Derrida. In comparison to the effect of Ponge's name, the profound and wide-spread impact of each of their names on modern literature and culture is recognised and familiar to a large and varied readership. It is within the genre of the object poem, itself a sub-genre of prose poetry, that Ponge's impact is more immediately felt and witnessed. However, in consideration of the amount of work the poet produced between his poetry, poetics, art criticism, extensive notes on his longer poems, and various prose pieces, as well as his close friendships and shared ideologies with highly influential figures of Post-War Paris, the fact that Ponge is a name that continues to cause frowns or blank expressions in discussions of French Twentieth-century writing and literature, is baffling and intriguing in itself.

On getting to know the writer's life through the critical texts available and the various translations of his poems, the answers to some of the questions that surround his seemingly inconsistent impact on modern European and American poets, reveal themselves in equally amusing and serious ways. In short, Francis Ponge was not one for

exploiting his name and flaunting his work the moment it was published, and although he was by no means averse to people, he devoted most of his life to physical and natural objects, before he turned to humankind. Eventually, he would reach people, but less through them, than in spite of them, or, as he suggests in his creatively critical reflection on the dictionary, art and evading literary influence, 'Fragments Métatechniques' (Metatechnical Fragments) (1922), behind them:

The artist can reach the public by way of a cape, or a gulf, or a river which he can travel back to his heart; he can fly over it, and only allow his shadow to amuse the surface; he can conquer it by foot, and in time take all the paths.⁵⁶

Among Ponge's most ambitious aims was to teach humankind a lesson about the vast topics of language and truth and humankind's responsibility to words, and in order to narrow this lesson he was not going to teach by looking directly at people, but by focussing on the object – the ordinary, and, as he saw it, much neglected and misunderstood object. Most importantly, the lesson was to be conducted in a number of surprising ways, at the expense of language itself, or rather the spoken and written language that he considered overused and sterile.

Ponge was concerned to hold language itself to account. In a short piece called 'Some Reasons for Writing'⁵⁷ written between 1929 and 1930, he declares that, paradoxically, one of the incentives for writing is the need to speak. The act of writing as an act of speech is what both complicates and characterises his work and personality. His use of voice is not only used in the sense of discovering individual creativity, but also to assert an individual voice above the din of industry and bureaucratic values marked by 'all those heavy trucks that pass through us'.⁵⁸ Ponge insists 'that at every moment, it is necessary to shake yourself free of the soot of words...[and] to speak against words.' As

⁵⁶ Ponge, 'Metatechnical Fragments', in *The Power of Language*, p. 57.

⁵⁷ Ponge, 'Some Reasons for Writing', in *The Power of Language*, p. 65.

⁵⁸ Ponge, 'Some Reasons for Writing', p. 65.

he sees it, a degree of violence is needed in order to assure a new appreciation of language: 'There is only one way out....Drag them along in shame to where they lead us, and there they will be disfigured'.⁵⁹ According to Ponge, clichés were best abolished, and new proverbs created to replace them in line with the rhetoric and point of view of the object.

The ordinary object, therefore, faced extraordinary challenges with Ponge, but it is also fair to say that he granted it more of an audience than he did people. It was through focussing on naming and re-naming the smaller things of the world that Ponge set out to sacrifice and neglect his own name. This usurping of 'Ponge' and any hint at his own appearance in the poem in favour of the object's title and presence, however, although begun early on in his career, was not a sustainable ambition, or device in his work. Ponge's generalising and bitter reactions against society's use of language during the immature stages of his life and focus on objects had a profound impact on his own use of language. The journey through his poems, therefore, is as much about the narrative of his observations of the world as it is an account of how these projected disappointments turned back towards Ponge, and showed him as a self rather than as an other.

School and Rhetoric

Ponge's interest in language and objects, as well as the thoughts he later developed about society as hideous and debauched, and the urgency he felt about meditating on objects began to emerge at school. His 'love of the Latin and French languages' started at the Lycée Malherbe in Caen, where he was also taught Classical Greek and natural sciences, all influences which nurtured his passion for precision in writing, and a sense of

⁵⁹ Ponge, 'Some Reasons for Writing', p. 67.

responsibility towards making the most of the French language.⁶⁰ As Martin Sorrell notes in his biographical information on Ponge, 'his classical background led him to later develop a sustained interest in linguistic concision and density and to try to restore to French the strength and depth he thought it had once gained from Latin, especially from such writers as Lucretius and Tacitus'.⁶¹

Lucretius' poem De natura rerum⁶² is a text to which Ponge later refers as an important model for his work, stating simply that 'I would like to write a sort of De natura rerum'.⁶³ The text is a book-length poem written in the First Century BC which translates either as 'On the Nature of Things' or 'On the Nature of the Universe', and is an exposition of Epicurus' philosophy to enable the common reader to understand the complexities of his ideas. Lucretius' materialistic rather than religious approach to the world is typified in the characters in the poem: Religion is a monster who seeks to destroy truth and Epicurus a heroic teacher who conquers Religion by explaining to humankind about the universe being made of atoms, rather than being pre-ordained – atoms that will continue after death and move from the human form and the soul into another shape from nature, such as water or stone. Epicurus offers humankind an alternative to presuppositions of our origins and turns mankind's face away from gods and deities towards a sense of personal responsibility and a more scientific approach to existence. What Ponge took from this poem was primarily Lucretius' concrete approach to what we can and cannot see, his emphasis on reason rather than romanticism, and an opportunity to distinguish himself from his contemporary poets by composing a 'single cosmogony', rather than individual poems.⁶⁴

⁶⁰ Ian Higgins, Francis Ponge (London: Athlone Press, 1979), p. 3.

⁶¹ Martin Sorrell, Francis Ponge (Boston: Twayne, 1981), p. 18.

⁶² My edition: Lucretius, On the Nature of the Universe, trans. R. E. Latham (London: Penguin, 1994)

⁶³ Ponge, 'Introduction to the Pebble', in The Power of Language, p. 81.

⁶⁴ Ponge, 'Introduction to the Pebble', p. 81.

'On the Nature of Things' consists of six books, and is written in Latin, Lucretius one of the first Epicureans to write in the language, another aspect of his poem which would have greatly appealed to Ponge. However, while he was insistent on distinguishing himself from his contemporaries by using this poem as a model for much of his work, he was also highly dedicated to the French language and, as Gavronsky notes, Ponge wanted to 'situate himself within the confines of the French literature'.⁶⁵ Gavronsky then quotes and translates Ponge to reveal his determined responsibility towards French:

I also feel that I have another mission as well, which is to discover verbal forms, original expressive formulations. A way of marking the language with my style, making the spirit of the French language walk forward step by step, working in the verbal laboratory, providing examples, models.⁶⁶

In order to discover these 'original expressive formulations', Ponge turned to the Latin root of each word, or object. The beginning, rather than the ending of the history of each word, was more important and it was part of Ponge's aim for the origin of the word, its etymological root to set the tone, rhythm and language for the rest of whatever poem he was writing. Returning to the original name of the object was one of Ponge's ways of insinuating a sense of truth and Latinate precision back into the French language, and by implication of reminding humankind of the strength and untarnished power of language before it became abused, and unclean.

Ponge's early devotion to French, in spite of the hermetic tendencies he later developed, did not preclude an awareness of other literatures and languages that he developed both within and outside of the confines of the classroom. His attendance at the Lycée between 1909 and 1916 was briefly interrupted in 1913 by a trip through England, Belgium and Holland with his uncle, a school teacher. Travelling was an

⁶⁵ Serge Gavronsky, introduction, *The Power of Language*, p. 25.

⁶⁶ Ponge, cited in Gavronsky, introduction, *The Power of Language*, p. 25. Original context, in Francis Ponge, *Pour un Malherbe* (Paris: Gallimard, 1965), p. 70.

experience that by all accounts greatly influenced his performance at school, his academic abilities rewarded once he had returned and settled by his coming first in class in the Baccalaureate dissertation.

Ponge was also interested in using other disciplines outside of literature when it came to language, and John Montague, one of Ponge's translators in the Selected Poems, observes Ponge's indebtedness to school, not in relation to travel or Classicism, but to natural science. Montague draws on the example of the Leçons de Choses, which was introduced to French schools in 1880, where the idea was to teach science by grounding it in observation and experiment. The lesson began with an object, the observed facts noted down by the children, while the teacher provided the explanation. As Montague recalls from his own experience:

In French primary schools in the Third and Fourth Republic, there was an exercise called leçons de choses, 'Lessons in Things', in which an object, usually living – donkey or dandelion – is described both from a scientific and a literary point of view. The scientific was to suggest objectivity, the facts being those within range of a child, using Larousse or other general reference books, whereas the literary was subjective.⁶⁷

Montague believes that this exercise can be witnessed again in Ponge's poetry, and states that his collection of poems, Pièces, the third and final volume of his major works published in 1961, is 'a development of the same semi-scientific sort of reverie' in which close observation meets glimpses of the writer's experience of observing and writing about the thing itself.⁶⁸

1880 was a significant year for Ponge, albeit nineteen years before his birth, as not only was it the year that 'Lessons in Things' was introduced to the curriculum, but also when rhetoric in schools was abolished. Rhetoric was the one class that was not offered to Ponge at school, but in terms of his thoughts on language, it is a subject of

⁶⁷ John Montague, here cited in 'Preface to Pièces: Live Studies', in Francis Ponge: Selected Poems, pp.110-111.

⁶⁸ Montague, 'Preface to Pièces: Live Studies', p.111.

equal importance to these object lessons. Ponge reflects on this loss rather bitterly, as well as with remorse, years later in his essay on the work of Georges Braque and recalls that his father was part of the last generation to be taught this subject and ‘from 1880 all... war was declared against all rhetoric, all reason, all science’,⁶⁹ and that it was the brilliant students of rhetoric just before him who were responsible for its overthrow as they opposed it to such a high degree in their classes. In light of his wish to create a rhetoric of objects, one asks the question: if Ponge had learnt rhetoric, and felt more confident about his use of language and things, would he have been more successful or less at writing from the object’s point of view? I ask this in relation to the way that Ponge’s personal difficulties with speech caused him so much anxiety within the written text, and thereby halted the process of persuasion by self-conscious pauses and interruptions, which disrupt the poem and the reader’s attention. This is not to say that rhetoric is the only answer to acquiring a flawless and adequate use of language, but more to acknowledge the level of Ponge’s anger and disappointment that rhetoric was no longer part of his education, and his subsequent regretful use of the term in various contexts.

Ponge’s regret was not typical of the French poets just prior to him – among those he mentions are Mallarmé and Rimbaud – but what he did share with the two he cites was an interest in writing prose poems. However, in the essay on Georges Braque, Ponge is less interested in referring to these figures as prose poets, but as students who were fortunate enough to be a part of the rhetoric generation. Ponge’s own regret about the absence of rhetoric at school is in stark contrast with Rimbaud’s scorn concerning its very presence. In a document that survived Rimbaud’s school days, described by Graham

⁶⁹ Francis Ponge, ‘Braque, or The Meditation of the Work’, in *Georges Braque*, Francis Ponge, Pierre Descargues, and André Malraux, trans. Richard Howard and Lane Dunlop (New York: H. N. Abrams, c1971), pp. 29-76, pp. 56-57.

Robb in his biography of Rimbaud as 'a few ink-spotted sheets, held together by a pin',⁷⁰ Rimbaud, aged ten, reveals amidst his homework, his rage and attitude towards rhetoric. In this document, Rimbaud bitterly and humorously doubts both the point and even existence of the entire Classical civilisation:

What's the point, I said to myself of learning Greek and Latin?...No one speaks that language. ... And are we quite certain that the Latins ever existed? Perhaps it's a made-up language, and even if they did exist, why can't they leave me to be a rentier and keep their language to themselves?⁷¹

Rimbaud's point about the absence of Latin and Greek as spoken languages – and in this sense they are alive only as written rather than verbal forms – proves interesting in relation to Ponge's love of Latin. In effect, as was the case with his attention to objects, Ponge was drawn to studying dead or mute voices and resurrecting their voice, consciously through the written word, and self-consciously through attempting to evade the death of his own voice. Relative to his interest in Latin and Greek via rhetoric, Ponge increases the reader's awareness of his aim to return to a more Classical use of French, and also of the affinity he draws between the concrete world of things and the density of Latin. As Beth Archer Brombert notes of Ponge's link between Classical literature and the physical world, 'Latin and Greek texts, whose pronunciation is now forgotten, exemplify this concrete muteness in that their existence today is solely in graphic'.⁷² As well as the fact Ponge did not share Rimbaud's scorn, he also went on to develop his own use of rhetoric by using the roots of words to instil a voice back into the object, thereby eschewing the consideration of Latin as a dead language.

Ponge's use of etymology in relation to the object attempted to raise both language and objects from a state of muteness and death into a vocal state of birth, or rebirth. Rhetoric, as developed by Ponge, worked in accordance with each particular

⁷⁰ Graham Robb, *Rimbaud* (London: Picador, 2000), p. 21.

⁷¹ Robb, *Rimbaud*, pp. 22-23.

⁷² Beth Archer Brombert, 'The Making of the Art Work', *Books Abroad*, 48:4 (1974), 694-699; 695.

object, climaxing in the most verbose of his object poems, *Soap* (1967) – a book-length object poem on the verbal nature of soap and one of his last major contributions to the genre. In an essay on *Soap*, J. Ames Hodges draws a link between Ponge's idea of an appropriate 'rhétorique par objet' and 'par poème',⁷³ and Aristotle's definition of rhetoric as 'the faculty of considering, for each question, that which is most appropriate to persuade'.⁷⁴ Based on this process of adaptation, Hodges puts forward the possibility that Ponge's poems share with Aristotle's definition of rhetoric a similar decorum of adaptation in this respect:

If each particular question, in the traditional view of rhetoric gives rise to a particular style, selection and arrangement of arguments, how is this conception of decorum different from Ponge's express desire for a rhetoric per object?⁷⁵

To the extent that this comparison is making a point about the appropriation of language to suit or mirror its external situation and, in this sense, recalls T.S. Eliot's definition of an 'objective correlative' as 'a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of that particular emotion',⁷⁶ I agree with Hodges. However, this point of view does not take into account the fact that a direct objective correlative, or equivalence, rarely if ever takes place in Ponge's work, because of his conscious and unconscious verbal interruptions, which constitute his own particular rhetoric, appropriate to his own difficulties in the art of persuasion.

To what extent, we might therefore ask, was Ponge's awareness of his own use of language connected to a feeling of regret and intimidation when it came to rhetoric? In order to discuss this question it is necessary to return to his essay on Braque, and the

⁷³ Francis Ponge, 'My Creative Method' in *Méthodes*, p. 36. Ponge also repeats this emphatically in 'Tentative Orale' in *Méthodes*, p. 260: 'C'est-à-dire que si j'envisage une rhétorique, c'est une rhétorique par objet, pas seulement une rhétorique par poète, mais une rhétorique par objet.'

⁷⁴ J. Ames Hodges, "'The Debut du Livre' and the End of Silence: Francis Ponge Lathering *Le Savon*," 9th Annual Conference, Comparative Literature, 'Beginnings and Endings' (March 25, 2000), Columbia University, pp. 51-58. p. 54.

⁷⁵ J. Ames Hodges, 'The Debut du Livre', p. 54.

⁷⁶ T.S. Eliot, 'Hamlet', in *Selected Prose*, p. 102.

suggestion that there is a very definite link between rhetoric and intimidation, which possibly played a part in his inability to speak during his oral exam, which I discuss more fully in the next section of the thesis. In the essay Ponge looks back to the days of rhetoric and cites the dates of his preparation for his important oral exam, using the term 'mutation' in such a way to suggest the fear of becoming mute:

When I was preparing for the École Normale in 1917-19, that is, fifty years [after Rimbaud's generation of schooled rhetoric], and despite reiterated warnings of equal power, more recently, by Mallarmé or, more crudely, by Jarry (another rhetoric student) – warnings, I mean, of the said mutation; well, you need only read the handbooks and the anthologies of the period to have an idea of the lucidity, in this regard, of our masters!⁷⁷

This acute, slightly panic stricken awareness of the generation before him who could express and persuade lucidly seems to reveal something else about Ponge's fear of speaking: that he needed to be taught by specialists of speech in order to feel equipped and prepared to speak himself, not only in front of masters and experts, but later, publicly in front of others, and more importantly, before objects.

Ponge's awareness of the threat of 'mutation' is abundant in his writing. His poem 'The Spider', itself written over many years between 1942 and 1948, is a good example of where he tried to use rhetorical devices and terms, but quickly interrupted the form in the first section with a doubt, immediately after an assertion. An epigraph sets off the poem with the word 'Exordium' (which in Western Classical rhetoric is Greek for the beginning of a speech), and follows its structure of being divided into six parts of a persuasive discourse. The poem goes on to begin the first section confidently – 'Of course I am well aware' – but this assertion is undercut by Ponge questioning the origin of his knowledge of the spider's act of secretion: 'was I taught this in an elementary

⁷⁷ Francis Ponge, *Georges Braque*, p. 56. (Although the syntax is incorrect, it is the gist of his anxiety that comes across and is important here.)

science course?' [or have I] 'reeled it out of myself'.⁷⁸ Why this matters goes back to the point about a need Ponge had to turn to the past, to the masters before him, from Malherbe and Lucretius to rhetoricians and teachers, in order to feel confident enough to proceed, and speak his own rhetoric. Ponge is too self-conscious in 'The Spider' to do as the spider does in terms of spinning a perfect web and using this to lure and capture in the manner of a rhetorician. Instead, he is highly aware of the web as an analogy for the act of successful speech, which in turn is a model for his own aim to procure a language as perfectly woven as the object he describes:

To follow her discourse – her image – I must throw out a few sentences that are bold enough and entirely of my own invention, but strong enough – and I must tread lightly enough so my body, without breaking them, can use them as a springboard for imagining others and throwing them in various directions – even in opposite directions. In this way my work will be so perfectly woven that my belly will be able to rest on it, hide in it, and I shall be able to invite in my prey – you, readers, you, the attention of my readers – in order to silently devour you (this is called glory).⁷⁹

The reader would be able to appreciate the humorous irony of this prose poem but for the paradox that it took six years to write, and is only one small part of Ponge's life-long exploration of facing objects to evade silence, and make himself simply understood.

The word 'mutation' is the most important term to come out of Ponge's essay on Braque, as not only does he relate this word to his thoughts on rhetoric, but also on war. Earlier in the essay, he states that:

Just as the Second World War itself, and the First too, and also the Russian Revolution and the Nazi or Fascist reactions, and the massacres, deportations, and mass exterminations which followed on all sides were only episodes, one may fear not the last of the sensational mutation to which humanity (whether it chooses or not) has been subject for a hundred years.⁸⁰

⁷⁸ Ponge, 'The Spider' in *Francis Ponge: Selected Poems*, p.163.

⁷⁹ Ponge, 'The Spider', p. 165.

⁸⁰ Ponge, *Georges Braque*, p. 54.

Ponge then declares that he deals with everything through writing and has got into 'the habit of expressing [his] feeling about this mutation in a very simplistic fashion, but one which generally permits [him] to make [himself] understood'.⁸¹ At this point, Ponge inadvertently makes a distinction between rhetoric and comprehension, implying that his interest lies in simplicity rather than convincing others through persuasiveness and other rhetorical devices. This desire for an honest form of expression is clearly demonstrated in his poem 'Memorandum' (1935), which Ponge concludes by reminding himself of one of the essentials of writing 'interesting works...written well'.⁸² In quotes he says, as translated by C.K Williams:

'You have first of all to side with your own spirit, and your own taste. Then take the time, and have the courage, to express all your thoughts on the subject at hand (not just keeping the expressions that seem brilliant or distinctive). Finally you have to say everything simply, not striving for charm, but conviction'.⁸³

It may well be, then, that Ponge saw in the object a return to a simplicity that would influence and lend his language an appropriate form in which he could make himself clearly and solidly understood. Perhaps this was his aim, but the reality was quite different.

One reason why 'Memorandum' is such a significant text in this respect is that it is reminiscent of the act and reason for note-taking at school: to aid memory. Ponge begins the text in a tone that combines self-admonishment and perplexity as he reflects on why it is that he has to remind himself of the aim and principle of simplicity:

Astonishing that I can forget, forget so easily and for so long every time...This is doubtlessly because I've never been able to define it clearly to myself in a conclusively representative or memorable way.⁸⁴

⁸¹ Ponge, *Georges Braque*, pp. 54-56.

⁸² Ponge, 'Memorandum', in *Francis Ponge: Selected Poems*, p. 3.

⁸³ Ponge, 'Memorandum', p. 3.

⁸⁴ Ponge, 'Memorandum', p. 3.

The key to the text in terms of Ponge's understanding of when expression will become simple, and also meaningful to him, is implied by his awareness that if he used something concrete rather than abstract to compare this maxim, perhaps he would commit his belief to memory in a more sustained and reassuring way. Consequently, he goes on to compare clarity and ease to 'an artificial development – like the sudden illumination of an electric lightbulb in a house hitherto lit by kerosene', but then, characteristic of Ponge's slips of confidence in the text as well as his ambiguous and contradictory relationship with objects as far as effortless expression is concerned, he continues this concrete image in a negative light:

But the next day, you've forgotten wiring's been installed and you start again painstakingly filling the lamps, changing wicks, scorching your fingers on the glass, and being badly lit....⁸⁵

The passage is also a humorous one, and the ellipses – also in the original text – support the clumsy and ongoing nature of Ponge's writing habits and wrestles with his own aims. The humour is undercut, however, by the fact that the image draws attention to the pain, struggle and blind obsession that make up the hall-marks of his written and spoken process, and the differences and similarities between his relationship with speech, and the written word in the presence of the object.

That Ponge's interest and exploitation of rhetoric was crucial to the development of his writing in some ways seems paradoxical to what we will later appreciate as his fear and disgust of the spoken word. The fact that practitioners of Latin have held the spoken word and the ability to deliver speeches in front of audiences in such high esteem would have terrified Ponge acutely right up until the Second World War, and less overtly

⁸⁵ Ponge, 'Memorandum', p. 3.

afterwards until his death. In view of the fact that Latin went from a largely rhetorical status to a predominantly silent one, Ponge's texts could be read as being haunted by the silence of Latin as a contemporary voice, but governed by its past glory to determine a precise, eloquent and dense form of expression. His work could also be read as a tragedy of a failure to realise that glory, because of internalising the silence of Latin (and this includes the death of taught rhetoric during Ponge's time at school), and writing out of a fear of an absence of language, which interfered with his presence of mind. The first example of such an interference occurs in the next stage of his academic career, and marks the premature end of Ponge's formal schooling and his consequential determination to pursue an independent way of thinking about the physical world relative to the craft of written and verbal expression. The next section, then, examines Ponge's first confrontation with public speaking and the repercussions of his experience of having to use language in a situation which demands the verbal, rather than the written word.

University and Aphasia

At both school and college Ponge was a prolific and brilliant writer, but at the end of the First World War, at two crucial moments in Ponge's early academic career, he failed the oral entrance exams which were key to his entrance into the *École Normale Supérieure*, his most important educational goal at the end of his successes at the prestigious *Lycée Louis-le-Grand* and the *Grandes Écoles*. These failures were wrought by attacks of a kind of aphasia which rendered him completely mute for the duration of the tests, one taking place while he was a student of philosophy at the Sorbonne and of law at the *École de droit*, and the other in the entrance exam for the *École Normale Supérieure*. The incidents are recalled by Ian Higgins – in the first full-length study of Ponge in

England – who acknowledges that these are two moments in Ponge's life that not only mark a link between language and failure for Ponge, but a rift between his speech and writing:

In 1918, a curious and important thing happened. The erstwhile outstanding essay-writer and enthusiastic student of philosophy was incapable of putting two words together in the oral component of his licence, and so failed. The same thing occurred the following year, in the examination leading to entry to the *École normale supérieure*. This inhibition sprang from the fear that his expression would be imperfect, and that there would be no time to correct it. Ponge has often explained his subsequent persistence and development as a writer in terms of reaction against the sloppiness of the spoken word.⁸⁶

Where Higgins attributes this attack to the pressure of time, there is another theory considered by Martin Sorrell after reading Jean Thibaudeau's study of Ponge that is more pertinent to the poet's reaction to the First World War. According to Sorrell, Thibaudeau describes Ponge's silencing as a 'choking back' and internalisation of the horror of the War, which is a credible theory given the dates of these attacks, one in 1918, the other in 1919.⁸⁷ 1918 was also the year that Ponge joined the army, where 'his experience of military life [was] a disaster'.⁸⁸ In 1919, he was demobilized, after which he joined the Socialist party; the same year he left home to live in the Latin Quarter of Paris.

Ponge's experience of the War as having a silencing and deadening impact on the individual and his use of language, is not only explored by Thibaudeau, but is likewise supported by Sorrell and Higgins, two of his most important English critics. Higgins recognises that Ponge's experience of being degraded and 'kneaded into a shapeless mass' was 'accompanied by that of a degradation of language in the suppression of truth'.⁸⁹ Expounding on this point, but more obviously in relation to Ponge's growing

⁸⁶ Higgins, introduction, *Francis Ponge*, p. 4.

⁸⁷ Cited in Sorrell, *Francis Ponge*, p. 19.

⁸⁸ Sorrell, *Francis Ponge*, p. 19. Originally in Jean Thibaudeau, *Francis Ponge* (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1967), p. 54.

⁸⁹ Higgins, introduction, *Francis Ponge*, p. 4.

political leanings to the Left, Sorrell contends that the War 'reinforced his mounting and somewhat political feeling of revolt against the classes which determined the nature of society, and which, spiritually dead and bombastic in tone, had the power to silence individuals of character'.⁹⁰ Ponge was determined to revolt against this kind of silence, but in 1945, again at the end of a world war, another significant event occurred in his life that could be construed as a reaction against his own silencing, or repression of his memory of war. In 1945, Ponge experienced what he called his 'aesthetic sob', another emotional response that occurred again unexpectedly, but this time in front of one of Braque's paintings while he was visiting his house with their mutual friend, Paulhan.⁹¹

In each of these situations at the end of a world war, there is a notable element of surprise and shock: two from unexpected silences, and the other from an unexpected release. Between Ponge's closed and open texts on objects and the verbal process, it is evident again, time after time in his work, that Ponge's relationship with expression was deeply affected by the inability to explain the terrifying nature and silencing impact of war alongside its destruction and annihilation of people, places, things and language. Throughout his life, on a profound level, war seems to have informed Ponge's attempt to 'fight against the frightening experience of speechlessness, inarticulateness',⁹² and, as he says in an interview held in 1976, the 'sentiment de trouble, de chaos, de désordre, de saleté de l'expression orale' (the feeling of turmoil, of chaos, of disorder, of the dirtiness of oral expression).⁹³

Serge Gavronsky, in his introduction to his broad compilation and translation of Ponge's poems and art criticism, recognises that the object and writing about the object played a crucial role in Ponge's ability to focus on something else, outside of the

⁹⁰ Sorrell, *Francis Ponge*, p. 19.

⁹¹ Ponge, *Georges Braque*, p. 53.

⁹² Ian Higgins, 'Against Petrification': Ponge's 'Baptême Funèbre' *Modern Language Review*, 78 (1983), 816-29; 824, n.20.

⁹³ Francis Ponge, 'Entretien avec Francis Ponge' in *Cahiers critiques de la littérature* No. 2 (1976), pp. 4-32, pp. 7-8 (my translation.)

otherwise abstract and nebulous nature of speech, asserting that 'writing became his only means to "grasp" the object that was to save him'.⁹⁴ Gavronsky acknowledges Ponge's interdependence between language, the object and writing, and that not only does Ponge consider speech fallible and weak in comparison to writing, but that he also distinguishes between speech and writing in terms of purity and impurity, implying that good poetry depends on his ability to produce clean and solid texts. As Gavronsky puts it:

If objects are endowed with such significance and language considered as the only medium capable of describing them, of 'holding' them, it thus becomes essential to filter out all the impurities of language, everything that would tend to weaken its effectiveness.⁹⁵

Similarly, as we have seen Ponge declare in 'Some Reasons for Writing': 'at every moment, it is necessary to shake yourself free of the soot of words and that silence is as dangerous as possible in this system of values'.⁹⁶ However, what is in fact typical of Ponge is that contradiction is not only an ambiguous part of his writing process, but an important part of understanding his writing process, and that whereas sometimes he associates speech with impurity, in 'Ardens Organum'⁹⁷ he addresses the urgency and importance of speech and states that verbal expression is essential to poetry, articulating quite clearly the interdependence between speech and poetry:

As for me, I would say that a true poet is someone with an overwhelming urge to say something, to communicate some emotion, that, though he recognizes all the rules, all the obstacles, all the possible difficulties, he will never forget what he wanted to say, and he will eventually end up by saying it, by having accepted it as evidence.⁹⁸

⁹⁴ Gavronsky, introduction, *The Power of Language*, p. 11.

⁹⁵ Gavronsky, introduction, p. 11.

⁹⁶ Ponge, 'Some Reasons for Writing', p. 67.

⁹⁷ Ponge, 'Ardens Organum', in *The Power of Language*, pp. 269-71. (Selections from Ponge's writings and reflections on one of his main influences Malherbe, begun in 1951 and published as 'Pour un Malherbe', 1965, Paris.)

⁹⁸ Ponge, 'Ardens Organum', pp. 269-271.

Although Ponge himself was not keen on the term 'poet', this statement reveals one of the rare instances that he seems to believe in the term and role of a poet and stresses, as part of that role, the need for verbal expression.⁹⁹

One of the most important aspects of the above quotation is Ponge's awareness of time and speech, hinted at in the last line: 'eventually he will end up by saying it'. Higgins is equally aware of the importance of time in relation to perfection in Ponge's work, and is right to acknowledge that Ponge's 'inhibition sprang from the fear that his expression would be imperfect, and that there would be no time to correct it'.¹⁰⁰ It is important to take this statement further and observe that instead of omitting speech from his work and relying on the written word, Ponge's work becomes increasingly affected, or infected, by speech as his writing develops, and becomes longer and less contained. Indeed, it is no coincidence that as Ponge wrote more, and explored expression more thoroughly in his work, his incorporation of notes and drafts became an increasing part of the final piece. What became as much poem as essay meant that he sometimes took years to complete collections as well as finish individual poems. This propensity to write more and more on the poems themselves in his poetics, and concentrate on the inclusion of drafts, within and alongside the poems themselves, seems very much to be a reaction to Ponge's fear of maladroit expression, and silence. Jean Paulhan, who not only was Ponge's friend and editor, but a critic and essayist in his own right, was known to have accused him of 'being unnecessarily verbose';¹⁰¹ Ponge's answer to this was to reply 'with more words verbalizing his fear of aphasia'.¹⁰²

⁹⁹ In his poem 'The Carnation', which, as an example of the open prose poem, is for later discussion, Ponge repeats his distaste for the term 'poet', implying here that it is allocated for a language that is special or elevated, and for his work he would see this as very misleading: 'I don't claim to be a poet. I think my way of seeing things very common.' Cited in Francis Ponge, *Things*, trans. Cid Corman, p. 83.

¹⁰⁰ Higgins, *Francis Ponge*, p. 4.

¹⁰¹ Peter Collier, review of *Poétique de Francis Ponge: Le palais diaphane*, by Bernard Beugnot, *French Studies*, XLV: 2 (1991), 226-227; 226.

¹⁰² Collier, review of *Poétique de Francis Ponge*, 226.

Peter Collier's argument in his review of Bernard Beugnot's highly respected study, *Poétique de Francis Ponge*, states that any verbosity in Ponge's writing was perpetuated by the etymological nature of the poems themselves, and that as his 'poems were already machines which developed by exploring their own potential etymologies and connotations...in order to explain those poems, Ponge wrote more poems'.¹⁰³ This point of view, however, only takes into consideration Ponge's literary practice, and ignores the less apparent reason, which is his personal fear of aphasia, based on his own experience. Higgins also says that Ponge reacted against 'the sloppiness of the spoken word'¹⁰⁴ by committing himself solely to the written word, and compensating for what Ponge called 'les bêtises et les maladroites de ma parole' (the clumsiness and awkwardness of my speech).¹⁰⁵ Again I think that calling the spoken word sloppy in comparison to writing is only part of Ponge's commitment to the written word, and disguises what was more of a deep seated fear of being unable to express himself openly, relative to the reasons listed above, and that this relationship between speech and writing is not only personal, but part of a deep and horrifying experience of language which many writers and poets of the Post-War era attempt to comprehend.

Ponge's recourse to objects, as a way of focusing not only on things and their neglected place in French literature, but also as determining an alternative route into language and recovering the 'semantical thickness of words' is unique among the writers of his generation.¹⁰⁶ This is not to say that other writers of his time did not explore the

¹⁰³ Collier, review of *Poétique de Francis Ponge*, 226.

¹⁰⁴ Higgins, introduction, *Francis Ponge*, p. 4.

¹⁰⁵ This quotation is taken from Ian Higgins' introduction to *Francis Ponge* (p.4) and is cited by Higgins as originally from 'Tentative Orale' in *Le Grand Recueil: Méthodes*, p. 237. In the original, however, the quotation reads slightly differently, albeit with the same sentiment, concerning his decision to communicate through the written word, rather than the spoken: 'j'ai longtemps pensé que si j'avais décidé d'écrire, c'était justement *contre* la parole orale, contre les bêtises que je venais de dire dans une conversation, contre les insuffisances d'expression' (For a long time I have thought that if I have decided to write, it is precisely against the spoken word, against the beasts that I come up against in conversation, against the inadequacies of expression.)

¹⁰⁶ Ponge, 'Introduction to the Pebble', in *The Power of Language*, p. 79.

relationship between language and objects, as writers of the nouveau roman¹⁰⁷ exemplify, notably Nathalie Sarraute and Alain Robbe-Grillet, but it is the overall extent to which Ponge retained this focus on things, rather than people, throughout his developments of the prose poem form that is largely what makes his place in French literature unparalleled.

Paris and Rage

In terms of place, and outside the confines of school and university, Paris was perhaps the most notable environmental influence on Ponge that proved significant in terms of his personal inhibitions when it came to speaking aloud, and where Ponge reveals himself early on as fundamentally a rather anti-social and hermetic figure. As part of his regression, it is of notable importance that this period in Paris coincided with Ponge leaving home completely. The security he associated with his upbringing was shattered by this radical change in environment. Higgins, in his short biography at the beginning of his book on Ponge, says that it was in Paris ‘that the pure, structured solidity of the child’s world was attacked by the directionless, repellent cynicism’ of what Ponge apparently called the “société hideuse de débauche” (hideous and debauched society),¹⁰⁸ alluding to a somewhat rebellious note Ponge had written in 1917 at a library in Paris during his time at the Lycée Louis-le-Grand before entry into the Grandes Écoles.

Ponge arrived at the city in 1916, after living with his parents in Caen, Normandy, and initially settled in his Grandmother’s house, so in this sense he acquired a level of continuity between home and estrangement. Various other factors should have

¹⁰⁷ The Nouveau Roman (New Novel), was formed during the 1950s and was a genre that questioned and diverged from established notions of the novel’s use of plot, and character, favouring precision and concrete detail over metaphor and symbolism, and everyday objects over characters and traditional narrative. Fundamental characteristics of the French novel were subordinated in order to accommodate a self-reflexive style that explored the actual process of writing as part of its composition.

¹⁰⁸ See Higgins, *Francis Ponge*, p. 2. Original quotation in: Jean Thibaudau, *Francis Ponge*, p. 29 (Thibaudau here quotes Ponge after an interview with him.)

helped Ponge assuage his cynicism, including some important friendships, and the fact that it was in Paris that he emerged as a poet, wrote most of his work, and divided his time between the political and café culture of Parisian Post-War literati, which included Jean Paulhan, Jean-Paul Sartre, Nathalie Sarraute, Alain Robbe-Grillet, Albert Camus, Breton and the Surrealists. Among the most significant of these meetings were those with the distinguished writer and editor Jean Paulhan, whose friendship and influence were vital to Ponge, and with Sartre who later proved to be invaluable to his growing reputation in literature. Notably for both writers, Paulhan was the editor responsible for giving Ponge and Sartre their first appearance in the Nouvelle Revue Française. The N.R.F. was founded in 1909 by Gide and established as the leading French literary review magazine. It was taken over by Gaston Gallimard in 1911, and became Éditions Gallimard Publishing House between 1925 and 1940. One of the other main cultural and literary reviews in Paris was Tel Quel, the core influences of which were James Joyce, Antonin Artaud, Georges Bataille, Jacques Derrida, Julia Kristeva, and Friedrich Nietzsche, whose will 'to affirm this world such as it is' was key to their outlook.¹⁰⁹ Ponge's poem 'La Figue (Sèche)' (1959) appeared in the first edition of Tel Quel in 1960, which was a significant acknowledgement of the originality and difference of Ponge's poetry, and its affinity with their fusion of a literary, scientific and philosophical approach to language and reality.

Ponge, therefore, from early to late on in his life was moving in what one would consider the right circles for his success. But although he was both a contemporary and friend of many of these figures, and for a time a member of the Surrealist group, he experienced conflicts and difficulties with many of these writers, his relationship with the Surrealists being particularly revealing in terms of his attitudes and dissatisfaction with his social environment. Indeed, for many reasons his initial meetings with writers were at

¹⁰⁹ Friedrich Nietzsche, cited in 'Chronological History of Tel Quel', in The Tel Quel Reader, eds. Patrick Ffrench and Roland-François Lack (London: Routledge, 1998), p. 9. 'Tel Quel' means, of course, 'as is'.

times rewarding and engaging, but in the context of Ponge's uncertain and irritated state of mind since the First World War and his recent academic disappointment, this literary environment did not sit easily with him, and overall he damned it as pretentious and remained uninterested in fame and opportunism, even after his first publication in Paris, Douze petits écrits, in 1926. Instead, with the exception of those who became close friends, 'his encounter with the literary world of Paris left Ponge disgusted... He disliked the insincerity he found there, and refused to make the moves necessary for self-advancement'.¹¹⁰ These kinds of feelings meant that although he was admired by a large number of artists, writers and philosophers in France, in many ways he remained an extremely private and isolated figure in French literature, considered by Higgins to be 'more than usually unclassifiable' and a 'loner' in poetry.¹¹¹

Overall, Paris was a significant factor towards accentuating a number of tensions in Ponge – between politics and writing, inhibition and anger, and silence and the need to express and be understood. In terms of politics, Ponge's bitterness was not helped by the fact that his long-term inhibition when it came to speaking in public was coupled with his insistence on choosing speech rather than silence when it came to politics and writing.¹¹² In turn this is indicative of there seeming to be a barrage and conflict of voices within Ponge, between various discourses, literary and political, perhaps based on his own fear of aphasia on the one hand, and his fear of verbosity on the other. This fear would account not only for his turning to politics, and the ideal possibility of a less vague discourse, but away from the pretensions of other influences, notably Surrealism. Higgins seems convinced of the latter point, and takes it further still, claiming that Ponge's overall impression of his early years in Paris is closely associated 'with his growing distaste for the feeble lyricism of the Symbolists and what he saw as the wordiness of Bergson and

¹¹⁰Sorrell, *Francis Ponge*, p. 19.

¹¹¹ Higgins, *Francis Ponge*, pp. 124, 122.

¹¹² Ponge was a member of the Socialist Party in 1919 and the Communist Party between 1937 and 1947.

Renouvier, the philosophers of the moment'.¹¹³ It is true that Ponge could not tolerate long-windedness in any context and argued with the Surrealists mainly because of their tendencies towards garrulousness and performance, and this was undoubtedly a source of frustration during the longer poems in which verbosity threatens Ponge's inability to find the right word.

It is perhaps for this reason that not only did he turn from Surrealism, but also sought refuge in objects, claiming that the very idea of writing about anything pertinent to humans and emotions would literally be too overwhelming for words:

What would appear to others as devoid of any complexity, such as, for example, the face of a man about to speak, or any display of an activity by a living being, still seems to me to be too difficult and charged with new meanings (to be discovered, then linked dialectically) for me to dream of harnessing myself to such a task for a long time to come.¹¹⁴

Instead, he can only 'conceive of the possibility of accounting for...the simplest things: a stone, an herb, fire, a piece of wood, a piece of meat'.¹¹⁵ On the one hand, this approach to life gives the impression of Ponge as a fairly benign and harmless writer of simple things. On the other hand, turning to things rather than humans recalls what Anthony Storr refers to as the 'schizoid' tendency in people who display a lack of emotional attachment towards others and experience a sense of futility and meaninglessness in life.¹¹⁶ Relative to Ponge's fear, and apprehension, as well as humility, when it came to using humans as a direct subject for his poetry, Storr says that this detached impulse is an important aspect of the creative act:

Schizoid people have a particularly marked tendency to seek for meaning and significance in things rather than in people; a fact which is highly relevant to

¹¹³ See Higgins, introduction, *Francis Ponge*, p. 3.

¹¹⁴ Ponge, 'Introduction to the Pebble', in *The Power of Language*, pp. 77-79.

¹¹⁵ Ponge, 'Introduction to the Pebble', p. 77.

¹¹⁶ Anthony Storr, *The Dynamics of Creation* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1972), p. 68.

creativity. It is, of course, because emotional involvement with people appears dangerous that the schizoid person remains detached and isolated.¹¹⁷

Given this reliance on the material, or concrete rather than the emotional world, the schizoid character also seems rather paradoxical: as Storr notes, 'a notable characteristic of schizoid people, who are...essentially introverted' is a preoccupation 'with inner, rather than with outer, reality'.¹¹⁸ Further support of this conflicted quality is that this introspection is wrought by dissatisfaction with 'people and things', which thereby places humans and objects, not in different spaces, but in the same category.¹¹⁹

Perhaps this is indeed the case with Ponge, who although he tried to separate humans and things in his poetry was not always successful, as acknowledged by Sartre in his article on Ponge in 1944, which stated that Ponge treated people like objects – petrified them, rather than brought them to life. As Higgins notes, Sartre is not alone in this opinion:

While critical views of Ponge's work have, since it was effectively 'launched' by Sartre's famous article in 1944, gone through several orthodoxies, one assumption seems not to have changed, that Ponge rarely writes about human beings, and that when he does he 'dehumanizes' or 'petrifies' them. Sartre says of 'Le Gymnaste' and 'La Jeune Mère' that they are 'pétrifiés. Ce sont des choses....Il prend les hommes délibérément pour des choses'.¹²⁰

Sartre wrote this of Ponge's approach to people in 1944, but Ponge from an early age seemed to display this sense of detachment not only in relation to humankind, but to language itself. Exactly twenty years prior to Sartre's accusation he writes:

¹¹⁷ Storr, *The Dynamics of Creation*, p. 70.

¹¹⁸ Storr, *The Dynamics of Creation*, p. 72.

¹¹⁹ Storr, *The Dynamics of Creation*, p. 72.

¹²⁰ Cited in Higgins, 'Against Petrification', p. 816. Original quotation from: Jean-Paul Sartre, 'L'Homme et les Choses' (pp. 245-93), reprinted in *Situations* 1 (Paris, 1947), pp. 255-56. (Last sentence translates as: 'they are things....He deliberately takes mankind for things'.)

What about me, and my words? If I write or speak, wouldn't [sic] it be as a form of dissimulation?... Thoughts and words and actions are neither controlled by nor obedient to man: they play themselves out. They fool themselves. They devour themselves.¹²¹

In relation to how this detachment from language plays itself out in the developments between his early and late work, what is perplexing, or unnerving, is the early supposedly gentle treatment he has towards the subject matter of his prose poems, and his somewhat more sinister developments of these objects and more potently his relationship with them, and their correspondence with his increasingly dramatic and neurotic use of language. For now, however, it is important to focus on the roots and causes of Ponge's anxieties on a human and biographical level, as these personal and contextual facts are the very details that reveal or disguise themselves in his poetry.

Neurosis and the First World War

Ponge's Post-War anxieties and rage began to coalesce with his writing to the point that he was known during the early 1920s to harbour a desire 'to construct a sort of bomb – secret, and devastating in its “effects once it exploded”'¹²² and later refers, time and again, to his prose poems as 'bombs'.¹²³ The irony of this description is deeply felt in relation to his poetry collection, *Douze petit écrits* (1926). In many ways these prose poems were a collection of elusive texts which are better known for preparing the reader for Ponge's later short pieces in his major collection, *Le Parti pris des choses*, of 1942, rather than proving significant on their own. The outcome of the collection relative to the bomb

¹²¹ Ponge, 'Proem', in *Things*, trans. Cid Corman, pp. 12-13.

¹²² See Sorrell, *Francis Ponge*, p. 20.

¹²³ Ponge has used this term in various situations, notably in two interviews, one with Serge Gavronsky and the other with Philippe Sollers, who was a key literary figure in Ponge's life with regard to Ponge's appearance in the *Tel Quel* review, as well as his alerting critics, also associated with the review, to Ponge's name. Sollers' interviews with Ponge (published as a book-length volume in 1970) are described by Patrick Meadows, in his book on Ponge and atomistic philosophy, as elucidating in their 'probing' of 'the poet's mind, successfully drawing him out with persistent perspicacity' (*Francis Ponge and the Nature of Things*, p. 18.) Original context, Francis Ponge: *Entretiens de Francis Ponge avec Philippe Sollers* (Paris: Gallimard/Editions du Seuil, 1970), pp. 71-72.

analogy was that in itself this volume remained un-detonated in terms of sales and reception, and only later when it was republished as part of his large collection, Tome Premier, in 1965, did it find a more significant and appropriate release. In the book's original form, Douze petits écrits was a small edition, at forty-four pages long, albeit published by the well-established Editions de la Nouvelle Revue Française. However, in spite of its prestigious publisher, Ponge's collection completely passed by French readers and only thirteen copies were sold by 1939, a mere three years away from Le Parti pris des choses, through which his name became better known among French and American Modernist writers and critics. The dates between the two collections marked a period of silence and anger for Ponge, moving between the necessity to speak and resist silence, but at the same time showing signs of misanthropy and solitude as he struggled with society and doggedly tried to write and explore his own relationship with language and things, an effort which only found its first true expression in the later collection, in terms of its exposure of the successes and failures of his relationship with the spoken and written word.

Ponge's general level of disenchantment with social discourse and the language which was fashioned out of the city's academic, literary and professional institutions, although it was emerging in the 1920s, stayed with him throughout the writing of his prose poetry. As late as 1965 in Pour un Malherbe, a text begun in 1951 and dedicated to the poet Malherbe who preoccupied much of Ponge's thinking, we find something Ponge wrote which expresses this determination to take an individual stand on language and therefore life, and in turn express his anger at the power of society over the individual:

We must differentiate our position in relationship, on the one hand, to journalism, radio, and to this vulgar, slovenly, dirty, undisciplined language, which

is taking over publishing, and, on the other hand, to that academic language, lucid but dead, simplistic, so-called litotic, in reality, worn out.¹²⁴

This is, indeed, something Ponge could have written in Paris during the 1920s, and the fact that he continues this rage into the late 1960s in other contexts is indicative of how fundamental anger and agitation are to the dogged and obsessive nature of his relationship with expression. Rejected by academia, resigning from publishing and joining the political Left in order to fight against the 'moribund social order' of Paris, and avoiding the 'literature which was this order's mouthpiece',¹²⁵ it is apposite, then, that his own poems during this time were considered dominantly satirical and a 'response to the general crisis Ponge was undergoing, discontented with contemporary society'¹²⁶ while he was 'ambitious to write but out of sympathy with current trends'.¹²⁷ Writing in a more solitary manner than was perhaps typical of other writers in Paris, and preparing his literary 'bombs', although it had little impact at the time on the public, privately his tendency towards writing in angry isolation had grave and long lasting repercussions on the poet himself.

During this period, Ponge suffered from nervous exhaustion and depression, although this was undeniably also a consequence of the death of his father, Armand, in 1923, for whom he had 'great affection and intellectual respect'.¹²⁸ In that same year, in spite of financial hardship, he left his job as an assistant editor with Gallimard publishing house after only a few months of employment. On leaving he reflected on his time there with bitter humour, the tone and image reminiscent of a petulant child or teenager: 'I wanted all the time to throw my inkwell in Monsieur Cocteau's face, or in monsieur's such-and-such's face, instead of taking their instructions about the publication of their

¹²⁴ Ponge, cited in Gavronsky, introduction, *The Power of Language*, p. 9. Original context in Ponge, *Pour un Malherbe* (Paris: Gallimard, 1965), p. 163.

¹²⁵ Sorrell, *Francis Ponge*, p. 4.

¹²⁶ Sorrell, *Francis Ponge*, p. 4.

¹²⁷ Sorrell, *Francis Ponge*, pp. 4-5.

¹²⁸ Higgins, *Francis Ponge*, p. 5.

books'.¹²⁹ Unemployed, furious with institutions and social mechanisms in general, Ponge continued to write and remain politically active while also living with his mother in Paris, who had moved in with him after the death of her husband. In 1926, Ponge left Paris for Normandy to recover from his depression, the context of which, according to Philippe Sollers, was essential for his convalescence, not only perhaps satisfying a need in Ponge to return to his childhood home, but also to remind himself of things, outside of Paris, in their natural environment. As Sollers phrases it, in Normandy Ponge 'rediscovered the tonic effect of the sheer presence of the natural world....This is the time of veritable enchantment....After the antechamber of logic, here is the tonic of the exterior world. Things are there'.¹³⁰ Shortly after his return, Ponge's financial situation changed, and for a while the constraints of the early Twenties were lifted in 1927 when he received a small inheritance. He used this money to sustain himself while writing poems, some of which were included in Le Parti pris des choses.

Overall, however, Ponge's Twenties offered little relief from the feelings of anger, disgust and fear beginning to form in him during the First World War. Margaret Guiton, the editor of the Faber translation of his selected poems, describes Ponge during this time:

An angry young man... at all human institutions and arrangements, most particularly the words whereby this sordid state of things insidiously penetrates our minds... he dreams of kindling an apocalyptic fire whereby, as in Poe's Eureka, existing creation will be driven back to the divine word (himself!).¹³¹

Indeed, Ponge was driven towards eventually, or ultimately, discovering the self, but perhaps less in the sense of 'divine' than of something more earthly. As Ponge implied in his text 'Rhetoric' (1929-30), one of his aims through language was 'to teach everyone the

¹²⁹ Ponge, here cited in Sorrell, Francis Ponge, p. 20. Original context: Francis Ponge, Entretiens de Francis Ponge avec Philippe Sollers, p. 65.

¹³⁰ Sorrell, Francis Ponge, p. 20.

¹³¹ Guiton, preface, Francis Ponge: Selected Poems, p. xi.

art of founding his own rhetoric' in order to save 'a few young men from suicide and a few others from becoming cops or firemen'. Those he considered to be desperate and disgusted enough to take their own lives or conform to public demand, were those who considered themselves full of a language that was 'ready-made' and no longer theirs, the point when 'they find that others own too large a share of them'.¹³² Ponge, therefore, decided that using non-descript and clichéd rhetoric would mean he had failed both language and man, and that 'the art of saying only what one wants to say'¹³³ was the most effective way towards change and individuality. As the following chapter suggests, however, Ponge's hope to save others or rather to show others the route towards an individual rather than a manufactured use of language through poems about objects and 'their' language, was impossible without his own interjection interfering with the otherwise silent wisdom of things.

¹³² Ponge, 'Rhetoric', in *The Power of Language*, p. 73.

¹³³ Ponge, 'Rhetoric', p. 73.

Chapter Two: Language and Rebellion

Prose Poetry and the New Language of Objects

This chapter seeks to understand in a more general, rather than personal, sense how the environment after the First World War influenced and echoed Ponge's work, enhanced his neuroses, and also determined his decision to turn to prose poetry as a form to accommodate his focus on objects. To begin with, Jean-Michel Maulpoix's work on French Twentieth-century poetry is a useful study of the changes in the literary and cultural environment of France which positions Ponge, among others, in a transitional and new approach to language, which is indicative of writers wanting to avert the destruction and confusion of war in their writing, and turn to things which represented stability:

As early as before the War, the concern for a writing less metaphorical, more discreet, closer to objects and to concrete situations...emerged among such poets as Francis Ponge, Eugène Guillevic, Jean Follain or, after the War, among authors of the Rochefort School. René Guy Cadou thus termed one of the fundamental ambitions of French poetry from this half century by saying: 'It is above all a matter of replanting a foothold on the earth where we are'.¹³⁴

Within this emerging turn to things in literature, however, Ponge was also considered to be going against the new grain of writing, and his ambition to side with things and establish new commonplaces by stripping the object of 'the public and private myths that normally muffle it',¹³⁵ provides an intriguing alter-narrative to the object's situation, not only in literary contexts, but also within modern ideas about the role of the object within culture itself. Janell Watson, in her book Literature and Material Culture from Balzac to

¹³⁴Jean-Michel Maulpoix, 'French Poetry Since 1950: Multifariousness and Perspectives', Modern French Literature, Jean-Michel Maulpoix and Co., trans. Catherine Wieder. (This is an essay published online, found at the author's website, Modern French Literature: www.maulpoix.net/US/Figuring.html.)

¹³⁵ Higgins, 'Against Petrification', p. 827.

Proust, points out what can be read as a fundamentally counter-argument to Ponge's treatment of the object in literature:

The very concept of 'material culture' carries with it the assumption that, like language, the world of goods, is fundamentally social in nature. Like words, things are created and given meaning collectively....Furthermore, as Marx insists in his theory of the commodity, relationships among things are inseparable from relationships among people, implying that the world of things is a social world, with a social structure which includes not only class relations and social positioning...but also gender relations.¹³⁶

The insistence that objects are unable to be brought to life merely through detailed descriptions of the things themselves, and can only be rendered poetically in the context of the dramas of human situations, is of particular interest to Lukács in his essay, 'Narrate or Describe?' In the following passage from the essay, we have another example of what appears to be the antithesis to Ponge's entire poetic oeuvre:

Boxes and orchestra, stage and parterre...are in themselves inanimate, absolutely unpoetic and void of interest.... Only when a theatre or a stock exchange provide the arena for human ambitions, a stage or a battlefield for men's struggles with each other, do they become poetic. And only when they furnish the indispensable vehicle for transmitting human relationships do they acquire value or become poetic in themselves.

A 'poetry of things' independent of people and of people's lives does not exist in literature....Anything which plays a meaningful role in the activity of a man about whom we are concerned becomes poetically significant...precisely because of its relationship to the character's activity.¹³⁷

By contrast, Douglas Mao, although addressing similar issues to Watson in terms of material production and literature, acknowledges that the object has occupied significant roles in creative or imaginative writing in English through ekphrasis and allegory. Moreover, as Mao notes, the position of the object changes, and via the 'high

¹³⁶ Janell Watson, Literature and Material Culture from Balzac to Proust: The Collection and Consumption of Curiosities (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 7.

¹³⁷ György Lukács, 'Narrate or Describe? A Preliminary Discussion of Naturalism and Formalism', in Writer & Critic, and Other Essays, ed. and trans. Arthur D. Kahn (New York: Grosset and Dunlap, 1971), pp. 135-6.

modernists...a self-conscious contemplation of the object qua object hitherto only sporadically anticipated' occurs.¹³⁸

This feeling of regard for the physical object as object – as not-self, as not-subject, as most helpless and will-less of entities, but also as fragment of Being, as solidity, as otherness in its most resilient opacity – seems a peculiarly Twentieth-century malady or revelation.¹³⁹

Among the 'few other authors' – European, American and English – whom we can list as part of this Modernist 'malady' are: André Breton, Charles Baudelaire, Francis Ponge, Alain Robbe-Grillet, Jean Paul Sartre, Max Jacob, Rainer Marie Rilke, Gertrude Stein, Paul Auster, James Joyce, Samuel Beckett, Virginia Woolf, and D H Lawrence. Modernist authors reposition the object in literature, and treat the thing itself as a new and crucial way of re-discovering language and reality. In her essay on Woolf and objects, for example, Mary Ann Caws, attests that in England 'the lesson of Lawrence's things is clear: objects solidify the world,' and concludes that 'the French have known this, it seems, better than anyone'.¹⁴⁰

One could argue that this statement finds its ultimate realisation in the work of Francis Ponge, and indeed Harry Moore in his book on Twentieth-century French poetry concurs that Ponge's unique place in this period of French writing is unprecedented and secured by this new treatment of the object in relation to the word:

Ponge invented a new kind of language – a poetry of the object that is at the same time a method of contemplation – as though the object being examined did not exist as a word. The primary act of the poet therefore becomes the act of seeing, as if no one had ever seen the thing before, so that the object might have 'the good fortune to be born into words.'¹⁴¹

¹³⁸ Douglas Mao, *Solid Objects: Modernism and the Test of Production* (Princeton, N.J; Chichester: Princeton University Press, c1998), p. 13.

¹³⁹ Mao, *Solid Objects*, p. 4.

¹⁴⁰ Mary Ann Caws, 'Taking our time with Things: Virginia Woolf's Object Lessons', *Contemporary British Studies* (France: Montpellier University Press, 1999), 151-164; 162.

¹⁴¹ Harry Thornton Moore, *Twentieth-Century French Literature* (London: Heinemann, 1969), p. 223.

In view of a text which falls into Ponge's poetics rather than his poems, 'Introduction to the Pebble' (1933), published after the actual poem 'The Pebble' (1927-1932), it can be argued with Moore that Ponge's approach to language and things is something of an anomaly in French literature. In 'The Introduction to the Pebble' Ponge explains and discusses his ambition for a new treatment of language and objects, and finishes the piece by emphatically addressing objects rather than people directly:

Well! stones, pebbles, dust, such trite feelings albeit so contradictory have been expressed about you; I will not judge you so hastily because I want to judge you on your own merits: and you will serve me, and henceforth, you will serve mankind for many other expressions; you will provide them with arguments when they speak among themselves or to themselves and, if I have enough talent, you will even arm them with a few proverbs or platitudes: that's the extent of my ambition.¹⁴²

In return for not judging things, and seeing them as they are rather than how they are thought about, Ponge demands from things a language that will refresh or nourish the language of humankind. Again, such a focussed and obsessive ambition to side with things was unique among the poets of his generation in France. However, there are also some very marked general changes in language during the end of the first half of the Twentieth-century, which make it possible to contextualise Ponge within French literature, rather than treat him purely as an anomaly. Again, Maulpoix observes certain trends in French poetry during this time and of the Sixties notes that 'the work of language [becomes] the very object of poetry':¹⁴³

One becomes more and more interested in the power of transgression. According to Bernard Noël, 'language is born of a breaking up, all of a sudden it can no longer bear being at the service of its references, naming them, reflecting them. The French language is quite naturally submitted to the signified: it has to offer evidence, give the detail of the accounts, edict rules, give some representation. But all of a sudden, there's a breaking up which is not a general one, but surges from one's specific mouth which becomes the point wherefrom

¹⁴² Ponge, 'Introduction to the Pebble', in *The Power of Language*, p. 83.

¹⁴³ Maulpoix, 'Tendencies 11 – 1960: Figuring'.

the revolution starts up'. The poetical act is thus willingly perceived as a revolutionary act. Writing must re-enliven language by establishing a singular relationship which dissociates it from its traditional articulation. The poet becomes he who imposes a new rhythm, a new way of saying or of provoking the real.¹⁴⁴

Equally, in its blatant questioning of a poetic use of language and genre – drawing poetry and prose consciously into each other – the prose poem had a wide impact on language, and was a significant part of the change in language becoming more of a focus, a subject in itself within writing. All of these terms – 'revolutionary', 'transgression', 'breaking up', 'dissociates', 'imposes' and 'provoking' – in association with this new imperative towards poetry are indicative of a changing rhetoric around poetry, which in turn is aligned with poetry's new associations with prose.

On this subject, Margueritte Murphy's study is dedicated to the acknowledgement of the prose poem's reputation as rebellious and intrinsically subversive. Murphy takes this defiant approach to language back to Nineteenth-century France, to the prose poem's exponent Charles Baudelaire, whose collection Petits poèmes en prose, published in book form in 1869 in Paris, 'in effect, engendered a new poetic tradition'.¹⁴⁵ This tradition, she also claims, from the start 'was allied with an aesthetic that valued shock and innovation over tradition and convention'.¹⁴⁶ A similar emphasis on newness and anti-convention also occurs in the poetry of the aftermath of the Second World War. Where Murphy partially accredits the prose poem's rebellious reputation with its 'reaction to the rigid prosodic strictures and artless "versificateurs" of Eighteenth-century France',¹⁴⁷ in other words the alexandrine, Michael Hamburger, in his chapter, 'A New Austerity', in The Truth of Poetry, discusses the 'new anti-poetry [as] a

¹⁴⁴ Maulpoix, 'Tendencies 11 – 1960: Figuring'.

¹⁴⁵ Murphy, introduction, A Tradition of Subversion, p. 2.

¹⁴⁶ Murphy, introduction, A Tradition of Subversion, p. 3.

¹⁴⁷ Murphy, introduction, A Tradition of Subversion, p. 3.

product of the Second World War [which] arose from an acute distrust of all the devices by which lyrical poetry had maintained its autonomy'.¹⁴⁸ Hamburger argues that:

For the new anti-poets it was not enough that poetry should be as well written as prose, it should also be capable of communicating as directly as prose, without resort to a special language mainly distinguished by its highly metaphorical character.¹⁴⁹

Again according to Murphy, the prose poem highlighted this conflict of literary and non-literary language through acting as a 'vehicle for the introduction of non-literary prose into "poetic" discourse – the prose of the street, the pulpit, the newsrooms, the political arena...and so on'.¹⁵⁰ The anti-poets, by developing a similar more matter-of-fact approach to the otherwise heightened language of poetry, lent a particular kind of density and science to poetry – theirs a reductive rather than luxurious approach to poetry:

The new anti-poetry... was to reduce poetic diction to those elements which no longer strike one as metaphorical or figurative, because they belong to the stock of prose usage. The invention of metaphors and similes was felt to be a luxury, a self-indulgence, if poetry could do without such personal linguistic accretions.¹⁵¹

This overriding characteristic of social and political Post-War poetry 'as dry, laconic and austere' is 'not only because its authors are 'literalists of the imagination' but also due to the way that 'the imagination itself has come up against barriers of an unprecedented kind'.¹⁵² In direct relation to the 'mouth' used in the context of Maupoux's quotation, from which a revolt against the traditions of articulation arises, what Hamburger calls 'the experience of silence in face of the unspeakable' is an example of one of these barriers similarly experienced by Ponge throughout his work.¹⁵³

¹⁴⁸ Michael Hamburger, *The Truth of Poetry: Tensions in Modern Poetry Since Baudelaire* (London: Anvil, 1996), p. 220.

¹⁴⁹ Hamburger, *The Truth of Poetry*, p. 220.

¹⁵⁰ Murphy, introduction, *A Tradition of Subversion*, p. 4.

¹⁵¹ Hamburger, *The Truth of Poetry*, p. 231.

¹⁵² Hamburger, *The Truth of Poetry*, pp. 238-239.

¹⁵³ Hamburger, *The Truth of Poetry*, p. 239.

It is here that I want to draw attention to one of my questions about Ponge: how and where do we place him, not only in relation to the social and political poetry of the time, but also in relation to the prose poem? Many critics have argued or asserted that Ponge was determined to not be of his time, but to remain a 'literary oddity',¹⁵⁴ and that although he has affinities with his contemporaries and their ideas, as Higgins states, 'his position in Twentieth-century French literature is as paradoxical as the qualities of things presented in his poetry'.¹⁵⁵ Guillaume Apollinaire, for example, who lived between 1880 and 1918 was writing before Ponge, but foreshadows Ponge's desire for the new language to replace the old, and displays the irony of working rebelliously not within the subversive prose poem, but outside of it. Apollinaire, noted by Caws as the 'only major French poet of the century to ignore the prose poem',¹⁵⁶ was another Twentieth-century writer who was involved in his own campaign for a new language, but unlike Ponge he wrote within vers libre, a similar genre to the prose poem in the way it questioned and relaxed the formal structures of French prosody. In 'La Victoire' (1917), Apollinaire declares what Ponge's prose poem seemed to be striving towards: 'O mouths humanity seeks a new language'.¹⁵⁷ Where the poets diverge, however, in this search for a new language is evident in their approach to figurative speech. In Apollinaire's poem, the voice is treated metaphorically and the word is described as a 'God quaking'.¹⁵⁸ Ponge's use of language, on the other hand (at least in the short and early prose poems), is closer to a speech of things, earthbound and recognisable. It is only in his later works, as he addresses speech more transparently, that Ponge begins to demonstrate more of an equivalent to Apollinaire's frustration with language, where – as Caws discerns of a

¹⁵⁴ Mark J. Temmer, 'Francis Ponge: A Dissenting View of His Poetry', *Modern Language Quarterly*, 29:2 (1968), 207-221: 221.

¹⁵⁵ Higgins, *Francis Ponge*, p. 113.

¹⁵⁶ Mary Ann Caws and Hermine Riffaterre, eds, introduction, *The Prose Poem in France: Theory and Practice* (New York: Guildford: Columbia University Press, 1983), p. 11.

¹⁵⁷ Guillaume Apollinaire, *The Self-Dismembered Man: Selected Later Poems of Guillaume Apollinaire*, trans. Donald Revell (USA, Middleton: Wesleyan University Press, 2004), p. 125.

¹⁵⁸ Apollinaire, *The Self-Dismembered Man*, p. 129.

general struggle between poets and words during Ponge's era – 'the poet who claims he speaks this language knows nonetheless that he can command only existing words and gropes in his effort to evoke the new'.¹⁵⁹ Ponge speaks for all the early modern poets and their struggle within this aim for a fresh and revolutionary language, in his description of the voice of leaves, in his poem 'The Cycle of Seasons'¹⁶⁰ (n.d.):

They think they can say everything, cover the entire world with assorted verbiage:
they say only 'trees'....Always the same leaf, always the same way of unfolding...
Try another leaf! – Same thing!¹⁶¹

It is precisely Ponge's recognition and use of nature, and his faith in earth-bound things as revolutionary when used in language, that separates him slightly from contemporary ideas of the radical in anti-literature.

Very late on in 1976 Ponge said something which not only settles on literature as the revolutionary influence on society, rather than the other way around, but also continues to acknowledge the important place of things within writing:

I think, too, that the real revolution, the real subversion, the real modernity, etc., takes place in writing, in literature. And that there are far more subversive and revolutionary elements in a text – no matter what the subject, no matter what the theme, be it a fruit-dish, or an herb-garden, or anything you wish, it doesn't matter – than in political sermons or discourses, or in works of that kind. Why? Because we are within language, we are closed within our own language, and no matter what, nothing happens outside of that language. And it is by modification through the transmutation of terms, by working on our language, that we are able to change things, and that includes politics.¹⁶²

¹⁵⁹ Caws; Riffaterre, *The Prose Poem in France*, p. 15.

¹⁶⁰ In the notes to the Faber *Selected Poems*, it is stated that 'with the single exception of 'Snails', Ponge, did not, as was his later practice date the poem in *Le Parti pris*. Approximate dates can be derived from the publication dates of poems previously published in reviews or from secondary sources.' I have found many of these dates in the three volumes of *Le Grand Recueil*, but not of this poem. 'Fauna and Flora' is similar, and was written between 1936 and 1937, but likewise 'Tentative Orale' of 1947 explores the same theme of language and seasons. As 'Cycle of Seasons' is a shorter poem than 'Fauna and Flora', I would imagine it was written in the early to mid Thirties, not far from the date of 'Trees Decompose in a Sphere of Fog' (1933), a similar poem in its brevity and exploration of trees and the cyclical process of life and death.

¹⁶¹ Ponge, 'The Cycle of Seasons', in *Francis Ponge: Selected Poems*, p. 35.

¹⁶² Higgins, *Francis Ponge*, p. 132, n. 4. Translation here by John Zuern in his essay: 'Francis Ponge, Gertrude Stein, and the Aesthetics of Compression', published online:

The emphasis on language and objects as revolutionary, rather than on the more overtly political acts of social demonstrations, in many ways seems to accord neatly with Ponge's choice of the prose poem and its revolutionary, or subversive, merging of prose and poetry. However, it is the very fact that Ponge's main interest was in language and beginning his poems with an interest in words, rather than basing his works on events or popular themes of the time, which was both a blessing and a curse in terms of his ambition for a new treatment of humankind's expressions.

This section has drawn parallels between Ponge and contemporary writers alongside observations of his difference from them, but ultimately Ponge's relationship with language was a personal rather than a political and literary one. As Lee Fahnestock says of him in her introduction to his poetry collection The Nature of Things, Ponge often came away from his texts with the feeling that 'much of the catch [had] slipped between his fingers'.¹⁶³ Although this kind of frustration with language was beginning to emerge in 'The Cycle of Seasons' and in examples of his later works, it is the early poems written close to the end of the First World War which stand as examples of where Ponge hides his anger towards the War behind his focus on objects. Where the First World War had both a silencing, in the sense of a constricted and controlled effect on Ponge's use of form, the Second had the opposite. The next chapter observes, however, that the lucidity and focus of the early poems is hard to fathom in the later works, and is beginning to give way to a less checked rage, the cause of which at times is blurred by the close proximities between his particular mental and social attitudes towards the language of his time and culture. In other words, Ponge's need for a distinction between his own speech

www2.hawaii.edu/~zuern/textonly/steintxt/check7.html. Original context: interview with Ponge in Cahiers critiques de la littérature, No.2 (1976), p. 9.

¹⁶³ Lee Fahnestock, introduction, The Nature of Things, p. 8.

and that which belongs to others starts to collapse through his own neuroses and self-consciousness around words.

Chapter Three: Neurosis and Prose Poetry

'Foul Mouths'

In the sentence below from section II of 'Some Reasons for Writing', Ponge draws direct attention to a neurotic association he makes between speech and dirt, which seems to guide him throughout his writing:

With all due respect for words, given the habit they have contracted in so many foul mouths, it actually takes courage not only to write but even to speak. A pile of old rags not to be touched with tweezers – that's what we're given to move, to shake, to turn about.¹⁶⁴

This kind of obsessive and compulsive rage, expressed in reaction to what he saw as a maltreatment of language surfaces in many of Ponge's poems between 1929 and 1930. What we can glean from the above example, however, are two specific reasons for his rage. The first is his impatience with the general public's use of language which continues the frustration he experienced from listening to militant and characterless discourses that arose during and after the First World War. The second, which is more pertinent to this chapter, concerns the most dominant conflict between his prose poems and critical texts: the act of speech and the act of writing, the former detested, the latter sanctified. It was during the 1920s that Ponge first attempted to keep speech and the speaker out of his writing, viewing speech as untrustworthy and unclean, and writing, on the other hand, as pure – a definite counterpoint to the unreliability of the spoken word. Again, this distinction is something he expressed years after he initially had formed this opinion. In 'The Practice of Literature', a lecture he delivered in 1956, he writes:

¹⁶⁴Ponge, 'Some Reasons for Writing', in The Power of Language, p. 67.

And often after a conversation, after talking, I have the feeling of dirt, of insufficiency, of muddled things; even a conversation that has moved forward a bit, that has gone just a bit toward the bottom of things, and with intelligent people. We say so many stupid things.... This is not proper. And often my taste for writing comes when I return to my house after a conversation in which I had the impression of taking old clothes, old shirts from one trunk and putting them into another, all this in the attic, you know, with lots of dust, lots of dirt, sweating a little and dirty, feeling uncomfortable. I see a piece of white paper and I say: 'Maybe, with a little attention, I can write something proper, something neat and clean.' This, is it not, is often the reason, maybe one of the principal reasons for writing.¹⁶⁵

Ponge's poem, 'The Augean Stables' written between 1929 and 1930, externalises this personal revulsion towards language. In this embittered poem, Ponge witnesses the dirt and inadequacy of language not only in the 'shameful order of things'¹⁶⁶ made up of the noisy and oppressive nature of Parisian traffic, bureaucracy, and opportunism, but within humanity itself:

Unfortunately, to cap this horror, within ourselves, the same sordid order speaks, because we have no other words at our disposal, no high sounding words (or sentences, that is to say, ideas) except for those that have been, and from the beginning of time, prostituted on a daily basis in this crass world... We are not interested in sweeping out the Augean stables but in painting them in frescoes with their own manure.¹⁶⁷

It is this particular kind of claustrophobia, and the verbal act of narrowing the city down to dung-covered stables, which is mirrored in two practical aspects of his writing at this time. The first is the fact that Ponge was writing short pieces, 'textes clos'¹⁶⁸ as he was later to call them, or again 'bombs', and the second is that he sat down to write these, out of choice, in a very tiny room in the flat where he lived with his mother. This, a room which he converted from an old lavatory, is by far the most isolated example of the environments in which he chose to write. Ponge relays this particular writing situation in

¹⁶⁵ Ponge, 'The Practice of Literature', cited in Jacques Derrida, 'From Signsponge', in *Acts of Literature*, pp. 356-7.

¹⁶⁶ Ponge, 'The Augean Stables', in *The Power of Language*, p. 69.

¹⁶⁷ Ponge, 'The Augean Stables', p. 69.

¹⁶⁸ Ponge, *Entretiens de Francis Ponge avec Philippe Sollers*, p. 80.

an interview with Sollers, and I quote the passage in full in order to show the close proximities of prose poems, claustrophobia, brevity, filth, and bombs, that were at work in Ponge's mind:

In the apartment where I lived with my mother, I had arranged a small room that used to be an old lavatory, in which there was nothing but a chair and a table, a small table. This room had no window, I couldn't hold out in there very long. In there I was a little like an anarchist working secretly. What were my weapons? Well, I had tacked an alphabet printed in large characters on the wall; and my Littré dictionary was under the table. So I worked at making my bomb, with letters and with words.¹⁶⁹

Everything about this room, from its history as a lavatory to its isolation and secretiveness, and finally the fact that Ponge could only breathe and write in there for so long, encapsulates the poet's nervous, inconsistent and suspicious relationship with writing, especially at this time. In terms of the uneasiness of the situation with its lack of light and air, the room seems to be a concrete and outward manifestation of his physical discomfort with speech, and intense desire to express outside of himself what is otherwise hidden and suffocated. In his 'Introduction to the Pebble' Ponge reiterates his need for isolation, and puts it down to wanting to filter out distractions, indicating a need for silence that one might assume works in opposition to his determination against silence expressed so frequently elsewhere:

As for me, distractions bother me: I would be the least bored in a prison or a cell, alone in the country. Anywhere else, and whatever I do, I have the feeling of wasting my time.¹⁷⁰

Ponge wrote this in 1933, and between August and September of 1940, when he was an active member of the Resistance movement he spent some time in the kind of isolation he expresses above. In a cabin in pine woods near La Suchère, a hamlet of the Haute-

¹⁶⁹ Ponge, cited in Patrick Meadows, *Francis Ponge and the Nature of Things: From Ancient Atomism to a Modern Poetics* (Cranbury, N.J.:Associated University Presses, Inc. 1997), p. 139. Original context: Ponge, *Entretiens de Francis Ponge avec Philippe Sollers*, pp. 71-72.

¹⁷⁰ Ponge, 'Introduction to the Pebble', in *The Power of Language*, p. 77.

Loire, Ponge in solitude produced a notebook called 'Notebook of the Pine Woods' (1940), which not so much documents in diary form his experience of hiding from the Nazis, but typical of Ponge documents in drafts and notes his struggle with trying to enter what he calls 'the sense of the pine woods; i.e., the releasing of the inherent quality of these woods, and its lesson'.¹⁷¹ Not much is known or published about this time in Ponge's life, and the notebook itself is a very elusive book. Ron Silliman, a Twentieth-century American poet associated with the Language poets, as well as critic and admirer of Ponge, writes a paragraph on his website about 'Notebook in the Pine Woods'.¹⁷² What we can discern from the passage is Ponge's hallmark of doggedly searching for perfection in language and poetry in the sense of obtaining the essence of the thing in itself, and the fact that 'Notebook', for all its solitary composition, is another example of Ponge not wasting his time, but struggling with his impossible objective of securing a language equivalent to the thing in itself, as well as satisfying himself in words:

'Notebook' documents a period during which Ponge, an active member of the Resistance who was being hunted by the Nazis & the Vichy regime, took refuge in a cabin in a pine woods and, while there, proceeded to imagine what it might be like to write a perfect poem, which I recall (perhaps imperfectly) to be a sonnet. In the 'Notebook' he writes the work over and over, carefully documenting the most minute changes until it becomes evident that a 'perfect' poem can exist only as an idea, that a text is a thing that could be refined forever without ever getting to an 'ultimate' core.¹⁷³

This narrative of the pine woods gives another example of a particular type of isolation in which Ponge was producing variations on the same theme and approach to language and objects. That is, although he claimed to be happiest away from distractions, in the

¹⁷¹ Francis Ponge, 'The Notebook of the Pine Woods', in *Things*, trans. Cid Corman, p. 68. 'Le Carnet du bois de pins' (The Notebook of the Pine Woods), originally part of several pieces comprising *La Rage de l'expression*, published in *Tome Premier (Douze petits écrits: Le Parti pris des choses; Proèmes; La Rage de l'expression; Le Peintre à l'étude; La Seine)* (Paris: Gallimard, 1965).

¹⁷² 'In' rather than 'of' is a subtly interesting and notable difference given that Ponge was trying to get into the pine woods through creating a sense of it. Both work well together.

¹⁷³ Ron Silliman, 'Silliman's Blog: A Weblog Focused on Contemporary Poets and Poetics', May 31, 2003, at: www.ronsilliman.blogspot.com/2003_05_01_archive.html.

end he failed to escape his own subjectivity, to which he was constantly being led back: an astute awareness of his own shortcomings with language, according to his obsessive scrutiny of things. These distractions, although never admitted by him, were coming not from outside, but inside. Objectivity through objects, Ponge's fixated return to things, and isolated situations did not always bring mental relief to the poet, and enable him to escape these distractions. At times, we gain a glimpse into the poet's awareness of this, at other times a clear indication of his lack of self-awareness. To illustrate this point, we can return to the comparison between the two texts of 1933 and 1940. In 1933, Ponge in writing has intellectually separated himself from humankind and reprimanded them for failing to attend to things and language, and being 'satisfied to be "proud" or "humble" or "hypocritical"...with all the imaginable combinations of those pitiful qualities';¹⁷⁴ but in 1940, in his physical separation from people, the poet reprimands himself for failing to succeed in what he despises in others. This disappointment is clearly documented in the 'Notebook' under the somewhat wearied, and yet sardonic sub-section: 'ALL THIS ISN'T SERIOUS':

All this isn't serious. What I have come up with in these 20 pages or so and these ten days? – Not much for the amount of trouble taken.

...

If I've come up with no more than that in ten days of uninterrupted and stubborn labor (I may really say that), then I've wasted my time. I'd even be tempted to say, the time of the pine wood. For after an eternity of nonexpression in the mute world, it is eager to be expressed now that I've given it such hope, or presentiment.¹⁷⁵

The mention of 'uninterrupted' and the feeling that he has wasted his own time and that of the pines', the object of his isolated contemplation, stands as a tragic contradiction to his above claim of 1933 where 'he would be the least bored in a prison or a cell', pitching

¹⁷⁴ Ponge, 'Introduction to the Pebble', in *The Power of Language*, p. 75.

¹⁷⁵ Ponge, 'The Notebook of the Pine Woods', in *Things*, pp. 67-68.

to himself and the reader a hopeful but altogether naïve desire for a pure, objective and isolated style of writing.

Out of all the situations in which he wrote, however, the converted lavatory seems to be the most revealing of Ponge's character and his battle between silence and the need to explore expression, not only as outside of himself in objects, but also inside of himself, as unsullied and dingy. The isolation of the context, and the hermit-like inclusion of a few and carefully chosen objects, tailored and necessary to his belief, all these details are signatures of Ponge's early relationship with language, and as the next section explores, provide the ground work for his later developments.

The Cleansing of Speech

The compulsion towards a purging of language is an implicit reaction felt not only in Ponge, but in many writers of his generation after both World Wars. Ponge's apparent snubbing of another one of his contemporaries, Paul Valéry (1871-1945), and assertion of their difference, can be contested by their similarly dynamic approach to language. As Ponge has spoken of a cleansing of texts in his 'verbal laboratory',¹⁷⁶ so Valéry insists on 'cleaning up the verbal situation', positing that the nature of language is provisional and akin to a bank-note – the true nature of speech and money analogous to 'a piece of paper, generally dirty'.¹⁷⁷ Both Valéry and Ponge, in an attempt to restore to the temporary and unreliable nature of language, words that are cleansed of their interpretive state and returned to their original sound and meaning, take a rather mechanical and practical approach to poetry, which at the same time is slightly self-conscious and humble. The following extract from Valéry's essay 'Poetry and Abstract Thought' is

¹⁷⁶ Ponge, cited in Gavronsky, introduction, *The Power of Language*, p. 25. Original context: Francis Ponge, *Pour un Malherbe*, p. 70.

¹⁷⁷ Paul Valéry, 'Poetry and Abstract Thought', *The Art of Poetry*, trans. Denise Folliot (New York: Bollingen Foundation Inc., 1958), p. 56.

reminiscent not only of Ponge's 'verbal laboratory', but also of the latter's awareness of his relationship with language.¹⁷⁸

I generally proceed like a surgeon who sterilizes his hands and prepares the area to be operated on. This is what I call cleaning up the verbal situation. You must excuse this expression equating the words and forms of speech with the hands and instruments of a surgeon.¹⁷⁹

The mechanical precision that the operating theatre implies, however, is apposite to the Post-War literary cleansing, which became synonymous with a stripping down, what Hamburger refers to as a mistrust and expulsion of the superfluous and 'suspect...traditional language of poetry'.¹⁸⁰

To encapsulate one side of this, and demonstrate something akin to Ponge's revolt towards language, are the words of the Polish poet Tadeusz Różewicz: 'I regard my poems with acute mistrust', he writes, adding, 'I have fashioned them out of a remnant of words, salvaged words, out of uninteresting words, words from the great rubbish dump, the great cemetery',¹⁸¹ and in the words of his poetry, when he "listens to the dreary voice" inside himself, this is what he hears:¹⁸²

someone will come
to wipe
the talking mould
from your skins.¹⁸³

A less obvious kind of reaction specific to the butchery of the Second World War, cleansing was an important part of the composition and content of Ponge's prose poems, particularly in how he dealt literally with the spoken word. Ponge's longest poem Soap,

¹⁷⁸ Valéry, 'Poetry and Abstract Thought', in The Art of Poetry, pp. 52-81.

¹⁷⁹ Valéry, 'Poetry and Abstract Thought' in The Art of Poetry, p. 54.

¹⁸⁰ Hamburger, Truth of Poetry, p. 247.

¹⁸¹ Tadeusz Różewicz, cited in Hamburger, Truth of Poetry, p. 247.

¹⁸² See Hamburger, Truth of Poetry, p. 249.

¹⁸³ See Hamburger, Truth of Poetry, pp. 247, 249.

explores this theme, and, amongst other things, metaphorically cleanses the language of humankind, the book taking us through the machinations of what Ponge calls an 'intellectual toilet'¹⁸⁴ performed by the voluble and therefore appropriate nature of the soap, with silence seen as 'dangerous' and dirty. As Ponge reasons:

If I wished to prove that purity is not obtained by silence, but by any exercise of language (in certain conditions, a certain ridiculous little object held in the hands), followed by a sudden catastrophe of water,
Would anything be better than soap?¹⁸⁵

In the 'abstract theme' which briefs us on the idea of the 'intellectual toilet', Ponge states:

It is necessary...to have in hand (in the mouth) something more material and perhaps less natural, something artificial and voluble, something which displays itself, develops, and which loses itself, uses itself up at the same time. Something which is very much like speech employed in certain conditions...
...In a word: a little piece of soap.¹⁸⁶

The equation that Ponge makes between dirt and speech is undeniable, but it seems contradictory, then, that he was so against dirt in speech, and yet saw in the object, exemplified in soap, a way of cleansing speech in spite of the fact that objects and dirt are almost synonymous, as indicated in the quotation below, taken from *Soap*. Here, the contradiction appears in the fact that Ponge seems to delight in dirt, saying that his incentive towards his work involved 'a violent need to bend down to the earth, to drink water, to finger dirt, to physically encounter things'.¹⁸⁷ We can possibly justify this contradiction in the sense that dirt in relation to speech seems to refer to the layers of clichés that obscure the original object, but what is an even more potent incongruity that the latter quotation illuminates and in turn supports his detestation of dirt, is the fact that

¹⁸⁴ Francis Ponge, *Soap*, trans. Lane Dunlop (California: Stanford University Press, 1998), p. 23.

¹⁸⁵ Ponge, *Soap*, p. 23.

¹⁸⁶ Ponge, *Soap*, p. 24.

¹⁸⁷ Ponge, Appendix II, 'Proem', in *Soap*, p. 85.

Ponge's writing practice seems to involve intense periods of isolation inside rather than communing with nature outside.

In 1977, seven years after his interview with Sollers in which he tells the story of his converted lavatory, Ponge is interviewed by Gavronsky and here he reflects again on his writing situation and himself during the 1920s. Again, he repeats the same sense of claustrophobia and tightness, or control, over his expression that ruled his early texts, and which was pertinent to the initial stages of his perturbing relationship with language and outward expression. Ponge says, after his first publication, that 'after he had his first taste of success with the N.R.F, one of the few young writers of his time to be published by them, he became not more boastful about his work but more critical and more introvert',¹⁸⁸ and that part of the process of working towards the cleansing of the text is the process of increasing isolation:

I dug deeper into myself. And, one might say, instead of spectacular meetings and numerous publications, I locked myself up at home with the Littré (about which I have to speak sufficiently), and my white sheet of paper. And very slowly, and very secretly. I perfected my weapon which, in my case, was neither a dagger nor a revolver that I was going to pull out in a crowded street, as Breton had suggested. I was perfecting a sort of machine made out of words, of letters, and punctuation signs – short texts very closed-in upon themselves that resembled a bomb more than anything else. I was preparing a sort of machine, closed texts, directed against old forms of culture and rules.¹⁸⁹

In many respects the most revealing aspect of this paragraph in terms of what is to come in the later texts is the point where Ponge checks himself after the mention of his most treasured literary resource, the Littré. The clause 'about which I have to speak sufficiently' seems to equate on some level the interview situation with the oral exam and gives the impression that Ponge is once again under pressure when it comes to talking about something that is too significant for words. Once more, we see a self-deprecation

¹⁸⁸ Ponge, interview with Gavronsky, in *Sun Placed in the Abyss*, p. 89.

¹⁸⁹ Ponge, *Sun Placed in the Abyss*, p. 89.

and lack of confidence in what is emerging from his mouth and pen, echoing his oral failure and the fear that there is not enough time to speak adequately about what he praises most.

The affinity that Ponge draws between responsibility towards the object and cleansing is twofold. The poet both berates others for not using language responsibly, as well as concerning himself with the weight of failing language and objects. Where Ponge is unique in his obsessive and burdensome responsibility towards language, objects, himself and others, he is not alone in the hope he places in cleansing language as a solution to language and failure. In The Force of Poetry, Christopher Ricks discusses the way that irresponsible language in the form of cliché is restored in the work of another poet, Geoffrey Hill. Relative to the parallel drawn between cleansing and responsibility in Ponge's writing, Ricks' discussion considers Hill's words to reclaim their true and rightful skin by Hill's ability to use and rephrase formulaic sentences and stock sayings. In the following passage we can appreciate through Ricks that this process of the need to cleanse language in order to use it more effectively and truthfully is not peculiar to the Second World War but goes back to the Seventeenth century in the work of some of the metaphysical poets, and continues in the modern poetry of Europe and England alike:

Hill achieves dignity by rising above clichés... What fascinates him is the appalling gulf between the way we usually mutter such-and-such a phrase and how we might use it if the doors of perception were cleansed... In Hill's poems, as in those of Marvell and Jonson, which he has praised, 'the perspective requires the utterance of deliberate cliché, but cliché rinsed and restored to function as responsible speech'.¹⁹⁰

Ponge, however, rather than praise other writers, goes to the extreme of equating purity in language with an expulsion of literary influence, so while Ricks recognises that there is a history of other writers attempting to cleanse language, rather than align himself with

¹⁹⁰ Christopher Ricks, The Force of Poetry (Oxford: Clarendon, 1984), p. 362.

those writers, Ponge implies that even to include them, his allies, is a threat to the purity of language. In 'Metatechnical Fragments', Ponge once again tries to isolate himself from what are implied as dirty influences, and in words performs the equivalent of physically segregating himself from distractions in pine cabins and small clean rooms:

The state of grace is...a *tabula rasa*. In order to abide by it, one must not only put aside authors and their works but also the slightest trace in ourselves of any of their ways of writing.¹⁹¹

The madness that swims inside this text again seems to come from the author's seeming lack of self-awareness at the boldness of his statements in one sentence and the complete contradiction of them in front of and behind the sentence. Not only does Ponge follow this statement with mentioning another writer, Stendhal, but suggests that we use him as an example to follow Ponge's solution to rid ourselves of influence, which is 'to stuff one's memory with impossible turns of the phrase and rhythms that style would not find attractive. Stendhal used the Civic Code in this fashion'.¹⁹² Moreover, the text mentions other writers and artists, among them Michelangelo and Bourdelle, but also Émile Littré. The mention of the latter is treated in a somewhat sly manner as Ponge acknowledges those who think ill of him, but at the same time praises his dictionary. From this account it is as though Ponge has separated Littré from the dictionary, the object of his own making, and by treating the dictionary as a thing therefore of its own rules, it no longer falls under the category of filthy 'authors and their works':

You can make fun of Littré, but you must use his dictionary. Besides ruling on proper syntax, he is also the best there is for etymology. What knowledge is more necessary for the poet? Such 'materials' (according to Bourdelle) help the mind create beauty.¹⁹³

¹⁹¹ Ponge, 'Metatechnical Fragments', in *The Power of Language*, p. 55.

¹⁹² Ponge, 'Metatechnical Fragments', p. 55.

¹⁹³ Ponge, 'Metatechnical Fragments', p. 55.

The above admonition of authors, you would think, would include people in general; that Ponge would favour 'materials' over humankind's crude phrases seems evident in this piece, but over the page, we find Ponge admitting to the impossibility of escaping influence:

You want art to live for itself. That doesn't mean anything to me. There's only man here, and one must please: that's it.

No doubt, the work of art leads its own immortal life, moved by the multiplication of internal relationships....But wherever the soul is found, man shall be found. In order to live, one must live with him, and submit to his categories – hence the genres.¹⁹⁴

These are less contradictions at this stage than they are insights into the possibility of Ponge's unawareness of his own critical statements, and perhaps weakness when it comes to his own critical influence over his creative writing. When Ponge says that 'Man is a god who is unaware of himself', it seems that this kind of unawareness is pertinent to the place of Ponge himself in the context of his own work.¹⁹⁵

The question here, therefore, that is explored further in my next chapter, again comes back to another speculation about Ponge's awareness of himself and language, and of himself, language and his cultural context. Was Ponge conscious of a need for the cleansing of texts because he felt his own speech was inadequate and contaminated, or because he was absorbing the atmosphere of his time, itself aware of the effect of war on language? As Hamburger notes of poetry after Auschwitz, in relation to Paul Celan: 'Celan's extremism in his later work hinges on the question of what can still be said or no longer be said in poetry'.¹⁹⁶ Likewise, akin to Ponge, this hyper-awareness of language and silence lends itself to a hesitant use of syntax and attempts at being understood

¹⁹⁴Ponge, 'Metatechnical Fragments', p. 57.

¹⁹⁵ Ponge, cited in Gavronsky, introduction, *The Power of Language*, p. 40. Original context: 'Notes première de l'homme', in *Tome Premier* (Paris: Gallimard, 1965), p. 238.

¹⁹⁶ Hamburger, *Truth of Poetry*, p. 290.

through speech, and the need for cleansing what has been attached to words and subsequently obscured their true meaning. In Celan's words, it is necessary to wipe language clean of 'the garish talk of rubbed-/off experience'¹⁹⁷ to ensure the poem remains his, rather than being made of the words of others and not his own: 'the hundred-tongued my-poem, the noem... the human-/shaped snow'.¹⁹⁸ Even the snow is touched, and, Celan suggests, cannot be seen as snow in itself.

This sentiment is reminiscent of something Ponge wrote in 'Rhetoric' in which he despairs of the individual being lost to others through ownership. Where he attempts to speak out he finds that, when he tries to express himself, he is 'unable to do so' as, like Celan's human-shaped snow, words 'are ready made and express themselves: they do not express me. Once again I find myself suffocating'.¹⁹⁹ This accounts for the violence Ponge often expressed towards language, his anger towards both people and words alike when it came to wanting to break his way out of this claustrophobic relationship, reminiscent of that of Antonin Artaud's position, as discussed in Martin Esslin's book on Artaud in the section, 'The Limits of Language'.

Esslin notes that around 1957 Artaud is known first to feel that he had to 'smash language in order to touch life',²⁰⁰ and although there were nearly thirty years between Ponge's earlier conviction that resisting words involves 'doing them violence [and] forcing them to submit',²⁰¹ each writer is intent on shaking humankind out of an apathetic relationship with language, by approaching words physically, as much if not more so than intellectually. The difference is the context in which they chose to express language, Ponge in poetry, and Artaud, ultimately, in the theatre. Perhaps even more of a distinction between them is the fact that where Ponge used objects to explore

¹⁹⁷ Paul Celan, 'Weggebeizt', cited in Hamburger, *Truth of Poetry*, trans. Michael Hamburger, p. 292.

¹⁹⁸ Celan, 'Weggebeizt', in *Truth of Poetry*, p. 292.

¹⁹⁹ Ponge, 'Rhetoric', in *The Power of Language*, p. 73.

²⁰⁰ Martin Esslin, *Artaud* (Fontana, 1976), p. 70.

²⁰¹ Ponge, 'Rhetoric', p. 73.

misunderstandings in language and the gap between the object and language, Artaud was more directly interested in the personal, and wanted to 'bridge the gap between his feeling and its verbal expression'.²⁰²

The following statement, in its acknowledgement of Artaud's awareness of language and failure and the consequential physical and furious use of his art, particularly the aim to impress upon the audience the search for equivalence and use of mimesis, illustrates a commonality and bridge between Ponge and the dramatist:

If language alone had proved incapable of communicating the actual physical sensation of his painful struggles to other people, perhaps an assault upon their senses in the theatre might wake them from their indifference and, by plunging them into equivalent pain and anguish, open their minds, shake them out of their apathy and thus purify them morally.²⁰³

It is undeniable that Ponge was prey to influence, in spite of his retreat into cabins and converted lavatories, but that he occupied a comfortable position among his literary peers is highly questionable, and his exposure to other movements only served to bring him back to himself and his strong personal views on language, and disgust when it came to how others used speech. Indeed, Artaud's discomfort with the spoken word, and fear of being unable to express himself ('I am vacant through the paralysis of my tongue'),²⁰⁴ in many ways was equivalent to Ponge's experience of aphasia and fear of the void that silence represented. However, Ponge and Artaud diverged in their explorations of this fear, and where Ponge professed to turn towards physical things he could see and hold, Artaud turned to a more unconscious approach to literature and used the surrealist practice of automatic writing to wrest his theatrical aims from out of the unconscious in order to access 'the darkest, deepest layers of the human mind and capture its movement

²⁰² Esslin, *Artaud*, p. 71.

²⁰³ Esslin, *Artaud*, pp. 71-2.

²⁰⁴ Esslin, *Artaud*, p. 65. Original context: Antonin Artaud, *Oeuvres Complètes*, Vol. 1, (Paris: Gallimard, 1956 -), p. 116.

at the very moment it emerged from the chasms and abysses of the unconscious into the light of consciousness, as poetry'.²⁰⁵ Ponge refused to discover poetry like this, claiming that all automatic writing brought to light was 'a lot of hogwash'.²⁰⁶ The next chapter, however, continues to explore Ponge's contradictory pattern of both belonging to and diverging from his immediate environment and influences, and marks as the most glaring of these contradictions his involvement with the producers of this 'hogwash'.

²⁰⁵ Esslin, *Artaud*, p. 74.

²⁰⁶ Ponge, *Sun Placed in the Abyss*, p. 86.

Chapter Four: Language and Surrealism

Surrealism

A movement very much of his time, and of which he was a part between 1930 and 1931, Surrealism was an artistic and literary trend towards which Ponge expressed ambivalence. Significantly, his involvement with the Surrealist movement, although short lived, is the only example we have of a literary and artistic group of which he was officially a part, signing their manifesto in 1930, Le Surréalisme au service de la révolution, and publishing a text in the first issue. In spite of the differences which will be examined in this chapter, Ponge shared with the Surrealists a divergence from traditional views of writing. Although theirs depended on what Kenneth Cornell in his article on Surrealism calls 'the revolt against the logical',²⁰⁷ using the unconscious and dreams as their inspiration, Cornell also includes Ponge's compatibility with the movement within a more general view of their resistance to traditional uses of language at the time:

Even the activity of poets who concentrated their attention on physical objects was sometimes interpreted as an outgrowth of Surrealism. Léon-Gabriel Gros, in his first series of Poètes contemporains (1944) [wrote of Ponge in 1951]: 'He is for Surrealism what Valéry was for symbolism, the man of methodical conquest, of "attention extrême"'.²⁰⁸

Equally, Serge Gavronsky acknowledges the fact that in many ways Ponge's approach to language was aligned with that of the Surrealists' questioning of language, namely a resistance to language in conjunction with a cleansing of words:

Sharing the Surrealists' suspicion of contemporary poetic language, of the French language in its cultural context, as it has been debased ideologically, as it had been

²⁰⁷ Kenneth Cornell, 'On the Difficulty of a Label', Yale French Studies, 31 (1964), 138-144; 141.

²⁰⁸ Cornell, 'On the Difficulty of a Label', 141.

corrupted by the marketplace as well as by the academies, Ponge first declared the necessity of resisting words, of cleaning them of their impurities: to take words seriously as Mallarmé and Lautréamont had done before him.²⁰⁹

However, in spite of this affinity in outlook, the poet and the movement diverged when it came to the method and style by which they went about the actual practice of writing. Ponge's involvement with the group was very revealing as the early 1930s was the time when he was consciously trying to gain control of his language, his motivation intensified by an increasing awareness of the difference between his and the Surrealists' approach to writing. Ponge's antipathy towards their methods was particularly acute when it came to their use of automatic writing and the literary exploitation of the language of the unconscious; he associated this stream-of-consciousness technique with the process of vomiting.

Although his reasons for joining the movement seemed to be motivated by his disgust towards other threats and attitudes of the time, amongst these, 'the elated reaction of the bourgeois press to the apparent disintegration of the Surrealist group',²¹⁰ and his reasons for leaving a combination of the personal and political (he was marrying a girl whose 'family would never countenance a Surrealist writer of literary bombs for a son-in-law'),²¹¹ Ponge had very specific reasons of his own for discontinuing his support of Surrealism. Above all else it was what Ponge saw as a lack of control, over language and over themselves when in public, that he could not tolerate. He 'felt the Surrealists' propensity to 'climb up on the stage... (claiming) at every moment to be the enemy of everything, but in a very spectacular manner... rather foolish'.²¹² In an interview with

²⁰⁹ Gavronsky, introduction, *The Power of Language*, p. 3.

²¹⁰ Higgins, *Francis Ponge*, p. 5.

²¹¹ Higgins, *Francis Ponge*, p. 5.

²¹² Ponge, *Sun Placed in the Abyss*, p. 85.

Gavronsky in 1977, Ponge's passionate reaction towards their 'clowning around'²¹³ continues to be felt:

I was never an activist in political movements. I was a sympathizer... I led the life of a student and a writer. Why? Because by temperament I am not someone who enjoys physical demonstrations, or if you will, theatrics.²¹⁴

Equally, Ponge was unable to practise Surrealist automatic writing because he had a 'rather positive, Bolshevik mind',²¹⁵ and, reminiscent of his interest in Lucretius and Epicurean philosophy, Ponge insisted on his belief in matter and the material stuff of existence. As he expresses in the same interview when discussing automatic writing:

I only believe in what exists, and I realized that if I were to allow everything to come from the depth of my mind, all of it would have been determined by what I had discussed or read the night before... And that I would be vomiting through my writing; that automatic writing would have been a sort of vomiting because it had already been impregnated with everything, and not only that, but also the old culture. You understand? So that if it was a question of vomiting again, and with greater detail, the old culture under the guise of automatic writing, what would have been the result? Just a lot of hogwash. Nothing at all.²¹⁶

In alignment with the amorphousness and lack of structure he associated with Surrealist writing, he abhorred 'their taste for the mysterious, the magic, the esoteric. Also their preference for poetry as such, for lyrical poetry'.²¹⁷ 'The Cycle of Seasons' is one of Ponge's most anti-lyrical poems, referring as it does to human expression and the clichés that arise 'when man takes himself as a direct subject'.²¹⁸ According to Jordan, Ponge's 'whole poetic endeavour is based on the premise that Narcissus must be dragged from the stream in an effort to counteract centuries of self-absorption'.²¹⁹ Turning to objects

²¹³ Ponge, *Sun Placed in the Abyss*, p. 85.

²¹⁴ Ponge, *Sun Placed in the Abyss*, p. 85.

²¹⁵ Ponge, *Sun Placed in the Abyss*, p. 86.

²¹⁶ Ponge, *Sun Placed in the Abyss*, p. 86.

²¹⁷ Ponge, *Sun Placed in the Abyss*, p. 86.

²¹⁸ Jordan, *The Art Criticism of Francis Ponge*, p. 6.

²¹⁹ Jordan, *The Art Criticism of Francis Ponge*, p. 225.

is, indeed, in theory, an effective way of resisting this self-absorption. As Robert Loy acknowledges in his discussion of things in modern French literature: 'Things can be notoriously unsympathetic to anthropomorphic design', and he adds that this includes 'human reasoning',²²⁰ reason being something that Ponge relies on for his expression of things, again so unlike the Surrealists.

If we examine other perspectives on Surrealism outside of Ponge, however, it is difficult to understand exactly why Ponge was so against the movement. To begin with, it seems highly contradictory that he should protest against the Surrealists' lack of control with such anger and intolerance, thereby demonstrating exactly what he pertained to despise. Further to this unintentional similarity, both Ponge and the Surrealists shared 'a desire for violent change and violent opposition',²²¹ but diverged when it came to their exploitation of the unconscious for their art. As Jordan notes, Ponge 'did not...subscribe so wholeheartedly to the Surrealist reliance on the subconscious or on Freudian theories; in the matter of creation, [but] steadfastly maintained his view that reason is the most exquisite sense of all'.²²²

Without discrediting Ponge's steadfastness to reason, if we look at Sartre's essay on Surrealism, there is further evidence here to clarify why Ponge would have been both involved in the movement as well as disillusioned by it and revolted by Surrealist actions and practices. In the essay, one can discern that the approaches Ponge and the Surrealists shared were also the places where they diverged. Both of their respective philosophies were concerned with the abolition of subjectivity and accepted notions of objectivity, but differed in their practical manifestation of these beliefs. Both practices played jokes on, and with, preconceptions about the objective world, which in turn upset a general

²²⁰ Robert J. Loy, "Things" in Recent French Literature", *PMLA*, 71: 1 (1956), 27-41; 30.

²²¹ Jordan, *The Art Criticism of Francis Ponge*, p. 16, n. 27.

²²² Jordan, *The Art Criticism of Francis Ponge*, p. 16, n. 27.

understanding about the subjective, and made a mockery out of the very concept of having a subjective relationship with the objective world. In Surrealism:

The basic model of the process is provided by the fake sugarlumps which Duchamp actually cut out of marble, so that they would surprise by their unexpected weight. The visitor who felt them in his hand was to have an immediate and dazzling revelation, feeling the destructions of the objective essence of sugar by itself; he was to experience that same fundamental disappointment, the same malaise, the same sense of being out of kilter that, for example, one has with practical jokes: the teaspoon that melts in the cup of tea or the sugar... that resurfaces and floats. Through this intuition it was hoped that the whole world would reveal itself to be a radical contradiction.²²³

In his book on Ponge, Higgins draws an important affinity between Ponge and his Surrealist contemporaries, comparing their use of juxtaposition as a creative and positive approach to contradiction:

There is a constant surge into the future, a tension of expectation which often leaves the reader of Eluard or Breton, like the reader of Ponge, with a thrilling sense of creative potential. This effect is usually achieved through imagery, an unresolved tension being set up by startling conjunctions of qualities or phenomena.²²⁴

The examples that Higgins finds in Ponge's poems are images of an immediate Surrealist nature and are as much images of Surrealist visual art as they are of Surrealist writing. Indeed, in his paraphrasing of these images Higgins could be describing shots out of Surrealist films, or details from the paintings of Dali: 'the slow-motion explosion of the flower' ('Le Magnolia', 1935); 'the flying match with a flame that ignites nothing it touches and which turns into a sailing boat', 'Le Papillon' ('The Butterfly', 1930-39, exact date unknown); and 'the giraffe-necked butterfly amoeba of fire'²²⁵ in 'Le Feu' (c. 1935). Ponge's denial of literary influence over his work is here contradicted by the fact that each of these examples was written during the Thirties when Ponge was most engaged

²²³ Jean-Paul Sartre, 'Surrealism', in *Modern Times: Selected Non-Fiction*, trans. Robin Buss, ed. Geoffrey Wall (London: Penguin, 2000), p. 189.

²²⁴ Higgins, *Francis Ponge*, p. 115.

²²⁵ Higgins, *Francis Ponge*, p. 115.

with Breton and his group.²²⁶ Not only does this contradiction highlight a glaring discrepancy between Ponge's poems and his critical writing, but also a gulf between the way he wanted to live and write, primarily in isolation, and the way he nonetheless absorbed and incorporated external reality into his art. In this sense, he muddled, and failed to cleanse, his own texts, and was seemingly unaware of this as an inconsistency in his work.

To give further evidence of a general, rather than a specific awareness of Surrealist influences, and note other images informed by his acquaintance with the movement's work, my own addition to Higgins' list comes from Ponge's short prose poem, 'The Minister', also written in the Thirties (1934), and an example of one of the few of his poems in which the central character is human. As with Surrealist fusions and manifestations of the real and the unreal, if this were to be witnessed in actual life, the effect would lie somewhere between disconcerting and – once we had adjusted and realised its divorce from reality – diabolical²²⁷. It is in the mouth of the Minister that a revolutionary image, and novel approach to speech, begins. Our simple awareness of speech as invisible, without form, as compared with the visibility and shape of writing, is inverted, perverted, destroyed, then opened up again, as something new. From the Minister's mouth, speech, compared to an object, becomes an object, emerging as streamers, and evaporating into smoke:

C'est quand les phrases du discours qui s'achève, lancées comme des serpentins, enru-bannent la statue récente qu'elles lient à la foule, puis flottent comme ces panaches de fumée dont le vent forme et défait plusieurs fois les nœuds avant de tout dissiper.

²²⁶ See Ponge, 'Metatechnical Fragments', in *The Power of Language*, p. 55.

²²⁷ I use the term 'diabolical' here in relation to the definition that alludes to the devil, as the poem is full of devilish images of snakes and serpents and gives an overall impression of something un-human at work in the way that the human, objects and in this case speech assume shapes and forms that are not naturally their own.

It is when the sentences of the speech, thrown out like streamers, come to an end, beribbon the recent statue which they bind to the crowd, then float like those plumes of smoke with their knots tied and untied by the wind which ends by dispersing everything.²²⁸

Speech, in its intrinsic shapelessness as breath, epitomises Ponge's discomfort and unease with amorphousness and nausea when confronted with ideas. Maintaining what Guiton calls, 'a salutary distrust of abstract concepts', he says himself:²²⁹

Les idées ne sont pas mon fort. Je ne les manie pas aisément. Elles me manient plutôt. Me procurent quelque écœurement, ou nausée. Je n'aime pas trop me trouver jeté au milieu d'elles. (Ideas are not my forte. I don't manipulate them easily. Instead they manipulate me. Give me a sort of queasiness or nausea. I don't really like to be thrown among them.)²³⁰

In drawing an analogy between speech and the object, Ponge eminently demonstrates 'the mind's need to give a structure to existence'.²³¹ This particular kind of juxtaposition of speech and object not only lends surprise, shock and absurdity to poetry, but, as with Surrealist inversion, operates through a reliance on generalisations, preconceptions and clichés. The assurance that the subjective affords an individual's awareness of knowing, belonging and owning, and that the world as it is owned by one lies in terms of how one sees, feels and knows, is intentionally destroyed through these visual and physical jokes. In order for their ability to disturb the familiar to actually succeed, the Surrealists' confidence in their own perception of others and their relationship between language and reality has to be transparent and absolute. But in the above example, in relation to the absolute, it seems a double sense of irony is at work, as the object that Ponge chooses, and which upsets (or opens up) our confidence in the fundamental difference between

²²⁸ Ponge, 'The Minister', trans. Michel Delville, in Michel Delville, *The American Prose Poem*, p. 154. NB: The translation is syntactically incomplete. Original poem in Francis Ponge, *Le Grand Recueil: Lyres* (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1961), pp. 18-19.

²²⁹ Guiton, preface, *Francis Ponge: Selected Poems*, p. ix.

²³⁰ Ponge, cited in preface, *Francis Ponge: Selected Poems*, trans. Margaret Guiton. Original context: Francis Ponge, 'My Creative Method', in *Le Grand Recueil: Méthodes*, p. 24.

²³¹ Higgins, *Francis Ponge*, p. 114.

speech and writing, metamorphoses from solidity to insubstantiality; from streamers to smoke, the wind having the last word.

In reference to another of Ponge's poems, 'Just Wind' (August, 1945 – October – November, 1974), speech is seen as the safest place for words, or at least we can gather this from the allusion Ponge makes to Aeneas' speech in which Aeneas asks the Sibyl 'not to write her prophecies on the leaves, lest they be scattered by the wind, but to speak them in her own voice'.²³² In the poem itself, the power of the wind is undermined by the power of memory of the reader, or listener:

Now that I know my destiny I can perfectly well throw these pages to the wind and this very one, the last of them, can be their plaything,

Since my principles are now hereby revealed, and since, after hearing them spoken in my own voice, you, my readers, have nonetheless READ them as inscribed – so well

That they are now as deeply engraved in your memory as on a stele, unaffected by future gusts of wind.²³³

These apparent contradictions in Ponge's work are interesting in that they can be paralleled with the prose poem's refusal to be categorized on account of its paradoxical nature. More fascinating still are the devices he used within these contradictions to resist conclusions, or conclusive remarks. Ponge's singular treatment of speech as an object, which in itself plays with one's understanding of the object as solid, is the most fruitful area of his poetry for this investigation. In the prose poem, this solidity is visually apparent in its unbroken, block-like fixture on the page, as well as its continuation in the face of adversity, particularly in England. In Ponge, it is witnessed in his determination to work so diligently in his poetics and poetry within an ideal impossibility and establish new commonplaces in language according to the rhetoric of the object, and in Surrealism, it is notable in its persuasive art of twisting reality away from people so

²³² See, 'Notes' in *Francis Ponge: Selected Poems*, p. 220, n. 5.

²³³ Ponge, "...Just Wind", in *Francis Ponge: Selected Poems*, p. 211.

demonstrably. One only has to turn to the way Ponge and the Surrealists thrive on their own contradictions to realise the extent of their confidence. They even expose, incorporate and utilise the imperfections that occur during the writing process, again using different methods: one through automatic writing, the other through analogy. Ponge's writing methodology, although fundamentally different from the Surrealist's method, nonetheless shared a wider philosophy about the importance of the exposure and utilisation of the writer's process and the movement of his mind.

This tracing of the writer's mind as he/she observes is as much a characteristic of Surrealism, as it is of the prose poem, and of Francis Ponge. In Surrealism, as Michel Delville notes:

Long after écriture automatique had become somewhat old-fashioned even within the circles of French Surrealist pioneers, the work of a number of writers published in Transition²³⁴ continued to retain some of the original impulses of Les Champs Magnétiques (1920) which included, besides a renewed attention to the workings of the subconscious mind, a sense of 'writing as process' insisting not so much on the content or subject-matter of the poem as on what André Breton called 'the actual functioning of thought'.²³⁵

Whereas, Bly responds, and this is pertinent to Ponge and the object poem,

It is easy to start a prose poem, but not easy to make a work of art. The metered poem, as Yeats remarked, finishes with a click as when a box closes, and the metered poem has two subjects: the thought of the poet and the meter itself. One is personal, the other impersonal. The thing poem written in prose has two subjects but quite different ones: the movement of the writer's mind and the thing itself. One is personal, the other impersonal. While the poet concentrates on the object, the movement of his mind cannot be hidden.²³⁶

²³⁴ Transition was a Paris-based English-language magazine (1927-1938), which published all of the major French Surrealists in translation.

²³⁵ Here cited in Michel Delville, Web Del Sol review, found online at: www.webdelsol.com/Del_Sol_Review/epicks3/delville.html.

²³⁶ Robert Bly, 'Afterthoughts: The Prose Poem as an Evolving Form', in What Have I Ever Lost By Dying? Collected Prose Poems (Bristol: Weatherlight Press, 1994), p. 80.

We can see this movement in many of Ponge's poems, but one which is almost explicitly revealing of this process is 'Le Pré' (The Meadow) written between 1960 and 1964. I will return later to this poem as it is an example of the later open texts, but it is a useful example here in terms of the way it reveals not only the writer's experience of writing and observation, but also of speaking and observing, and the point where writing and speech separate and converge.

Ponge's position during the writing of 'Le Pré' is as much literal as it is physical – as much inside the meadow as it is inside the verbal creation of the meadow. The spatial and temporal distance between the poem and the meadow is barely visible, their only separation their fusion, being Ponge himself. Sometimes his place as a writer is apparently close to the surface – 'Let us then prepare the page upon which/A green truth may be born today';²³⁷ 'The bird that flies over it in a direction opposite to the way we write',²³⁸ – and sometimes less so:

Delicate but not brittle,
The vegetal earth sometimes regains the upper hand,
Where the young hoofs of the galloping colt marked it.²³⁹

The poem is also an interesting example of the writing process, in its occupation of other disciplines and processes as an essential part of the telling. The first discipline is painting:

Take a tube of green, spread it on the page,
That's not the way to make a meadow.
They are born differently.²⁴⁰

The second is speaking:

²³⁷ Ponge, 'The Meadow', in *The Power of Language*, p. 109.

²³⁸ Ponge, 'The Meadow', p. 117.

²³⁹ Ponge, 'The Meadow', p. 111.

²⁴⁰ Ponge, 'The Meadow', p. 109.

No way of avoiding our initial onomatopoeias.
Therefore, let us accept them.

...

But we must pronounce them.
Speak. And perhaps parabolate.
Say them, all.²⁴¹

Throughout the text, various references to speech, as well as the mouth, are made, the pun and siding of 'elementarity' with 'alimentation' made in reference to grass. This is also an example of notable intertextual interest in Ponge's work, as the earth and the alimentary process are similarly aligned with the creative process in 'Snails':

They go along glued bodily to it. They carry it with them, they eat it, they excrete it. They go through it. It goes through them...covers ground at the same time that it eats.²⁴²

This act of excretion, of outing language through the mouth, the body, is an image and action (or animated image) that appears in a variety of forms, predominantly in 'Snails' (1936) 'The Spider' (1942-48) and 'The Minister' (1934), the mouth a stage from which language performs and acts, praised as a thing in itself, as expression solidified through the verbal act of the object, symbolising a gap between the seen and the unseen.

It is in this gap that Ponge's claim for objectivity becomes questionable, particularly in conjunction with the way that the language used for the unconscious can arguably be used to discuss the fact Ponge's focus on the object involves bringing the object from darkness into light. In other words, the object until object poetry was more a part of the cultural and literary subconscious than consciousness. Words like 'hidden', 'concealed', 'beneath', 'unrecognised', are all as applicable to the discourse of the unconscious as much as they are to the heretofore treatment of the object in literature. In

²⁴¹ Ponge, 'The Meadow', p. 113.

²⁴² Ponge, 'Snails', in Francis Ponge: Selected Poems, p. 39.



her introduction to Ponge's Nature of Things, sometimes translated as the 'Voice of Things', Lee Fahnestock writes of Ponge that he observed that 'objects had passed virtually unnoticed in literature',²⁴³ and that 'with the field wide open and unexplored, he would write his own Nature of Things'.²⁴⁴ The fact that Ponge wanted to write about the unnoticed and the unexplored is not so remote from what drove the Surrealists, not to mention the psychologist. The following section observes where Ponge slipped towards and away from his ambition to side with things in relation to his apparent aversion to the notion of the unconscious in literature.

Unconscious Ambivalence

Having acknowledged Ponge's associations with Surrealism, this section discusses Ponge's attempts to disassociate himself from Surrealist tendencies, in spite of associations made between the prose poem and the unconscious.²⁴⁵ The prose poem has long associations with the unconscious, and in this respect, Ponge's choice of the form seems unlikely. His selection of objects as subject matter, for example, was an essential part of his desire to have a constant 'brake' on his 'subjectivity', and in order for any form of true and clear reconciliation to take place between the individual and the world of nature and objects, his reliance on looking outside rather than awaiting inspiration and looking inside of himself was paramount. What is intriguing about this ambition is his use of the prose poem as a form in which to explore this level of objectivity, a form that since Baudelaire has been equated with the 'lyrical impulses of the soul [and] 'the ebbs and flows of reverie'.²⁴⁶ Benedikt, one of the more established prose poets and critics of the form, claimed that there 'is a shorter distance from the unconscious to the Prose

²⁴³ Lee Fahnestock, introduction, The Nature of Things, p. 8.

²⁴⁴ Fahnestock, introduction, The Nature of Things, p. 8.

²⁴⁵ Ponge, Sun placed in the Abyss, p. 17.

²⁴⁶ Charles Baudelaire, 'Letter To Arsène Houssaye' Volume II. The Poems in Prose and La Fanfard, trans. Francis Scarfe (London: Anvil Press, 1989), p. 25.

Poem than from the unconscious to most poems in verse'.²⁴⁷ However, there are certain images and uses of language in Ponge's poems which contradict his anti-unconscious and predominantly rational stance when it comes to language, and crucially veer him away from the object and towards himself.²⁴⁸ For example, some of his analogies for speech as an object are of a substance that is halfway between the invisibility of speech and the visibility of writing, such as the web of the spider's secretion-expression in 'The Spider', and the slime of the snail's expression in 'Snails'. With the inclusion of the streamers that become smoke in 'The Minister' the fragility of Ponge's analogies lend these three poems a surreal as well as scientific perspective, and in many ways position his work somewhere between the Surrealist leanings of the prose poem and the concrete aspirations of the object poem. Notably, each of the above three images, correlatives, and similes imply obscurity, a veiling, in-as-much as they all correlate to an object that can be seen and felt, in the imaginative sense.²⁴⁹ If Ponge was intent on his poems being unassailable in terms of a distinction between the objective and the subjective and consciousness guiding his poems away from the unconscious, why is speech not compared to less obviously ambiguous substances than web, slime, or in the case of the Minister, ribbons that become smoke? Through these highly self-conscious and unusual analogies for speech,

²⁴⁷ Michael Benedikt: 'A Few Notes on the Future of the American Prose Poem', published in The Prose Poem: An International Journal, (1993).

²⁴⁸ This can be supported partly by Ponge's use of the Littré dictionary which was an essential part of his re-entering language anew, on his own rational terms, and, as he says in his interview with Gavronsky, the dictionary provided 'the linguistic researcher with all the information needed to ground language in its etymology and in its evolving definitions.' (Francis Ponge, cited in The Sun Placed in the Abyss, p. 17.)

²⁴⁹ Robert Bly's distinction between the image and picturism in American poetry sheds an interesting light on the use of the image, the imagination and the unconscious in Ponge's poems: 'The only movement in American poetry which concentrated on the image was Imagism, in 1911-13. But 'Imagism' was largely 'Picturism'. An image and a picture differ in that the image, being the natural speech of the imagination, cannot be drawn from or inserted back into the real world. It is an animal native to the imagination. Like Bonnefoy's 'interior sea lighted by turning eagles,' it cannot be seen in real life. A picture, on the other hand, is drawn from the objective 'real' world. 'Petals on a wet black bough' (Ezra Pound, second and last line of his haiku of 1913, 'In a Station of the Metro') can actually be seen.' With this in mind, is Ponge's work composed of images or pictures? Originally from an essay called: 'A Wrong-Turning in American Poetry' by Bly and James Wright, published in 1958 as part of their first issue of The Fifties, 'a magazine of poetry and opinion', p.26. Here cited in an online essay by Kevin Bushell entitled: 'Leaping Into the Unknown: The Poetics of Robert Bly's Deep Image' found at: <www.english.uiuc.edu/maps/poets/a_f/bly/bushell.html>.

Ponge appears to become the enemy rather than the perpetrator of his ambition to side with things and not himself. Once again, speech fails him, but not in the sense of aphasia, instead because of his own inability to silence the voice of the influences around him.

Ponge's chosen analogies for speech, however, can perhaps also be seen as indicative of a struggle in his work between the prose poem's relationship with the unconscious, and his aims for the prose poem according to his own adherence to reason. Similar questions have been asked of prose poetry and Surrealism, as illustrated in the interview below between Stephen Frech and Peter Johnson:

SF: I'm very interested in your inclusion of the surrealists and wonder if we could linger there for a moment. Surrealists of all disciplines used conscious strategies (games, optical illusions, juxtapositions) as vehicles for accessing altered or other states of consciousness. Again, perhaps in prose poetry's play of cross genre, we see the irony of conscious access to the unconscious. What can you say about the prose poem as a discourse or even a struggle between the conscious and the unconscious?

PJ: I think the freedom that prose allows encourages the kind of leaping Bly speaks of in his essay 'Looking for Dragon Smoke' — a leaping from the conscious mind to the unconscious and back again. But it's impossible to describe this process; it's intuitive. If we could pinpoint the leaps between the conscious and unconscious in a poem, then it would be a lousy one. But, still, both parts of the mind must be at work. When I write a poem I bring experiences, emotions — whatever — to it. I trust my imagination to create a poem from this raw material, and in the first draft, I often feel like someone working on a jigsaw puzzle, blindfolded. I guess you could argue that I tap the unconscious here; I guess you could say, as Bly does, that in the prose poem 'the conscious mind, at least to a degree, gives up the adversary position it usually adopts toward the unconscious, and a certain harmony between the two takes place.

SF: Russell Edson describes as the ideal prose poem: 'a small, complete work, utterly logical within its own madness.' He's come to understand his process as 'dreaming awake.' If we overlook the easy misunderstandings/manipulations of his ideas, what can we say about the prose poem's long interest in the unconscious as creative vehicle?

PJ: I guess you could argue that if you privilege the unconscious, it makes sense you'll be attracted to prose. It's the difference between being lost in an endless field or in a city. There are no boundaries in an endless field, while in a city you're going to have to make some turns once in a while, maybe even pause at a stop light. Remember that the word verse comes from the Latin *verto*, to turn, so if you're a verse poet, even if you rely on the unconscious, as of course you must, your line breaks or metrical choices, the various twists or turns you adopt, will eventually come into play. I like to think that Rimbaud didn't consciously choose the prose poem, but that, in his attempt to make himself a vehicle for the unconscious, prose naturally presented itself. Ironically, he had to go deep into his own unconscious to escape from himself. 'For I is an other,' he said. 'If brass wakes a trumpet, it is not its fault.' I'm sure the Surrealists were aware of this possibility of prose, even if they looked at it more subjectively than Rimbaud did. Perhaps the freedom poets feel with the prose poem comes from this opportunity to wander and listen to the unconscious, instead of having to write with all the great versifiers of Western Civilization looking over their shoulders.²⁵⁰

As Johnson notes in his discussion, the word verse comes from the Latin '*verto*', or as is defined elsewhere, '*vertere*,'²⁵¹ to turn. If this is, then, a cause to move away from the unconscious in its associations with prose, its 'opposite' direction and movement, I would like to theorise the prose poem as a term and conceit which implies a middle ground between the conscious and the unconscious, and that Ponge's illustration of speech fluctuating between solidity and vulnerability as in the above examples is a kind of mirror of this aspect of the prose poem. Indeed, as Baudelaire first pointed out, the prose poem is a form which can adapt both to the concrete aspects of the city as well as its less tangible properties created by the movement and emotions of its dwellers:

Which of us has never imagined, in his more ambitious moments, the miracle of a poetic prose, musical though rhythmless and rhymeless, flexible yet strong enough to identify with the lyrical impulses of the soul, the ebbs and flows of revery, the pangs of conscience?²⁵²

The definition and roots of the prose poem in relation to the unconscious are discussed in an interview between Michael Benedikt and Dennis Stone, which gives an outline of

²⁵⁰ Stephen Frech, 'Conversation with Peter Johnson' in *Another Chicago Magazine* (Left Field Press, 2004). Reproduced by Poetry Daily, cited at: www.poems.com/essayjohn.html.

²⁵¹ 'Verse', in *The New Penguin Dictionary* (London: Penguin, 1986).

²⁵² Charles Baudelaire, 'Letter to Houssaye' in *The Poems in Prose*, trans. Francis Scarfe, p. 25.

the prose poem's development. It serves as an interesting source in terms of Benedikt's dedication to the promotion of the prose poem in English, in America. Benedikt claimed that 'what Baudelaire was calling for, among other things, was nothing less than a richer, more intimately "inward" and psychologically truer poetry than had theretofore existed in Europe'.²⁵³ The prose poem is possibly suited to this level of inwardness, again due to its form:

The Prose Poem, which avoids by degree (but not by kind) various strictly formal devices of rhymed verse, and which emphasizes an approach more naturally consistent with the inward or 'associational' turnings of the human psyche – the mind's fondness for dream-like creations of metaphor in particular – seems an ideal vehicle for such sophisticated, psychologically realistic, aesthetic aspirations.²⁵⁴

What Ponge did with the process of the inward turnings of the mind was to observe them in relation to external reality – as he watched the object subject, he was aware of the patterns, distractions and movements of his mind and the creation of language as it was being led and influenced by the object itself. The result is that the object, language and the writing process are interdependent, and work almost by a process of osmosis, whereby each element, language and object, pass through each other, language becoming as much about the object as the object is about language. By his use of analogies and objective correlatives, Ponge thus offers us another possibility of speech. Through close observation and through analogy²⁵⁵ speech is secreted from the speaker as an object, as

²⁵³ Michael Benedikt, 'Michael Benedikt Talks about Prose Poetry: Critical Perspectives on the Prose Poem as a Literary Form', in *PSA Newsletter*, no. 19: *The Poetic Process*, No. 3 in a series of interviews, by Dennis Stone, 1985. Here cited at: www.members.aol.com/benedikt4/index.html. Hereafter cited as: 'Dennis Stone, Michael Benedikt interview'.

²⁵⁴ Dennis Stone, Michael Benedikt interview.

²⁵⁵ Though in Ponge's work it is part of his philosophy of 'objet', a Pongian amalgamation between the object and a playing with language, that the observation of the object and the observation of the language are interdependent. Observation and analogy, therefore become something like obsemalogy. To further complicate these correspondences, Ponge also states that he does not like 'metaphor' or analogy for the same reason, in that they imply a separation between two things. Again, this does not prevent metaphor or analogy from being recognised as a salient feature of his work.

something we can touch, not as invisible breath and only realised as meaning, as an image. Speech itself is considered a complicated and weighty visible act in itself before it becomes meaningful and seen in the mind; it is a verb, capable of doing, not just saying. Coupled with the image of speech as weighty, and far from abstract, Ponge's use of the spoken word upsets the notion that the text 'differs from speech in that it is an utterance visibly fixed as an object in ink and paper',²⁵⁶ and in turn appears to go against the grain of the dream-like images found in the art and writing of the Surrealists.

Gerd Henniger is one of the few writers on Ponge who presents this fusion between speech and object and speech and writing directly in relation to breath, and addresses the possibility of speech as visible and solid. In his essay, 'Terrorism and Rhetoric in the works of Francis Ponge' he poses the question:²⁵⁷

Are we aware that spoken language is a physical reality, namely formed breath, breath which we ourselves form while speaking? Our idealistic consciousness still lags behind the materiality of man. If we were to speak as consciously as Oriental wise men breathe, then we could sense the presence of the thing in the word, and we could understand that writing can evoke a manifestation if the act of writing is conscious of letters to the same degree that the act of speaking ought to be aware of sounds.²⁵⁸

Set against our understanding of writing as visible and speech as invisible, this inversion, or game, has Surrealist overtones. If, therefore, one of the ways that the prose poem undermines the traditional separation of poetry and prose is in its use of everyday speech, with Rimbaud as one of the first prose poets to draw speech into the prose poem, and remove poetry from the polite chatter of drawing room to modern streets, Ponge takes such potentials of speech in writing and prose poetry much further. Indeed, Ponge's rendition of speech through analogous objects is far more pertinent to the concept of

²⁵⁶ Higgins, *Francis Ponge*, p. 65.

²⁵⁷ Gerd Henniger, 'Terrorism and Rhetoric in the Works of Francis Ponge', *Books Abroad*, 48:4 (1974), 715-717.

²⁵⁸ Henniger, 'Terrorism and Rhetoric', 716.

'exact metaphor[s]', which is a phrase used by Arthur Symons in his study of the Symbolists. He uses the term in relation to the writing style of Joris-Karl Huysmans, Symbolist and author of the French Nineteenth-century novel, Against Nature:

No one has ever written such barbarous and exact metaphors for the rendering of visual sensations. Properly, there is no metaphor; the words say exactly what they mean; they become figurative, as we call it, in their insistence on being themselves fact.²⁵⁹

In relation to 'exact metaphor', according to the character Des Esseintes, the book's protagonist, the prose poem is a form which accommodates the exact metaphor's succinct properties so that he favours the prose poem of 'all forms of literature',²⁶⁰ seeing in its compactness and density 'the dry juice, the osmazome of literature, the essential oil of art' – 'the substance of a novel, while dispensing with the latter's long-winded analyses and superfluous descriptions'.²⁶¹

In terms of his aim for density, Ponge's contribution to the prose poem can therefore be seen to continue the prose poem's ability to focus language employing the subject or object at hand, using only words and sounds that mimetically procure the object's properties. Indeed, through the prose poem Ponge does move away from the 'dream-like creations of metaphor' that Benedict associated with prose poetry, and towards a metaphor far closer to that of Huysmans. The irony is that by consciously avoiding the surreal characteristics of the prose poem, Ponge inadvertently lent us a few Surrealist images, but rather than being informed by dreams, or memories, he showed us how metaphor can be grounded in science and fact, and, as Robert Bly, the twentieth-century American prose poet and translator of Ponge has noted below, in the dictionary.

²⁵⁹ Arthur Symons, The Symbolist Movement in Literature (New York: E. P. Dutton & Co., Inc. 1958), p. 81.

²⁶⁰ Symons, The Symbolist Movement in Literature, p. 198.

²⁶¹ Symons, The Symbolist Movement in Literature, p. 198.

Bly is one of the most renowned prose poets to have been influenced by Ponge, in spite of his more spiritual or dream-like approach to his subject matter. He is among the critics who view Ponge as a poet of the anti-unconscious, but Bly very specifically put this down to Ponge's *Littre*, viewing Ponge's dedication to the dictionary as a substitutive act, an etymological contemplation chosen in place of the unconscious, stating very emphatically that Ponge 'did not believe in the unconscious [but] offers us the French dictionary instead'.²⁶² Higgins' understanding of Ponge's use of the dictionary seems to corroborate Bly's statement, but Higgins draws attention to how the dictionary is a vital part of Ponge's writing process to be incorporated into the poem itself. He says that Ponge does not use the dictionary to steal words, but uses it to confirm his use of words in his descriptions, and then goes about using that confirmation in the poem, the confirmation being that his use of the word prior to looking it up in the dictionary coincidentally, or intuitively fits the poem. This kind of manipulation is also highly aware of the reader's participation in the text, and Ponge's act of using the dictionary, 'instead' of the Surrealists' unconscious, mirrors his control over the reader. Ponge goes to the dictionary for himself, the object and the reader, seemingly denying the reader any 'unconscious' tendencies in their journey through the text. As Higgins notes:

Ponge does not rely on the reader mysteriously reacting to some residue of an Adamic language, unconsciously registering some intrinsic 'pile-of-sticks-ness' in the French word 'encombre'. Once again, his reference to the etymology of the word does not, for the modern French reader, so much give it back an old meaning as give it a new one, created through the manipulation of a context.²⁶³

Returning to the past of a word was therefore for Ponge a way into the future, into a sense of newness – etymological contemplation for him was twofold, forward and back. To express this in a suitable pun: what he saw before him was also what he saw before

²⁶² Robert Bly, interviewed by Peter Johnson (April 6-7, 1997, Associated Writing Program Convention) 1998, Providence College. Reproduced by *Poetry Daily*: www.poems.com/blyinter.htm.

²⁶³ Higgins, *Francis Ponge*, p. 57.

him. The position of the 'him', however, is displaced in order to allow the objects to merge with their language, their rhetoric, and from this, to surprise. This process has no room for inspiration nor intervention, but instead takes place in front of the object, and is only about the reader and the poet once the poem is complete and the relationship between the language and the object established. As Patrick Meadows notes:

It is to things that Ponge wanted to give a voice, thereby rejecting the notion of the divinely or supernaturally inspired poet in order to focus on the pleasurable description-definition of the neglected phenomena of material existence. This typical reversal of poetic perspective indicated Ponge's effort to found a new humanism in which he hoped the individual and the world could be reconciled.²⁶⁴

Gavronsky acknowledges and echoes the objective, or scientific character of Ponge's writing process, reiterating that far from relying on inspiration, the 'source' of Ponge's words 'is not found in the unconscious, and liberated through free association; it is located in the dictionary and requires patience'.²⁶⁵

Ponge's use of the dictionary also indicates his need for an unemotional way of writing in order to attend as much as possible to the 'mute supplication, mute demands' of the things themselves, and again, to 'try in the verbal world to do something which has as much concrete existence as the objects'²⁶⁶ that he described. Within this, Ponge claimed that there was no room for immodesty, which he equated with subjectivity, and in turn with the tradition of lyricism in poetry:

I write as I write, and I do not want it to be poetry. I do not intend to write poems. I express my feelings about things that move me, or that seem to me to be important to state. I have protested at length against my classification among poets, because....lyricism in general disturbs me. That is, it seems to me that there is something too subjective, a display of subjectivity which appears to me to be unpleasant, slightly immodest. I believe that things – how can I say it – that

²⁶⁴ Meadows, *Francis Ponge and the Nature of Things*, p. 17.

²⁶⁵ Gavronsky, introduction, *The Power of Language*, p. 19.

²⁶⁶ Ponge, *Sun Placed in the Abyss*, p. 96.

emanate from your subjectivity, should not be displayed. Naturally, one never does anything but that. My own resolution was rather to reverse the situation and to try to say things that were generally valuable and pertinent. That is the reason why I have chosen things, objects, so that I would always have a brake on my subjectivity, calling back the object as it exists when I write about it.²⁶⁷

The apparent neatness and polished straightforwardness of Ponge's ambition and the discourse around that ambition is unconvincing, however, in light of his actual poems, within which his use of speech both supports and complicates this ambition. To begin with, Ponge was working within a highly self-reflexive genre. As Monroe concludes in his study of the prose poem, the very name of the genre, to an extent, has created, and perpetuated within the prose poem a self-fulfilling prophecy, where it re-enacts – through a predisposition towards juxtapositions, observations of outcasts, the unnoticed, shifting identities/points of view (moving between pronouns within the poem itself) – a self-conscious inability to fit in:

In keeping with its oxymoronic designation, the prose poem has proven to be an unusually self-thematizing genre foregrounding a variety of conflicts and oppositions, a genre whose counter-discursive resistance has served as a persistent reminder of the importance of reconceiving the aesthetic 'as a mode of struggle'.²⁶⁸

Setting his sights on one of the most extreme tensions in literature, between language and the object, and trying to eliminate the boundary between the word and the thing, one could argue that the prose poem in its self-reflexivity is an apt form for Ponge. That the object offers an objective way of resolving these tensions, however, is not strictly true for Ponge, as the 'I' in his work is not entirely absent from his observations. Hamburger acknowledges, through Ponge's own words, a 'new self-identification with things'²⁶⁹ whereby the poet admits to being 'composed of their variety, which would allow [him] to

²⁶⁷ Ponge, *Interview with Francis Ponge: Poems & Texts*, ed. and trans. Serge Gavronsky, p. 37.

²⁶⁸ Jonathan Monroe, *A Poverty of Objects: The Prose Poem and the Politics of Genre* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell UP, 1987), p. 335.

²⁶⁹ Hamburger, *Truth of Poetry*, p. 239.

exist even in silence. As if [he is] the place around which they exist'.²⁷⁰ Following on from this, Hamburger then goes on to discuss Ponge's work in a general manner which includes terms that in many ways are utterly outside of the remit of Ponge's poetics:

In practice the hyper-realism of Francis Ponge can produce effects akin to Surrealism or to the pure fantasies of Henri Michaux, since Ponge's realism is not a social realism and his self-identification with things leads to discoveries that are also self-discoveries. The reciprocity on which his poems and prose poems hinge becomes magical. Yet the concrete and the literal are his starting point.²⁷¹

It is the tension in Ponge's work between the subjective and the objective, and the Surreal and the objective, that gives rise to something less simplistic or neat than Hamburger suggests in Ponge's movement from the concrete towards the fantastic. Indeed, as the next section will explore, some of Ponge's self-discoveries or self-allusions have been not so much aligned with the fantastic as they have been deemed to indicate a jealousy that borders on something much closer to fantasy.

²⁷⁰ Hamburger, *Truth of Poetry*, p. 239. Original context: Francis Ponge, 'My Creative Method' in *Le Grand Recueil: Méthodes*, here translated in *Truth of Poetry* by Lane Dunlop in *Quarterly Review of Literature*, XV, 1 and 2 (1967), 147-8.

²⁷¹ Hamburger, *Truth of Poetry*, p. 239.

The Moving Rhetoric of Self and Object

Positioning himself as the ‘ambassador’ of the mute world, one could argue that Ponge was vicariously playing out the struggles he experienced with language by trying to remedy the muteness of nature, liberating it from the prison of not being able to speak, and freeing himself from the threat of aphasia. If viewed this way, Ponge’s position within his poetic aim is potentially both a therapeutic and an arrogant one, and certainly self rather than object-centred. If, indeed, he was intent on writing from the object’s point of view – listening to it rather than an idea of it – why would he want to create a rhetoric of objects, and thereby assume that they wanted to be heard? Walter Benjamin, in his important essay in One Way Street called ‘On Language as Such and on the Language of Man’, discusses this question of muteness in nature and the role of language relative to speechlessness:

It is a metaphysical truth that all nature would begin to lament if it were endowed with language. (Though to ‘endow with language’ is more than to ‘make able to speak’)...Speechlessness: that is the great sorrow of nature....Because she is mute, nature mourns.²⁷²

The way this is phrased is confusing. The initial sentence is particularly misleading, as at first it appears logically to preface the second sentence, but it can in fact be read in two ways, which need to be stated before applying the sentiment of the quotation to Ponge. The reason for clarification is that both readings apply to Ponge, and his work relies heavily on these contradictory interpretations. In the first sentence, therefore, is Benjamin saying that nature would lament if it were given the powers of speech, because

²⁷² Walter Benjamin, ‘On Language as Such and on the Language of Man’, in One-Way Street and Other Writings, trans. Edmund Jephcott, Kingsley Shorter (London: Verso, 1997), p. 121.

Chapter Five: Language and Point of View

The Moving Rhetoric of Self and Object

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nature is dying to be able to express its inability to speak, or that it would lament because it does not want to speak? According to the latter reading, Benjamin is saying not only that speechlessness is nature's difference from humankind, but that it would prefer to retain this difference, for a change from silence to speech would be forced, and create a fundamental lack of differentiation which is essential to our understanding and appreciation of humanity and nature. The second sentence implies the former interpretation. Therefore, the other argument to be made about Ponge's endowment of objects with language is that it is rather patronizing, presumptuous even that they would want him to speak for them at all. Nicolette David's study of Ponge from a Kleinian perspective adheres to this point:

There is a sense in which Ponge's somewhat self-conscious championing of the humble things which have no voice could be seen as rather patronizing....One cannot help wondering whether, if these things did have the momentary power to speak, they would want Ponge to speak for them in this manner.²⁷³

Is there, it might be asked, anything in the form of the prose poem that Ponge chose to write about these objects, which mirrors this act of resistance; of not wanting to be spoken on behalf of themselves? Is there something in the nature of the prose poem which makes for congenial ground for subjects which lend themselves to resistance to speech? Ponge's poem 'The Orange', in its emphasis on the delights and ordeals of eating an orange, mirrors not only the act of expression, but also the characteristic of the prose poem to expand into prose through the sentence, but resist the temptation to do so, either by sticking to the constraints of a paragraph, or precluding prose-like developments in the form of character and plot. This movement of shrinking from the temptations of expansion, and the tension between the prose sentence and poem's

²⁷³ Nicolette David, *Love, Hate and Literature: Kleinian Readings of Dante, Ponge, Rilke and Sarraute* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2003), p. 120, n. 10.

brevity, is encapsulated in Ponge's poem through the poet's allusion to the releases and efforts of speech:

But it's not enough to recall the orange's peculiar way of perfuming the air and delighting its torturer. We must call attention to the glorious color of its liquid, and to how, as is not the case with lemon juice, the larynx has to open wide to pronounce its name as well as to ingest it, with no apprehensive puckering of the lips.²⁷⁴

The movement of the mouth from wide to tight is a highly visual illustration of Ponge's broader exploration of the retractions and explosions of wanting to speak, the ordeals and risks of speech, and desire to speak and be understood. But, as Higgins notes, there is a further dimension to the poem involving the speaker:

The conscious concern with expression is manifest also in the references to the aims and achievements of the speaker in the poem. Here, what is at stake is not just the relation between words and their referents, but that between an utterance, what the utterance refers to, and the person uttering.²⁷⁵

Higgins' reading clearly indicates the presence of the poet in the poem itself, while David not only denies Ponge's absence from the poems, but takes his presence one stage further from being a mere slip in the text, to that of a Kleinian/Freudian desire to know, arguing that 'beneath the cool exterior of Ponge's matter-of-fact description, the scenario emerges as highly-charged, containing a powerful latent cruelty'.²⁷⁶ David uses Ponge's poem 'The Orange' in a way that would possibly horrify Ponge, which is to illustrate that the poet's obsession with language is indicative of an oral, phantastic and possessive relationship with things, and that this is an unconscious part of Ponge's relationship with speech as primarily sensual, bordering on a vicarious envy of the body of the thing itself. An obvious justification of this point lies in Ponge's treatment of the 'O' of the 'orange'

²⁷⁴ Ponge, 'The Orange', in *Francis Ponge: Selected Poems*, p. 23.

²⁷⁵ Higgins, introduction, *Le Parti pris des choses*, (London: Athlone Press, 1979), p. 28.

²⁷⁶ David, *Love, Hate and Literature*, p. 105.

itself whereby the speaker's tongue and mouth are naturally inclined to welcome rather than resist this particular fruit:

Et l'on demeure au reste sans paroles pour avouer l'admiration que mérite l'enveloppe du tender, fragile et rose ovale dans cet épais tampon-buvard humide dont l'épiderme extrêmement mince mais très pigmenté. Acerbement sapide, est juste assez rugueux pour accrocher dignement la lumière sur la parfaite forme du fruit.

No words can express our admiration for the envelope of this oval, this tender, fragile pink balloon. The epidermis of the thick, moist blotting paper is extremely thin but highly pigmented, pungently tangy, and just rough enough to catch the light and draw attention to the perfect form of the fruit.²⁷⁷

As much as the above quotation lends itself to a psycho-sexual reading of 'The Orange', I am not going to go so far as to sexualise Ponge's recourse to words and things, and words as things, and the idea that things could be seen to bring a sense of oral relief to his recurrent struggle with language. This said, there are, however, some aspects of David's argument that are relevant to my own exploration of Ponge's physical and corporeal relationship to language through objects, which support the interpretation that the object in Ponge's poetry is as much about the mouth and the act of speech, as it is of the pen and the act of writing.

To begin with, that Ponge could have experienced pleasure rather than agony before the orange is possibly true, and, as David points out, in the poem Ponge claims to be speechless, 'sans paroles' (without words), but then proceeds to praise it at length, and write not an open text as such, but a poem longer than most of the other closed texts. Claiming to be speechless, or unable to express the thing, is also a hallmark of the longer poems, so in this sense 'The Orange' is another object that challenges Ponge's fear of silence, and leads him to write more, rather than less. There are also certain phrases that Ponge uses within the poem which incline the reader further towards the violence and slight monstrosity of the poet's handling of the object in the open texts. For example:

²⁷⁷ Ponge, 'The Orange', in *Francis Ponge: Selected Poems*, p. 23.

'expulsion prématurée de pépins' ('the premature expulsion of pips'), 'l'épreuve de l'expression' (the ordeals of expression) and finally 'cellules ont éclaté, ses tissus se sont déchirés' (its cells have burst, its tissues are torn apart). In conjunction with the repetition of the words 'torturer', 'oppression' 'dirty', and use of the word 'degrading', it is difficult therefore, to deny David's attention to Ponge taking a sadistic, rather than purely observational pleasure in the fruit.

However, the argument for the opposite case is equally if not more convincing. Among the other critics who have been persuaded by Ponge's absence from the text is Robert Greene, who in his book examines half a dozen French poets of the Twentieth century, and claims Ponge's work is 'self-less' in light of the general 'disappearance of the self in modern literature'.²⁷⁸ Greene also recognises Ponge's own sense of self-awareness and at times use of irony and black humour in his aim to side with things at the expense of himself. For example, Greene recalls Ponge reading from texts in his speech at the ceremony for the Books Abroad, Neustadt prize at the University of Oklahoma, where he banged at the side of the lectern when he recited the line: "l'armoire enfin veut parler: c'est tout" ('The Wardrobe finally wants to speak: that is all').²⁷⁹ In relation to David's point of view, Ponge's speaking on behalf of things in his ambassadorial way, although it can be seen as condescending, is certainly not indicative of the other extreme he suggests, which is that Ponge is envious of the thing he describes, and it does not mean that Ponge literally wants to get in the Wardrobe and possess its wardrobe-ness entirely. David, however, uses Ponge's poem 'Snails' to make this claim of possession, stating that by 'speaking in the first person singular, Ponge phantasises himself inside the head of the speaking snail'²⁸⁰ and that 'gradually one begins to glimpse the extent to which the snails

²⁷⁸ Robert Greene, introduction, *Six French Poets of Our Time: A Critical and Historical Study* (Princeton University Press, 1979), p. 9.

²⁷⁹ Francis Ponge, cited in Ivar Ivask's introduction, 'Notes Towards a Francis Ponge in Norman', *Books Abroad*, 48: 4 (1974), 647-51; 650.

²⁸⁰ David, *Love, Hate and Literature*, p. 112.

are the objects of the poet's envy... impregnable within their self-sized homes'.²⁸¹ But David fails to acknowledge Ponge's awareness – albeit occasional or inconsistent – that he is speaking for or about, rather than as the thing itself. As we recall in his 'Introduction to the Pebble': 'Welll, Stones, pebbles, dust, such trite feelings albeit so contradictory have been expressed about you; I will not judge you so hastily because I want to judge you on your own merits'.²⁸² Positioning himself, in an attempt to distinguish himself, here Ponge also acknowledges that he is a part of other literary efforts which in turn contributes to his sense of separation from, rather than mergence with the object.

Ponge was, therefore, too aware of language and literature in relation to things to lose himself entirely to objects themselves in the way that David suggests, and he constantly tried to establish an affinity with things and understanding of what they were through what they were called, judging them on their own merits outside of 'trite' expressions as a way of clearing their names of meaninglessness. These 'trite feelings', in many respects, are analogous to the terms 'empty prattle' and 'over-naming'²⁸³ that Benjamin uses, again, in 'On Language as Such and on the Language of Man', with reference to the wake of 'linguistic confusion' in the manifold language of men after the Fall.²⁸⁴ It is the use of the name, as acknowledged by Benjamin, as a means of distancing the object from humankind that Ponge attempts to overcome, or overthrow in his poetry.

In his essay, Benjamin distinguishes between the language of humans and the language of things, through naming: 'man' names things; 'he is the lord of nature and can give names to things' and 'all nature, insofar as it communicates itself, communicates

²⁸¹ David, *Love, Hate and Literature*, p. 112.

²⁸² Ponge, 'Introduction to the Pebble', in *The Power of Language*, p. 83.

²⁸³ Benjamin, 'On Language as Such and on the Language of Man', in *One-Way Street and Other Writings*, p. 120.

²⁸⁴ Benjamin, 'On Language as Such and on the Language of Man', p. 121.

itself in language, and so finally in man'.²⁸⁵ When a being is named, then, it is also changed. It is assimilated into the terms of the human subject at the same time that it is opposed to it as object, an opposition that is indeed necessary for the subject's separation and definition. All of our knowledge of the object is only knowledge of its modes of representation, or rather of our modes of representation, the ways in which we set forth the object to the understanding, of which language is one. The object is thus first of all the represented; what it is not, in Kantian terms, is the thing-in-itself, what he called the *Ding an sich*. As Benjamin argues, 'language communicates the linguistic being of things...the language-lamp' rather than the lampness of the object itself.²⁸⁶ Through representation, things are removed from themselves, and their etymological roots. An essential part of Ponge's process was to take things back to their beginning and appreciate them before they became part of a language-object associative mechanism, where things are symbolic, reminders, endlessly intertextual – advertised, adapted, socialised, or in the Barthesian sense, mythologised, myth being 'a type of speech', a 'mythical speech', 'made of a material which has already been worked on so as to make it suitable for communication', where 'pictures become a kind of writing as soon as they are meaningful'.²⁸⁷ It is precisely this type of sociological meaning that Ponge tried to resist in his use of objects. If, as Benjamin consistently argues, 'nature is mute,' Ponge's answer to this was not to give things sound – an audible speaking voice, to parallel that of the human's – but to realise what things want to say by 'listening' to them by looking. In an interview with Gavronsky, and originally in his text 'Malherbe', Ponge speaks of the 'corde sensible',²⁸⁸ a sensitive string within each object which vibrates and produces a

²⁸⁵ Benjamin, 'On Language as Such and on the Language of Man', p. 123.

²⁸⁶ Benjamin, 'On Language as Such and on the Language of Man', p. 109.

²⁸⁷ Roland Barthes, *Mythologies* (London: Paladin, 1973), pp. 110-111. The quote continues: 'a photograph will be a kind of speech for us in the same way as a newspaper article; even objects will become speech, if they mean something'.

²⁸⁸ Ponge, *Pour un Malherbe*, p. 310.

sound particular to that object. The poet, Ponge claims, is the locator and employer of this sound or vibration. “Words come”, Ponge tells Gavronsky:

in a host, as soon as one touches what I call the sensitive chord of each thing.... I don't know if this is a game played in the United States, but young boys in France like to blow into a bottle until they find its particular key... When it is found, and that is what I attempt to do, words are selected according to their adequacy to this chord.²⁸⁹

However, as ‘Snails’, among many other poems illustrates, Ponge is constantly thrown back on himself rather than the chord of each object, because of the fact that so many of the objects he chooses to know are unknowable on account of their self-sufficient nature. The snail does not need Ponge to ‘speak’ for it, and therefore, if Ponge cannot serve it, it cannot serve Ponge. But, furthermore, in Ponge’s cosmogony the snail simply becomes another challenge to his ideal of interdependent use: a positive co-exploitation, as opposed to an inter-reliant servitude. This is another illustration of Ponge’s motivating incentive in the prose poem, that every object ‘should impose a particular rhetoric on the poem [and that] sonnets, odes, epigrams’ and other traditional forms, are uncongenial territory for ‘the form of the poem [itself being] in some sense determined by its subject’.²⁹⁰

However, although Ponge implies that the object, and not the poet, is re-representing language, note below in ‘Snails’ his use of pronouns, moving from ‘snails’ to ‘they’ to ‘you’ to ‘they’, and then ‘I’ over the space of the first two pages of the poem:

²⁸⁹ Cited here in Richard Stamelman, ‘The Object in Poetry and Painting: Ponge and Picasso’, *Contemporary Literature*, 19: 4 (1978), 409–428; 414. Original context: Gavronsky, ‘Interview with Francis Ponge’ in *Poems & Texts*, trans. Serge Gavronsky, p. 39.

²⁹⁰ Ponge, cited in Monroe, *Poverty of Objects*, p. 247. The original quotation can be found in Francis Ponge, ‘My Creative Method’, *Le Grand Recueil: Méthodes*, p. 36, and reads: ‘toutefois chaque objet doit imposer au poème une forme rhétorique particulière. Plus de sonnets, d’odes, d’épigrammes: la forme même du poème soit en quelque sorte déterminée par son sujet’.

Snails love damp earth. They go along glued bodily to it... to be sure it can be burdensome with you everywhere, but they don't complain...How is it possible that a being as sensitive and as vulnerable as I am should at the same time be so well protected from unwelcome intrusions...Whence their magnificent bearing.
I'm so glued to the ground.²⁹¹

The pattern of moving between all these pronouns and ending the poem with a moral note to humanity in which he urges the reader, 'morally perfect yourself and you'll write fine poems', reads as calculated, and controlled – perhaps not to the extent of wanting to possess the snail's identity, but it is certainly indicative of retaining a kind of cubist control over all aspects of the poem. Ponge is clearly the puppeteer, and the 'I' has various ways of manifesting itself in his text, both objectively and subjectively. This interdependence between Ponge and the object is realised in a variety of ways, from his use of pronouns through to his use of metaphor. In 'Snails', as Ponge moves between the object ('referred to as 'you' 'they' or the object's name) and 'I' (object/Ponge), so he moves between metaphor and the real.

Ponge's particular use of analogy incurs questions about metaphor and simile. In a similar way (within the remit of the 'ideal impossibility'), that the text moves between the 'I' and the 'you', so the text falls between metaphor and reality, the unconscious and the conscious. This is executed in so subtle and complex a manner that often it seems we are dealing with the literal, and to use Symons' term again, 'exact metaphor'. Ponge seems to write both literally and figuratively about the object, where analogy and reality are working in parallel with one another, neither one dominating the other, as with a more traditional or absolute use of metaphor or simile. In this way, Ponge denies analogy and metaphor their substitutive characteristic. This dualism between the actual and the figurative, however, is contested and denied by some critics and translators. As Lee Fahnestock notes: 'At no time in his poetic career has Ponge ever considered writing as

²⁹¹ Ponge, 'Snails', in *Francis Ponge: Selected Poems*, p. 41, 43.

anything else but one of the objects he must succinctly describe'.²⁹² However, Fahnestock is also aware of the places where the self shows through this ambition, and through considered translation has identified where the 'imprints of the searching mind and writing hand appear in the narration, either in suggestion, or in the first person singular, when Francis Ponge steps forward, watching the rain or holding a shell in his hand'.²⁹³ Fahnestock sees the accidental design of Ponge's self in the text as intrinsic to his frustrations with the spoken word.

Clearly Fahnestock does not entirely distinguish between Ponge's speech and his writing in this respect, but as a translator of his printed work, it is interesting to note that her wording is far more attentive to these frictions as verbal-based, rather than as written:

Gradually, more and more autobiography filters through the objects themselves in recognizable traits – the ordeals of articulation, the outbursts of rage and attempts to say something new, the waiting to be heard countered by fear of being laid bare to scrutiny, the patience and self-knowledge of the solitary snail – who is perhaps the emblematic creature here, stubbornly tracing his silvery wake, dedicated to the intricate construction of his shell, his artwork.²⁹⁴

Where Fahnestock postulates, somewhat tentatively, that the snail's determined formation of his shell is analogous to Ponge's devotion to the trials of language, Sartre, as we will see below, recalls with confidence Ponge's use of the snail in this respect. To this extent, the next section examines the fine line between Ponge's textual slips and what becomes a kind of visible speech, as the metaphors for speech, such as the snail's shell, take on a highly visual, and therefore exposed, character.

²⁹²Fahnestock, introduction, *The Nature of Things*, p. 10.

²⁹³Fahnestock, introduction, *The Nature of Things*, p. 10.

²⁹⁴Fahnestock, introduction, *The Nature of Things*, p. 10.

The Risks of Speech

Sartre said of Ponge in his 1944 seminal essay on the poet's work, 'L'Homme et les Choses' (Man and Things), that Ponge treated language as something that was outside of us, concrete and visible, not unlike the shell of a creature:

Ponge considers speech to be a veritable shell which envelops us and protects our nudity, a shell that we have secreted to match the softness of our bodies. The texture of words is for him a real, perceived existence: he sees words around him, around us.²⁹⁵

Ponge's visual and physical idea of language as a shell points to one thing very clearly – that in spite of his predominant use of objects rather than humankind, his own relationship with language was a very human one, albeit extreme. Patrick Meadows in his book on Ponge and the philosophical impact of his work compares Ponge and Plato, distinguishing between Ponge's materialistic approach to language and Plato's 'ancient and idealistic' view of speaking.²⁹⁶ In his book, Meadows takes as evidence Plato's dramatization of a dialogue between Ion, a prize-winning orator and interpreter of Homer's epics, and Socrates. The extract that Meadows uses is Socrates' derogatory remarks on Ion's Homeric skills, impressing upon Ion instead the power of the Muse and divine speech:

This gift you have of speaking well on Homer is not an art; it is a power divine, impelling you like the power in the stone Euripides called the Magnet... it is the God himself who speaks.²⁹⁷

Ponge, on the other hand, manipulates language like a material thing, keeping it earth-bound, treating speech like a snail's shell rather than a god. From this Ponge concludes

²⁹⁵ Jean-Paul Sartre, in Neal Oxenhandler, 'Toward the New Aesthetic', *Contemporary Literature*, 11: 2 (1970), 169-191; 187. Original context: Jean-Paul Sartre, 'L'Homme et les choses', *Situations I* (Paris, 1947), pp. 247-248.

²⁹⁶ Meadows, *Francis Ponge and the Nature of Things*, p. 29.

²⁹⁷ Plato, *Ion*. Originally in Plato, trans. Lane Cooper (New York: Oxford University Press, 1938), pp. 82-84. Here cited in Meadows, *Francis Ponge and the Nature of Things*, p. 30.

that using things, rather than the divine, is a form of protection, as where the divine is exclusive, objects are not selective or special by nature:

Nous...ne tenons la parole que du monde muet, notre seule patrie....Elle n'a jamais proscrit personne (We...receive speech from the mute world alone, our only homeland....It has never exiled anybody.)²⁹⁸

As Meadows concurs on behalf of Ponge, 'things in nature, unlike muses, gods, or demons, can neither solicit a person's approval nor approve or reject an individual',²⁹⁹ but in view of this, Ponge's admiration of the self-sufficient and earth-bound snail is confusing, as Ponge reveres its shell as a perfect form of language, lifting it from the earth to the status of the saint:

And here's the example they set us. As saints they make works of art of their lives – of their self-perfecting. Their secretion is so produced as to shape itself. Nothing exterior to themselves, to their necessity, their needs, enters the work. Nothing disproportionate, alien to their physical being. Nothing not necessary, imperative, to it.³⁰⁰

Perhaps not consciously, but in 'Snails' Ponge has re-explored his fear of the relation between time and the spoken word, indicated by the fact that part of the reason he sees the snail's shell as a symbol of language's perfection is because the creature has taken the time to perfect its outer expression. Not only does the shell signify beauty but durability, something from which humankind could learn in terms of its subjective and ephemeral relationship with language:

And so it is with all who express themselves this way, in a purely subjective mode, without second thoughts, without bothering to construct and shape their expression into a solid dwelling of more than one dimension. More durable than themselves.

....

I have come to one of the main points of their lesson, which isn't peculiar to snails but is something they share with all those who live in shells: that shell,

²⁹⁸ Ponge, *Pour un Malherbe*, p. 31. Here cited in *Francis Ponge and the Nature of Things*, p. 28.

²⁹⁹ Meadows, *Francis Ponge and the Nature of Things*, p. 28.

³⁰⁰ Ponge, 'Snails', in *Francis Ponge: Selected Poems*, p. 45.

an intrinsic part of their being, is also a work of art, a monument. It endures longer than they do.³⁰¹

As Sorrell understands this lesson, although it is expressed as 'their lesson' it is clearly a judgement made by Ponge and directed at humankind:

Unlike those (that is, human beings), who have not taken the trouble to build a solid structure of their self-expression, and who have instead expressed themselves only through the ephemera of subjective and vanishing traces, the snail has got its monument, its work of art which will outlast the animal inside it – the shell...their secretion itself is produced in such a way as to take on a definite form; it is made of solid substance.³⁰²

In spite of hailing the snail's expression as admirable for the way it outlasts the thing inside, the speaker in a sense, the poem still remarks on Ponge's ambiguous or contradictory use of objects when it comes to language. As well as praising its resilience, Ponge is also in favour of the snail's lack of excess and superfluity. It is, however, in Ponge's actual discourse at the end of the poem which portrays him as a kind of preacher to humankind stating that we must learn from the snail, where already he is going beyond what the snail is towards what it represents, thereby in danger of being in excess of his own ambition to side with things:

They thus mark our human obligations. Great thoughts come from the heart. Morally perfect yourself and you'll write fine poems. Ethics and rhetoric unite in the ambitions and desires of the wise.

But saints in what? In exactly following their nature. First know yourself. And accept yourself for what you are. With your vices. In terms of your capabilities.

But what, essentially, is man? Language and ethics. Humanism.³⁰³

This is an example which not only contradicts Ponge's ability to side objectively with things and remain outside of the text, but also shows how the act of doing so involves a

³⁰¹ Ponge, 'Snails,' in *Francis Ponge: Selected Poems*, p. 45.

³⁰² Sorrell, *Francis Ponge*, p. 51.

³⁰³ Ponge, 'Snails', p. 45.

host of different registers of language, low and high, many of which are eminently capable of exiling the reader, particularly as the work becomes longer and the object more entrenched and lost in the dialogues the poet has with himself. In turn, the reason for these frequent dialogues is the fact that the object increasingly seems to exile Ponge, as noted above by Fahnestock. Rather than prove Ponge's materialistic approach to language as the opposite of Plato's idealism, it seems that Ponge not only shares an element of this idealism in terms of the relationship between his creative and critical writing, but also between his own hopes for language and his self-delusion.

Speech, therefore, in Ponge's poetic oeuvre is not only a shell that protects and endures, but also something that disguises and deceives both reader and poet alike. With disguise, there is the element of risk, of being caught and in this way language as a shell is as vulnerable as it is secure:

The joy, the happiness of being a snail! But that drool of pride leaves a mark on everything they touch. A silver wake follows them wherever they go. And perhaps points them to birds that like to eat them. There's the rub, the question, the to be or not to be (of vanity), the risk.³⁰⁴

In possible contradiction to the above section that observes Ponge's unconscious use of 'exact metaphor' and in effect attributes visible form to the spoken word, each one of Ponge's poems, to varying degrees, explores the threat and anticipation of exposure. To be seen, or not to be seen preoccupied the writer intensely. Ponge worried about the repercussions of being seen through one's speech – of how the 'secret' in secretion looks when secreted, and, as acknowledged by Antoine Denat in his study of Ponge and 'The New Problem of the Epos', 'Ponge, more than anybody, is conscious of the fact that to speak is to betray'.³⁰⁵

³⁰⁴ Ponge, 'Snails', p. 41.

³⁰⁵ Antoine Denat, Francis Ponge and the New Problem of the Epos, 1: 6 (1963), 36-41; 38.

The poems after the Second World War explore this inadequacy in a far more raw and uncomfortable fashion. Whether this is a direct result of what was considered by other writers and artists to be happening to language after the Holocaust is hard to answer without taking into account the fact that Ponge's use of the form of the prose poem was beginning to change and become more open and more fragmented and unsure in its use of language. Perhaps this was used to reflect changes in literature or that he was, as he said, becoming dissatisfied with the form towards the end of the Thirties and at the beginning of the Second World War onwards. In an unsent letter to Paulhan in relation to his 'first' open text, 'Fauna and Flora', Ponge says that the 'prose poem form no longer satisfies me and, like Joyce or Proust, if you will, I'm searching for my form'.³⁰⁶ Although Ponge is rejecting one characteristic of the prose poem, as a paragraph or box-shape, he is at the same time creating another kind of prose poem, as the poetry continues to incorporate poetic and prose tendencies and draw on an amalgamation of the essay and the spoken conversation, equally appropriate to definitions of the prose poem. What is important with these longer pieces is the opportunity they seem to give Ponge to intensify and explore further his fear of being alienated from language and feeling of being divorced from a concrete relationship with words.

With speech, there is a risk of a betrayal of imperfection, and the possibility of misinterpretation. Ponge's determination to discontinue what he sees as a longstanding

³⁰⁶ Jean Paulhan, Francis Ponge, *Correspondence, 1923-1968*, Editions Critique Annotée par Claire Boaretto, Vol. 1, 1923-1946 (Paris: NRF, Gallimard, 1986). Letter # 291, unsent, dated 5th August, 1943. Here cited in 'Notes', in *Francis Ponge: Selected Poems*, p. 215 (Guiton's notes on Ponge's poems.) NB: In Ponge's prose poem, 'Formation of a Poetic Abscess', written between 22 August, 1940 and 9 September 1940, as part of draft sections of the 'Notebook of the Pine Woods', Ponge recalls Paulhan saying to him, 'From now on the prose poem is no longer for you.' Ponge's subsequent authoritative dismissal of the prose poem in this later letter to Paulhan sounds strange, therefore. Either Ponge forgot that Paulhan made the suggestion in the first place, or he unconsciously absorbs Paulhan's influence on his work, and does not credit him directly. Ponge also says 'Paulhan was quite right', and claims that after this remark he tried to turn the poetic abscess into 'verse', 'so that I had to unmake this prose poem to integrate its interesting elements in my objective (sic) report on the pine woods.' (Francis Ponge, 'Notebook of the Pine Woods', in *Things*, trans. Cid Corman, p. 68.) Ponge, however, continued to write many more prose poems of the closed kind after these statements, and rather than undo the prose poem further entrenched himself in the form. Both of these statements in these letters of the early Forties do no more than indicate Ponge's self-conscious use of the form, and his frustration, petulant at times, with his fluctuating ability to make it work for him and his ambitions.

and general misunderstanding of the object is indirectly connected to his own fear of being misunderstood through speech, and then writing. The fear of annihilation and aphasia he experienced with speech is, I suggest, inseparable from his experience as a writer. Mary Ann Caws pertinently demonstrates this point using Ponge's poem, 'Un Rocher' (A Rock) (1928-29), in which the labour associated with his writing process and his frustration with trying to convey things, draw attention again to risk, to the danger of not being understood:

But whenever I take pen in hand to describe even a bit of underbrush, or just do it in words, if I just tell some friend about it... the leaves of my notepad or my friend's mind receive my lucubrations as if they were a meteor falling into their garden, some strange, well-nigh impossible pebble, of an obscure nature.³⁰⁷

The gap between the teller and the listener in many ways is as treacherous as it is opportune for Ponge. In order to curtail the fear and possibility of misunderstanding and disappointment, Ponge at times seems not merely to be anticipating the reader's mind and imagination, but almost pre-empting it, his descriptions of things often so vivid and original that it is hard to see them any other way than the poet's. For example, we recall the use of 'when' rather than 'if' in 'The Minister': 'It is when the sentences of the speech, thrown out like streamers' (C'est quand les phrases du discours qui s'achève, lancées comme des serpentins). This confidence in the image as both figurative and literal is typical of Ponge's use of analogy, where, again, an exact metaphor takes place, and the literal and the figurative occupy the same space rather than one replace the other. Higgins below, in reference to Ponge's explanation of his fear of language in his speech 'Tentative Orale',³⁰⁸ addresses the tendency to what I would call a pre-empting of the

³⁰⁷ Caws; Riffaterre, *The Prose Poem in France*, p. 121. ('Un Rocher' was originally published in Francis Ponge, *Proèmes*, 1948, the latter poetry collection republished as part of *Tome Premier* in 1965, pp. 167-68.)

³⁰⁸ The passage to which Higgins alludes is in Francis Ponge, 'Tentative Orale', *Le Grand Recueil: Méthodes*, pp. 246-47.

imagination, in view of Ponge's fear of not being understood, in a chapter on absurdity, which is equally fitting. This is directly appropriate to the above example given by Caws:

Try to express your deepest feelings, and you find yourself on the edge of a frightening precipice: language is incapable of penetrating right to the core of what you love. But even if you readjust your aim, and try to express the simplest object, say a stone, the same thing happens — the stone's irredeemable otherness, its inaccessibility to the mind, opens like an abyss... The commonest symptom of this, in everyday discourse, is that neither speaker nor listener controls the manifold play of associations — neither can be sure that the listener has seen what the speaker means, nor yet that the speaker is really aware of the force of what he is saying. And so, absurdly, the meaning of an utterance remains forever unsure. The writer's aim in the *objet*,³⁰⁹ therefore, is to seize as many as he can of the implications and consequent ambiguities, and to tie them in with one another in such a way that they all have a clear expressive function in the text, as little as possible being left to chance in this 'rigorous harmony'.³¹⁰

Ponge seems to leave nothing to chance in many of his poems and the extreme length to which he goes in his exact use of analogy to prevent misunderstanding has another irony, which pertains to the choice of the object that he uses to clearly demonstrate what he means, or is trying to put across. In 'The Minister', the choice of the streamers seems both etymologically and playfully realised in word and sound associations, namely puns, and these visual and aural echoes of words and letters lead to the choice of streamers as a way of capturing the closed nature of the minister's speech: 'Ministre', 'sinistre', 'serpent', 'souffles', 'serpentins' (Minister, sinister, snake, breath and streamers).

This attention to close proximity and focus on the thing itself in relation to the character of the prose poem has in part been attributed to the use of the sentence, rather than the use of the line, which creates a tendency towards a broken and interrupted approach in conventional poems. In this respect, the prose poem has been aligned with the 'undulations of the psyche' and unbroken reverie, and indicates that this characteristic of the prose poem is a safe, rather than a risky place for language. Michael

³⁰⁹ The '*objet*' is Ponge's word for the combination of the concrete existence of the text as well as its playful characteristic.

³¹⁰ Higgins, *Francis Ponge*, p. 55.

Benedikt, who was the prose poet and editor of The Prose Poem: An International Anthology (Dell/Laurel, 1976), the first anthology of its kind in English, put the link between the prose poem and the unconscious down to form, to the use of the sentence rather than the line, and claimed that the lack of traditional lineation indicates the presence of the unconscious, and thus the prose poem is the ultimate unconscious form: 'The attention to the unconscious and to its particular logic, unfettered by the relatively formalistic interruptions of the line break, remains the most immediately apparent property of the prose poem'.³¹¹ Robert Bly allies this lack of interruption with a sense of calm, and elaborates on this point, metaphorically:

Lines in free verse or in meter can reach high levels of excitement and emotion which one feels, for instance, in Yeats; the reader flies or is tossed from the emotions to the ideas to the senses and back. But in the prose poem one can stay close to the senses for half a page. Its mood is calm, more like a quiet lake than a sea. When our language becomes abstract, then the prose poem helps to balance that abstraction, and encourages the speaker to stay close to the body, to touch, hearing, color, texture, moisture, dryness, smell. Its strength lies in intimacy. One could also say that in the object poem in prose, the conscious mind gives up, at least to a degree, the adversary position it usually adopts toward the unconscious, and a certain harmony between the two take place.³¹²

This attribution of calm and a kind of self-sufficiency to the unbroken line of the prose poem is interesting in relation to Ponge's transition between the closed and the open texts, as there is an element of hysteria that intensifies his feeling of language as risky which is more apparent in the open texts than the shorter and more boxed-like form of the early prose poems. In this respect, the late prose poems, with their extensive drafts and multiple pages, could be seen as indicative of Ponge's fear of aphasia becoming more acute as the poems go on, rather than less. The lines in his long poems become more excessive and more broken, and Ponge increasingly self-referential, and in this respect it

³¹¹ Stephen Fredman, Poet's Prose: The Crisis in American Verse (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1990), p. 131.

³¹² Bly, What Have I Ever Lost By Dying?, p. 81.

seems ironic that he did not remain within the confines of the shorter prose poems if he wanted to overcome his fear of annihilation, as well as remain close to the object. In relation to Bly's association of intimacy with the unbroken line of the prose poem, it is also somewhat ironic that Ponge's open poems are more intimate in terms of what the reader witnesses of the poet himself.

In spite, therefore, of his affinities with some aspects of the prose poem and the unconscious, Ponge diverges from the prose poem precisely because of the last point: his treatment of the line. In this respect, it is clear that Ponge did not experience the prose poem in the same way as Robert Bly. Even during the composition of the early poems, in spite of their focus, Ponge was far from calm, and treated the prose poem less as a refuge, than a form in which he struggled, perhaps all the more because of its boxed structure. Lee Fahnestock reflects on this early period in Ponge's life when writing itself took on a form of mutism, and his frustration around his ambition of siding with things was expressed more apparently than any feeling of pleasure, or achievement:

By 1925 despairing of an ability to write anything at all, Ponge found refuge in a contemplation of things... But it didn't come easily; two and three years for many of the poems, and after later struggles with words, how often he must have come away feeling that much of the catch has slipped between his fingers.³¹³

This sense of regret is confirmed later on by Jordan's acknowledgement that in certain texts Ponge's 'writing represents above all a struggle with language – a crusade against its worst tendencies – and takes place under the constant threat of inarticulateness'.³¹⁴

An example of a longer poem, in which Ponge chooses an object which conveys the risks of speech and the continual assertion and retraction of the tongue, is 'The Lizard' (1945-47). In this poem, Ponge continues the self-reflexive tradition of the prose

³¹³ Fahnestock, introduction, Francis Ponge, *The Nature of Things*, p. 8.

³¹⁴ Jordan, introduction, *The Art Criticism of Francis Ponge*, p. 5.

poem, but the ironic, slightly sardonic tone and language of the 'Argument' in a small box-shape in the top right hand corner prior to the poem's actual entrance undercuts this notion, and instead seems to laugh at the text for drawing attention to itself in the first place:

This unpretentious little text perhaps shows how the mind forms an allegory and then likes to resorb it.

A few characteristics of the object first appear, then develop and intertwine through the spontaneous movement of the mind thus leading to the theme, which no sooner stated produces a brief side reflection from which there at once emerges, unmistakably, the abstract theme, and during the course of its formulation (towards the end) the object automatically disappears.³¹⁵

In dictating to us through the poem before the poem has actually begun, the text then goes on to display this process and then refute it, again through irony:

What does this glaring surface of the rock, or the masonry barrier that I previously evoked, resemble if not a page – lit up and brought to a white heat by a passionate desire to inscribe an observation on it? So here, then, is the way things are transmuted.³¹⁶

The fragile process of the writer creating the text, its absorptions and struggles, is both mirrored in the object that the writer has chosen as its subject, and mocked by the writer's 'absent' consciousness of himself writing about it. Throughout, the poem is written in the third person, and the point at which Ponge slips in the 'I' is when he wishes to draw direct attention to how the poem is operating in relation to the lizard, the object-subject:

And now, why not be honest a posteriori? Why not try to understand?
Why let the poem stand as a trap for the reader and myself? Am I so eager to

³¹⁵ Ponge, 'The Lizard', in Francis Ponge: Selected Poems, p. 147.

³¹⁶ Ponge, 'The Lizard', p. 153.

leave a poem, a trap? Instead of allowing my mind to take forward a step or two?³¹⁷

This line seems to correspond with a line from 'The Spider' (1942-48), where, less ironically, Ponge identifies with the spider coming towards the reader, this time with the full intention of trapping the reader:

To follow her discourse – her image – I must throw out a few sentences of my own... Yes, suddenly from a corner of a room here I come in great strides to hurl myself upon you, attention of my readers caught in the snare of my saliva-work.³¹⁸

The mention of saliva adds a twist to the fact that this is a written text based on speech – that of the spider's 'salivated talk in the air', and Ponge's own discourse. Characteristic of Ponge, the reader is bound up in this process, and his act of 'swallowing' the text as it appears is the subject of both this poem, 'Snails' and 'The Minister'. In 'The Minister' the act of swallowing is conveyed in the image of the reader, and listening audience, being bound by the speech of the Minister, the ropes of the text emerging in the forms of streamers, in turn alluding to the tongue of a serpent. The latter image is also echoed in the lizard's movement:

It then darts out its little tongue like a flame. Yet this isn't fire, these aren't flames coming out of its mouth, but actually a tongue, a very long forked tongue that goes in as fast as it came out – that quivers at its own audacity.³¹⁹

The last line alludes to exposure and the vulnerability that occurs with the risk of expression, caught mid-speech between being seen and unseen. In 'The Spider' the equivalent of the moment of exposure and the sense of urgency to continue performing or executing expression once present is borne out subtly in the line: 'this is where I sting

³¹⁷ Ponge, 'The Lizard', p. 153.

³¹⁸ Ponge, 'The Spider', in *Francis Ponge: Selected Poems*, p. 165.

³¹⁹ Ponge, 'The Lizard', p. 151.

you and put you to sleep'.³²⁰ Once exposed, caught in the glare of the 'attention' of the reader, Ponge then manipulates the poem/situation so that he is alone, absenting the reader, through sleep.

There is an interesting discussion about this topic in Claire Kahane's book on hysteria in which she includes Garrett Stewart's contention that:

The act of reading itself evokes a silent voicing in the reader, who involuntarily mimes in the body his or her identificatory reception of the text, and that this unconscious corporeal mimicry includes the organs of vocal production. Thus, the reader comes literally, perhaps even hysterically, to embody the voice of the text's speaking subject, including its fractures, its implicit conflicts, its points of pleasure and danger.³²¹

This theory of the reader's inner reading voice identifying with the speaker's voice opens up various readings of the use of speech in 'The Spider'. To begin with, Ponge's absenting of the reader, through sleep, in effect is an absenting of himself, or a re-absenting as he has already disclaimed himself from the text. Moreover, if the speaking subject desires to put the reader to sleep, and allow the poem to continue, speech becomes a disembodied voice, the poem continuing as it does in spite of the reader (though initially the form that follows is a list of things – inanimate and animate – which in itself could be discerned as a breakdown of communication) and illustrating what Sorrell says of Ponge's own belief about language, that 'language is created but then released by man, and makes its subsequent way independently of him'.³²² In this sense, Ponge's attempts to create a language that came from the object rather than from himself, meant that he could relinquish his responsibility towards his own speech, and in effect was less at risk in terms of exposing his own failures in language.

³²⁰ Ponge, 'The Spider', p. 165.

³²¹ Claire Kahane, preface, *Passions of the Voice: Hysteria, Narrative and the Speaking Woman, 1850-1915*, (Baltimore; London: Johns Hopkins UP, 1995), p. xiii.

³²² Sorrell, *Francis Ponge*, p. 37.

Another view of dissociated speech is given by Susan Sontag in her essay, 'The Aesthetics of Silence', which discusses artistic or aesthetic revolts against language, as demonstrated in Western literature and culture:

Silence undermines 'bad speech' by which I mean dissociated speech – speech dissociated from the body (and therefore from feeling), speech not organically informed by the sensuous presence and concrete particularity of the speaker and of the individual occasion for using language. Unmoored from the body, speech deteriorates. It becomes false, inane, ignoble, weightless. Silence can inhibit or counteract this tendency, providing a kind of ballast, monitoring and even correcting language when it becomes inauthentic.³²³

The empty speech of the Minister in some ways is a more fitting example of this unmoored and inauthentic speech than 'The Spider', but at the same time it is interesting to note in 'The Spider' how the speaking subject (the 'I' or 'she' voice) seems to want to unmoor itself from the reader, by swallowing the reader, so putting them to sleep. This, combined with Stewart's theory, makes the act even more perplexing. Where is the voice in this poem? The reader in effect, still and mute as an object, becomes the focus of the poem; the threat of being swallowed by the spider, the main object of the poem, is usurped, inverted, so that the spider itself is swallowed by the reader: mute and still, and able to be observed unhindered without imposing his or her opinion or interpretation of the text.

A passage in Ponge's critical text on Malherbe ('Pour un Malherbe', 1965), 'Ardens Organum', seems to give a different interpretation of the role of the reader, and although it continues to view language as an act, it places the reader in an active rather than a passive or even victimised position in the text. Ponge is equally aware of the reader in 'Ardens Organum' as he is in 'The Spider', but rather than exploring the destruction of the reader, in 'Ardens Organum' Ponge lifts the reader onto the same

³²³ Susan Sontag, 'The Aesthetics of Silence' in *Styles of Radical Will* (New York: Picador, 2002), p. 24.

plane as the writer, and it seems here that their mutual existence is beneficial to the existence of the text:

To begin with the first proposal of this book, whose words you are in the process of reading... since you are reading me, dear reader, therefore I am; since you are reading us (my book and myself), dear reader, therefore we are (You, it, and I).³²⁴

Here Ponge supports his belief that language is an act that confirms existence, and the latter is one of the few texts in which Ponge asserts his own existence confidently, rather than drawing attention to himself in the text in a somewhat ironic, but nevertheless self-deprecating manner, his poem 'The Pebble' for example, ending 'He attempted to describe stone and petered out'.³²⁵ Again, this refers to a fear he expressed at the beginning of 'The Pebble', which is a simultaneous fear of letting the stone down, and also himself by an inadequate use of language, that is unfit, or untrue to both the pebble's voice and his own. 'It isn't easy to define a pebble', he begins, and continues with trying to assume control of the reader again, by asking us to look at the pebble and not 'my thick elegiac expressions'.³²⁶ This fear of being misunderstood, synonymous with Ponge's misunderstanding the object, as we know is his constant battle, and this pressure is expressed again in the following passage from 'Ardens Organum', where he associates not just speech, but the right speech, with existence, reiterating also his link between silence and death. On speaking of Malherbe and Descartes, from whom he spins variation on the latter's 'I think, therefore I am', Ponge compares the two figures in order to arrive at his own axiom:

Why do we prefer Malherbe to Descartes? Because to his 'I think therefore I am,' to the meditation about Man on Man, to his homily on reason, we prefer Reason

³²⁴ Ponge, 'Ardens Organum', in *The Power of Language*, p. 245.

³²⁵ Ponge, 'The Pebble', in *Francis Ponge: Selected Poems*, p. 107.

³²⁶ Ponge, 'The Pebble', p. 91.

in Action, the 'I speak and you understand me, therefore we are': The 'Doing what one Says'.³²⁷

He continues, somewhat arrogantly, as he has done before when commenting on his own work in comparison to other poets: 'Rather than a work that might be entitled like Valéry's, Charms or Poems, we are trying to write a work whose title might be: Acts or Texts'.³²⁸ Action is therefore recognised here as synonymous with speech, itself essential to existence, which although it seems to be contradicted in the poems where speech seems to be synonymous with death, it is more the fact that it is the wrong speech, the bad speech which is capable of doing harm and causing so much destruction. Ponge has this responsibility to himself, but also to the object, but it seems in the same way that he approaches humankind indirectly through the object, so he approaches his own pitfalls through the poem, as well as the object.

³²⁷ Ponge, 'Ardens Organum', p. 247.

³²⁸ Ponge, 'Ardens Organum', pp. 247-249.

Chapter Six: Language and Death

The Threat of Misrepresentation

This chapter examines Ponge's autobiographical rage and fear, not only in relation to the poet himself, but to another, not an object, but a human being. One of the few texts in which Ponge writes about a person, 'Baptême Funèbre' (1945) is an epitaph on Ponge's friend and fellow poet, René Leynaud, a member of the Resistance executed by the Germans, as well as another and equally moving account of Ponge's terror of inadequacy. Here the descent into silence is tantamount to death, not just his own, but that of another. The fact that the person of whom he wishes to speak is already dead, and less alive than the most inert of Ponge's objects, makes his fear all the more poignant and unnerving.

Ian Higgins' discussion of 'Baptême Funèbre' is an excellent study of Ponge's approach to silence and death, drawing attention not only to the inadequacy of language in the face of death, but to the comparative interdependence between speech and writing in Ponge's work, and the fear of the process from the spoken word to print, therefore being witness to his own verbal inadequacy on the page. The absence of the subject in conjunction with the presence of the text, however, is a particularly terrifying, but fertile clash, both for poet and critic. As Higgins states, on behalf of Ponge: 'If there is no struggle, the result is either inarticulateness or essentialist cliché'.³²⁹ Ponge's struggle to speak adequately about Leynaud is visually manifest on the page, the poem itself deemed by Higgins as highly self-conscious in terms of the print and the visual shape of the words and sentences. As in the example below, the panic and despair of the speaker is conveyed in the sudden appearance of capital letters, and isolation of the question itself:

³²⁹ See Higgins, 'Against Petrification', p. 819.

FACE À UN TEL SUJET QUE PUIS-JE? (Faced with such a subject what can I do?)³³⁰

This feeling of pressure and fear of verbal impotence is sensed throughout the poem, the weight of the role so significant, and the consequences of saying the wrong thing so keenly felt that Ponge even goes so far as to compare his predicament with the role of the executioner:

Oh FACE À UN TEL SUJET comme si je faisais partie du peloton ennemi (Oh faced with such a subject it is as though I have become part of the enemy gun-squad).³³¹

As Higgins interprets this line, 'to misrepresent him would be to murder him a second time'.³³² This level of honesty about the difficulty of his position is particular to the poem, and lends the text an original slant which Higgins understands as a conscious and intentional reaction to what he feels is otherwise required of him: 'the speaker desperately wants to say the right thing about the dead man, and therefore avoids the conventional rhetoric often seen in the commemorative poetry of the time'.³³³ However, the look of the poem and the more transparent self-consciousness around speech also look forward to Ponge's more open poems written after the Second World War, and in this sense 'Baptême Funèbre' can be read as a symbolic example of the fear and pressure of being unable to express himself that was to follow. As with many of the later texts, this poem is long at nearly three pages and is composed of many paragraphs, thirteen in total, each of a different length varying between one line, as above, and six lines at the most. The visual

³³⁰ Francis Ponge, 'Baptême Funèbre', in *Le Grand Recueil: Lyres*, p. 37.

³³¹ Ponge, 'Baptême Funèbre', p. 37.

³³² Higgins, 'Against Petrification', p. 823.

³³³ Higgins, 'Against Petrification', p. 828.

inconsistency caused by erratic switches between cases, varying line lengths, and gaps between paragraphs, gives the poem a haphazard and restless appearance, the entire poem depending on the tension between what to say and what not to say, and moreover, how to say it.

So how exactly is this worked through, or represented graphically on the page? Specifically, and startlingly, struggle is manifest in two ways. First, 'the spaces between the paragraphs suggest an effort to master effusion and to control breathing',³³⁴ and lend an air of panic to the poem. The single lines that seem to hover either side of the spaces between each one, aside from being uncharacteristic of the use of the line within a more typical prose format, is quite alien to the tightly controlled appearance of the prose poem in its sturdy block. It is interesting to note, however, that the paragraphs in the poem assume a steadier and sturdier look at the beginning and the end of the poem, as though the hysteria is flanked by some kind of order. Secondly, panic is manifest in the image of birds, their fluttering 'analogous to the speaker's trembling in the face of language'.³³⁵ Each of these two representations of anxiety, as Higgins notes, is conditioned by an overall tension between the act of speech and writing:

The emotion and inarticulateness are encountered through the idiosyncratic concern with the written or printed shape of words. The capitals emphasize the line, but they also make it look visually like a rifle-barrel, with the question mark like the wisp of smoke after a shot. So the double sordidness of execution and maudlin linguistic inadequacy is further emphasized – and so is the vital fact that the inarticulateness is not actually spontaneous, but is the fruit of reflection of something written down. This takes us still further away from a speaker groping for words, and brings the process of literary creation into the picture. More and more, the representation of the struggle against inarticulateness is seen to be the supremely articulate result of pondering and careful control.³³⁶

³³⁴ Higgins, 'Against Petrification', p. 823.

³³⁵ Higgins, 'Against Petrification', p. 823.

³³⁶ Higgins, 'Against Petrification', p. 823.

These moments of control, however, are undercut more directly than the analogies afford, as we have seen above when halfway through the poem Ponge turns in on himself in capitals and exclaims his own inadequacy and fear of speaking in the subject's absence. As with so many of Ponge's questions, many of which refer to his inadequacies with words in relation to the subject, this question is unanswered, and either left to the reader's thoughts, or brought about in the poem to remind us that language is fallible, and acutely so in the face of death, absence and silence. As Eliot's Prufrock says about his experience of the intangible nature of speech:

It is impossible to say just what I mean!
But as if a magic lantern threw the nerves in patterns
on a screen.³³⁷

What is interesting here is that the 'nerves' behind the words that will not appear, manifest themselves visually. Where words remain in the dark, the sensations that circumnavigate meaning come to light, and do so with both Eliot and Ponge in an almost painterly manner. In 'Baptême Funèbre', Ponge turns to the landscape, rather than talk about Leynaud directly, and the description of birds, sky and lavender evoke a sense of what Ponge is trying to say, and more importantly, by turning to nature and speaking about the subject indirectly he avoids silence:

Les oiseaux qui s'envolèrent au bruit des douze fusils se reposèrent
plusieurs fois ensuite au milieu des mêmes dangers. (The birds that take flight
from the noise of twelve guns resettle after a while in the middle of the same
danger.)

...

Le ciel ne tremble pas tous les jours a toute heure comme a midi l'été sur
les pierres sèches (The sky does not tremble all day at all hours like at noon the
summer on the dry stone).

La lavande a chaque printemps refleurit (Lavender reflowers at each
spring).

³³⁷ T.S.Eliot, *Selected Poems* (London: Faber, 1961), p. 15.

...

Et les ruisseaux de l'Ardèche comme ceux de notre langue maternelle
coulent et couleront toujours (And the streams of Ardèche like those of our
mother tongue flow will flow always).³³⁸

The way the poem shifts from Ponge openly disclosing his inability to speak about the subject, to focussing on nature is not only reminiscent of the poems written before the Second World War, where he attempts to hide himself behind the object, but is also indicative of the later texts where Ponge begins to show his inadequacies around speech more openly. Becoming more transparent about his place in the text, however, does not signify ease around his inadequacies, and, as the next section reveals, his relationship both with his mother tongue and the world of objects indicates a troubled and awkward phase between the short and the long texts, which marks a shift between idiosyncratic neuroses and something closer to hysteria.

Eliot's 'Hysteria' and Ponge's Annihilation

This section looks at Ponge's longer poems, with particular focus on 'The Spider' and uses one of T.S. Eliot's few prose poem's 'Hysteria' (1917) to reflect and help explain what was occurring in Ponge's increasingly unconventional and chaotic use of language and form between the two World Wars. The panic of 'Baptême Funèbre' caused by the interrelation between silence and death turns to hysteria in some of Ponge's later prose poems and forces the reader to observe how Ponge's relation with the object and the form is a double-edged sword. 'Hysteria' demonstrates two significant tensions found in Ponge's poems between the early object poems and the late open texts. The first of these tensions is between the shifting positions of the 'voice' of the object and Ponge's own

³³⁸ Ponge, 'Baptême Funèbre', p. 37 (my translations.)

urge to speak in the poem. As noted by Jordan – and this is the case with the early object poems – objects enabled control over language and silence:

Clarity and control of language are permitted by the simple, attractive non-duality of objects.... If language is to be controlled, then reason and objectivity must prevail... This is why small, graspable objects – graspable by the hand as well as the mind – are preferred to subjects whose implications are so numerous as to swamp the observer, or threaten him with annihilation.³³⁹

The object, therefore, on the one hand is the antithesis of threat, by virtue of its silence: if Ponge aims to remove words from their multiple and turgid meanings, definitions, statuses, and contexts, the object is the perfect route to take as its silence will not answer back – it can offer a new language precisely because it has never spoken a recognisable human language. However, the flaw in using the object to avoid becoming mute is that the object on account of its very silence also represents death and annihilation.

The combination between a desire for pure expression through the object on the one hand, and the death or loss of the author or subject on the other, is discussed by Peter Schwenger in his book on the rift between the significant and indifferent roles of objects in our lives. In the book, he speculates on Virginia Woolf and the main character John in her story 'Solid Objects', and posits that his ultimately fatal state of being haunted and possessed by objects is a consequence of the allure of the object that is outside, rather than within a domestic and familial context. In John's case, his obsessive drive to pursue objects is at the expense of his profession as a politician, and broken objects that are not part of an economic, or socially useful system, such as bits of glass or stone, render him as part of an alienated, rather than accepted world:

For this is the object's seductive power as pure object, escaping the familiar categories and functions to which the subject would assign it, and in the process

³³⁹ Jordan, *Art Criticism of Francis Ponge*, p. 5.

becoming fatal to the subject. The solidity of objects dissolves the solidity of subjects.³⁴⁰

If the stray object has an annihilating effect on the subject on account of its neglected or forgotten status, Ponge's choice, or use of the object can be seen as a distortion of Schwenger's theory. In the case of Leynaud, who in effect acts outside of the social system, we can use Schwenger's hypothesis, but in general, Ponge's objects were actually parts of an economic system, such as food items, and stoves, cigarettes and crates. Ponge's twist relative to Schwenger's theory occurs in the way that Ponge wants to remove these objects from the system and thereby render them alien to it, but is actually able to resist annihilation more successfully with domestic objects than with things already outside of the system such as the pebble or the swallow. *Soap* could be an exception, were it not for the fact that this object was extremely rare during the time of the poem's composition. The main point, however, is that by treating everything as if it were unknown, Ponge in effect invites annihilation. 'Proem' written early on, in 1924, prepares the reader for this essential negative, or negating force behind his work, the distinct and appropriately forceful use of italics in the original retained in the translation, 'underneath' being one of the few words in the poem which is written in regular font:

Words don't touch me any more except by the tragic or ridiculous error they manifest, not at all by their significance.

At no moment do I forget their defect...

...underneath is what I am concerned with, which is only death. Yes, in the same way that we can say a thing is being involved that is drawn fatally towards a series of cogs that will destroy it in a few moments.³⁴¹

The sense of fatality wrought by the inevitability of a feeling of alienation, although it is demonstrated in Ponge's poems through his treatment of the object, can also be applied

³⁴⁰ Peter Schwenger, *The Tears of Things: Melancholy and Physical Objects* (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 2006), p. 83.

³⁴¹ Ponge, 'Proem', in *Things*, p.12.

to humans. Ponge is aware of this fact in 'Proem' – 'But can you show me anything else but man?' – although he rarely looks at humans directly in his poems. An example of an equivalent linguistic death that occurs in Ponge's poems when the poet is faced with an object takes place in T.S. Eliot's prose poem, 'Hysteria' (1917). The difference is that the object is human in Eliot's poem, but moves from a subject to an object status through a process of feeling alienated by another human, or more specifically the verbal act of the human.

In Eliot's poem, the speaker is indirectly threatened by his own silence, which is directly caused by a woman's laughter and the fear of being swallowed during what reads as a terrifying lack of equal exchange between two people:

As she laughed I was aware of becoming involved in her laughter and being part of it, until her teeth were only accidental stars with a talent for squad-drill.³⁴²

Claire Kahane puts forward the argument that 'Hysteria' mimics the act of the prose poem itself, simply by being written about in a form that no longer relies on clear distinctions between poetry and prose: 'Erasing the line that distinguishes poetic form from prose, "Hysteria" technically performs the obliteration of boundaries that threatens its speaker'.³⁴³ Ponge's choice of the prose poem has also been informed by what could be discerned as a similarly conscious hysterical act, and his statement in his longest object-poem Soap that 'it is always necessary to break something', is one of many indicators that his choice of the prose poem is linked to the prose poem's challenge to generic barriers.³⁴⁴ This compulsion towards obliterating traditional literary inheritances with a view to creating reconciliation is a tension that is typified in a general understanding of the prose poem's history. As Monroe notes, the 'prose poem

³⁴² T.S. Eliot, 'Hysteria' in Prufrock and Other Observations (London: Faber, 2001), p. 29.

³⁴³ Kahane, Passions of the Voice, p. 128.

³⁴⁴ Ponge, Soap, p. 49.

characteristically gestures both toward unity and sameness and toward fragmentation and difference'.³⁴⁵ This is indeed the case with Ponge's use of the prose poem as well as Eliot's in 'Hysteria', both poets hoping to restore order (in the disorder they have created) through the intense observation of an object. Ponge's own poetic practice and situation during the writing of many of his prose poems before the Second World War seems to create a similar tension between order and chaos:

From the fact of my social condition, because I am busy earning my living practically twelve hours every day, I could not very easily write anything else: I have available about twenty minutes each evening before being invaded by sleep....What matters to me is to seize nearly every evening a new object, to draw from it both pleasure and a lesson.³⁴⁶

Ponge wrote this during the early 1930s while he was working in the office of Messageries Hachette, and as well as the combination between Ponge's lack of time and self-discipline during this difficult period of writing, the intensity of his work is also wrought by the conjunction between the formal layout of his early prose poems – their block-like density and rigid prose structure – and the fragmented, often hysterical discourse of the prose poem's content itself.

Eliot's 'Hysteria' is equally characterised by this tension and in this way illuminates Ponge's. One of the many ways this tension is conveyed in 'Hysteria' is through speech, and the narrator's use of a rather cold and passive use of language, within an atmosphere of desperation and panic. According to Murphy's reading of the poem:

It does not disrupt discourse on the level of grammar, syntax, or semantics, but is disturbing chiefly through the tension between the hysterical state of the narrator and his even tone of voice, and the sense of an excruciating moment blown up to overwhelming proportions.³⁴⁷

³⁴⁵ Monroe, *Poverty of Objects*, p. 269.

³⁴⁶ Ponge, cited in Monroe, *Poverty of Objects*, pp. 261-62. Translated by Monroe, and originally cited in Francis Ponge, *Tome Premier* (Paris: Gallimard, 1965), p. 126.

³⁴⁷ Murphy, *A Tradition of Subversion*, pp. 57-58.

Ponge himself made various allusions to hysteria bound up with speech in his work. In 'Rhetoric' (1929) he explores language in relation to ownership and the terror of 'others' owning too large a share of one:

To them, one should say: at least let the minority within you have the right to speak. Be poets. They will answer: but it is especially there, it is always there that I feel others within me; when I try to express myself, I am unable to do so. Words are ready-made and express themselves: they do not express me. Once again I find myself suffocating.³⁴⁸

We have read this expressed before in 'Some Reasons for Writing' in which Ponge intones a somewhat melodramatic account of 'the sordid movement of men' and states that one incentive for becoming and remaining a poet was to go against the grain of receiving and swallowing the words of others.³⁴⁹ Overall this points to Ponge's frustration and physical discomfort when it comes to language, particularly it seems when it comes to the act of speaking. Indeed, the mouth is considered here a kind of hell in which mankind 'is sickened by the food' he eats, where his breath makes him 'choke' and where 'expressions consume each other'.³⁵⁰ The mouth is unhealthy in this text, associated with entrapment, madness and disease rather than freedom and hope, with annihilation rather than progress.

However, the mouth is not always represented so negatively in Ponge's poems, and in line with the image of the mouth in 'Hysteria', Ponge's poem 'The Spider' observes the mouth as a place not only of destruction, but also creation. Hysteria is a result of the gap between these two places. In reference to 'Hysteria' but equally pertinent to Ponge, Eliot's poem shows us 'where language struggles from a condition of inarticulateness to a threshold where it can approach the total presence which is also

³⁴⁸ Ponge, 'Rhetoric', in *The Power of Language*, p. 73.

³⁴⁹ Ponge, 'Some Reasons for Writing', in *The Power of Language*, p. 65.

³⁵⁰ Ponge, 'Rhetoric', in *The Power of Language*, p. 65.

its own extinction. It falls away inevitably to reconstitute itself as language'.³⁵¹ The falling away process that is crucial to a renewed sense of the whole is similar to the struggle with language that Ponge undergoes as part of realising new commonplaces, and a language more unified with its original meaning and object. Of Eliot's poem, Kahane asks: 'What does it mean to speak of hysteria in texts whose very poetics deliberately mime the symptoms of hysteria – splitting, fragmentation, digression, dissociation?'³⁵² The same can be asked of 'The Spider'. In the poem itself, Ponge appears to answer this straightforwardly, illustrating in a few paragraphs his entire poetics mimetically realised in the object, specifically, the speech of the object. Starting out by exploring the beginning and consequential weaving of the spider's discourse, Ponge then moves on directly to his own poetic process:

But how does she begin?
 With a bold leap? Or by letting herself down without losing the thread of
 her discourse, and then returning a number of times by various routes to her
 point of departure, so that her body, at once spinner and weaver, passes
 through – fully participates in – the lines of every snare she sets.
 Whence, directly, her own definition of her web:

NOTHING MORE THAN SALIVATED TALK IN THE AIR BUT
 AUTHENTICALLY WOVEN.³⁵³

And Ponge, in order to establish his own beginning, must follow on from her example, the rhetoric of the object directly imposing a form onto his own. As we recall from 'The Spider' in relation to my discussion on Ponge and rhetoric, Ponge must 'follow her discourse – her image... throw out a few sentences that are bold enough and entirely of [his] own invention'.³⁵⁴ If the object of the poem, therefore, authentically imposes a

³⁵¹ *Guide to Literary Theory and Criticism*, eds. Michael Groden and Martin Kreiswirth, (Baltimore; London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994), p. 224. The quotation comes under the entry 'T.S.Eliot', and was written by Balachandra Rajan.

³⁵² Kahane, *Passions of the Voice*, p. 127.

³⁵³ Ponge, 'The Spider', in *Francis Ponge: Selected Poems*, p. 163.

³⁵⁴ Ponge, 'The Spider', p. 165.

rhetorical style on Ponge's language as well as the form of the poem, what are the implications of using the spider and his web-like speech? If the spider's web is indicative of perfection in speech, it is also a place of cunning and fragility. In this respect, is there an equivalent mimesis to Eliot's 'Hysteria' that occurs in 'The Spider' and is comparable to 'Hysteria'? Are the two poems interchangeable through their study of speech? Can 'Hysteria' be interpreted as an object poem that consciously petrifies speech, and 'The Spider' a poem which unconsciously explores the palpable impact of speech on the self? The answer to these questions exists primarily in each poem's profound fear of an annihilation of speech, and vicariously suggests the poet within the poem.

To begin answering these interrelated questions, it is important to be aware of the process of mimetic fragmentation that takes place in 'Hysteria', and how this mirroring effect relates to the key tensions between the prose poem's structure, and the even tone of the narrator. Although the rational tone of the poem is apparent in some of the sentences when read all together, it is when the reader examines the individual words of these sentences that the poem begins to fragment and judder under view, and does so right from the poem's outset:

As she laughed I was aware of becoming involved in her laughter and being part of it... I was drawn in by short gasps, inhaled at each momentary recovery, lost finally in the dark caverns of her throat, bruised by the ripple of unseen muscles.³⁵⁵

Similar to the narrator of the poem who, according to Henry Christian, is 'dissociated from his mental and physical stability', and seems to 'go where the laughter' goes and 'flow where the laughter flowed',³⁵⁶ without a clear thread to follow of his own choosing, the choice and placing of these words aptly conveys the hysterical sense of fragmentation

³⁵⁵ T.S. Eliot, 'Hysteria' in *Prufrock and Other Observations*, p. 29.

³⁵⁶ Henry Christian, 'Thematic Development in T. S. Eliot's "Hysteria"' *Twentieth Century Literature*, 6: 2 (1960), 76-80; 76.

and alienation. Akin to the movement of space breaking apart, certain words and phrases are carefully distributed within the sentences so that they remain close to each other and it is this proximity that sends tremors throughout the entire form from beginning to end: 'laughter' repeated in the first and second lines of the first sentence; 'short gasps' 'momentary recovery' 'lost' 'ripple' 'unseen' in the second sentence on the fourth fifth and sixth lines; 'trembling' 'hurriedly' in the third sentence of the sixth and seventh lines; 'shaking' 'fragments' in the eleventh and twelfth lines of the fourth sentence. Add to this the fact that an elderly waiter repeats his question twice and you have a poem sitting like an object on a table in an earthquake; likewise, as Christian notes, the poem has a tangible effect on the reader and witness of this breakdown: 'As the narrator tells what happened both he and the reader live through the experience of hysteria'.³⁵⁷

The equivalent of this frantic relationship between the object and the speaker in 'The Spider' and how this is manifest in speech occurs at the point when the spider claims to put the reader to sleep, and the list that follows – predominantly devoid of conjunctions, articles, indefinite or definite, and linked by commas, and thematic and aural juxtapositions – enhances the poem's act of a kind of verbal breakdown:

seraphims, assassins,
roughnecks, thugs, archers,
sergeants, tyrants and guards
...
bubbles, ashes, dust,
things, causes, reasons,
...
proverbs, phrases, words,
themes, theses and glosses.³⁵⁸

Relative to Eliot, verbal communication, as Murphy remarks of 'Hysteria', reaches us 'only as a broken record', the experience of reading a list akin to being 'stuck in a single,

³⁵⁷ Christian, 'Thematic Development in T. S. Eliot's "Hysteria"', 76-77.

³⁵⁸ Ponge, 'The Spider', in *Francis Ponge: Selected Poems*, p. 167.

endlessly repeating moment of shock':³⁵⁹ Similarly, in 'The Spider', when the speaker returns, the experience of the list is continued in the capitalised voice and is even more disturbed and disturbing:

BUZZINGS, BALDERDASH, ZANY ZIGZAGS! KNOW, WHATEVER
YOU MAY THINK OF MY SECRET BELLY AND THOUGH I'M ONLY A
MIXED UP LITTLE SCRIBBLER, FOR PRESENT PURPOSES THIS
MUCH CAN BE DISENTANGLED: IT TURNS OUT THAT I AM YOUR
FATE; TURNS OUT, I SAY, AND IT FOLLOWS THAT THOUGH ONLY
A BELLY I AM THEREFORE (SACHET, SILKEN SHELL THAT MY
BELLY SECRETES) YOUR EVIL STAR LYING IN WAIT FOR YOU ON
THE CEILING TO INTRODUCE YOU, WITH ITS RAYS, INTO YOUR
NIGHT.³⁶⁰

The notable difference between the two poems lies in their point of view, Ponge's from the spider's which is active, hurling himself towards the reader, and silently devouring the reader-speaker, whereas Eliot's speaker is subject to this fate, not told he will be annihilated, but experiencing the effects as it is happening. Ironically, one could argue that the sleeping and vulnerable reader is saved from being devoured not so much by the content of the language, but by the look of the words themselves; the visual shock of capitals after the initial reverie of the list forcing the reader awake through the urgency of the appearance of the words, the printed emulation of shouting. It is only at the end that the speaker seems to shift from a position of power to an acknowledgement (albeit sardonic and defensive) of vulnerability, and transience. As the snail's speech is prone to predators, and rain, when secreted, so the spider's salivated talk is fragile and exposed to external hazards, from neglect to accident:

Long afterward – when my web has been abandoned – drops of
dew, specks of dust will stiffen it, make it shine – give it an entirely different
attraction....

Until, like a horrible or grotesque bonnet, it covers the head of some
nosy amateur of bushes or attic corners, who will curse it but remain bonneted.³⁶¹

³⁵⁹ Murphy, *Tradition of Subversion*, p. 57.

³⁶⁰ Ponge, 'The Spider', p. 169.

³⁶¹ Ponge, 'The Spider', p. 169.

The image of speech worn outside the head, entangling and binding an almost incidental speaker, or figure in the poem, is reminiscent of the Minister when his sentences entangle the crowd, and bind the listener to a speech which in itself is mocked and seen as redundant and meaningless. If speech is made redundant, as these examples imply, partly by being removed from its right and true context – towards humanity and away from objects – how is speech to be redeemed in these situations?

Ponge's view of speech in so many ways is negative. The poet is incensed by being covered in the filth of other peoples' language and conversations, outraged by the empty noise of social prattle from conversation to political discourse – 'These governments of businessmen and merchants...if all that didn't speak so loudly, if that weren't the only thing to speak'³⁶² – and irritated by the mutism of 'men themselves' who 'for the most part seem to us deprived of speech',³⁶³ so that it is therefore a challenge to discern where in his work speech escapes, or surpasses these sordid features. However, through witnessing 'conversations' among the poems themselves, one can glimpse where this is possible, even achieved. In 'The Minister', words undergo a metamorphosis from streamers to floating like 'plumes of smoke with their knots tied and untied by the wind which ends by dispersing everything'.³⁶⁴ In 'Ardens Organum', Ponge directly compares words to smoke, claiming that 'words are obviously smoke, a residue of the body-of-desire that has burned',³⁶⁵ and the images he uses in his poem 'A Fire' are beautiful, and surreal, and as has already been noted above by Higgins, glimpse into what 'flashes inside' language as it changes from a solid state into something intangible:

(One can only compare the way a fire walks to that of animals : it's got to leave a place in order to occupy another; it walks like an amoeba as well as a giraffe, leaping from the neck and crawling on its feet)...

³⁶² Ponge, cited in Monroe, *A Poverty of Objects*, p. 263.

³⁶³ Ponge, cited in Monroe, *A Poverty of Objects*, p. 260.

³⁶⁴ Ponge, 'The Minister', trans. Michel Delville, in Michel Delville, *The American Prose Poem*, p.154.

³⁶⁵ Ponge, 'Ardens Organum', in *The Power of Language*, p. 235.

Then, while the contaminated masses methodically disintegrate, the escaping gases are successively transformed into a single file of butterflies.³⁶⁶

In 'The Spider', the speaker's ideal possible redemption of speech is less concerned with hinting at the majesty of speech, or the surreality of words, than the necessity of repetition for the survival of its talk; that speech renews itself purely by virtue of its mechanism and intrinsic appetite for more: 'my power (simply a function of my body and its appetite) remains! And I shall long since have fled – to try it out elsewhere'.³⁶⁷ Where Ponge respects the durability and proportionate scale of the snail's expression, so here he seems to admire the spider's expression for its ability to return as new, post-destruction. This view of the spider implies that the speech of the object is indestructible in its ability to renew itself through its language, through the automatic verbal nature of its body, that is, its natural compulsion to secrete, as opposed to humankind's compulsion to destroy, or remain unable to produce language as if from the beginning. Where the spider recollects herself through repetition, and a dependence on being able to repeat her discourse caused by her insatiable appetite, the narrator's answer in 'Hysteria' to overcoming the threat of destruction is to concentrate on an object. Again, in this respect hope lies in the domain of the object rather than the subject. The narrator chooses to fix his eyes on her breasts motivated by the conviction, however desperate, that 'if the shaking of her breasts could be stopped' perhaps order could be restored.³⁶⁸ As he is making this remark while her body is moving, one could infer that the act of observation is not only crucial to bringing life to the inanimate but also to the inverse – essentially bringing death to life that order may be restored to what we cannot otherwise control, and that conscious observation is a crucial means of control.

³⁶⁶ Ponge, 'The Fire', in *The Power of Language*, p. 93.

³⁶⁷ Ponge, 'The Spider' in *Francis Ponge: Selected Poems*, p.169.

³⁶⁸ T.S. Eliot, 'Hysteria', p. 29.

Observation, however, seems to be a substitute for speech, as speech serves merely to enhance the hysteria. Through being unable to speak at the beginning of the poem, the subject in 'Hysteria' loses the power of objective observation, but through close study at the end, he hopes to regain the power of speech. It is significant that the point where the waiter speaks marks the transition in the poem between hysteria and the desire for control. The repetition of the waiter's language, therefore, serves as an ambiguous space between calm and chaos. The fact also that it is such a simple invitation, repeated twice ('If the lady and gentleman wish to take their tea in the garden, if the lady and gentleman wish to take their tea in the garden'), and spoken so plainly, serves to add to the disturbance of the poem. If the invitation had not been repeated thereby sustaining the trembling movement of the poem, the waiter would represent simplicity and an untroubled moment of speech. In terms of the wider connotations of speech, the waiter's insistence that they move outside also implies social embarrassment and the inappropriateness of certain acts of expression in particular social situations, that is, the categorisation of ways of communication, and hierarchies of speech, of which both Eliot and Ponge were aware.

Stephen Spender remarks on Eliot's approach to speech, and how his inclusion of ordinary speech in his work is exemplified in 'The Wasteland': 'He wrote about a subject which was not considered poetic and Eliot wrote in the kind of language which people actually used in conversation in the streets'.³⁶⁹ Ponge's equivalent to this was his desire for his simple rhetoric of objects, to be read 'by members of an unhappy, unfortunate class'.³⁷⁰ The prose poem in this respect was an apposite form, as the use of contemporary speech was an important resource for the prose poem throughout its history. Murphy discusses this in relation to American and French prose poetry:

³⁶⁹ Video: T.S Eliot, 'Voices and Visions' (New York, 1988.)

³⁷⁰ Ponge, *Soap*, p. 47.

In Twentieth-century American poetry...the prose poem becomes a vehicle for bringing ordinary speech into the poetic idiom; it is a field where the poet can rehearse 'ordinary' prose rhythms, patterns and expressions. This is true, as well, for the Nineteenth-century 'classics' by Baudelaire and Rimbaud, among others. This interest in contemporary speech is clear in Baudelaire's desire that his prose poems catch the music of modern urban consciousness.³⁷¹

'Urban consciousness' like 'Hysteria' is a space of two worlds, not only of prose and poetry, but of speech and mutism, of public and private discourse, of the everyday and the surreal, of reason and un-reason and of two people, male and female. What 'Hysteria' does not purport to be, in relation to 'The Spider', is an overt, or controlled conversation between the object, and or subject, and the reader. As Kahane notes:

In presenting a discursive embodiment of hysteria as poetic object, Eliot distances his voice as controlling author from that of the hysterical speaking subject. 'Hysteria' is, of course, not a narrative but a kind of interior dramatic monologue; the relation of reader to text is unmediated; we are given neither commentary nor context for the devastating effects of the woman's body on the speaker.³⁷²

It is more apparent that where 'The Spider' and 'Hysteria' interrelate is through their explorations of the subject/object and speech, the language of the poem, and indirectly of the author himself.³⁷³ Murphy goes on to draw brief attention to the significance of Eliot's choice of this 'morally ambiguous form' for a subject which rests on threat, vulnerability and sexual anxiety experienced among men during the First World War: 'the fears of acting like a woman, of not measuring up to manly expectations'.³⁷⁴

This anxiety is manifest in 'Hysteria' not only in the focus on the breasts as both a redemptive and threatening object, but through the loss of perspective, in the sense of

³⁷¹ Murphy, *Tradition of Subversion*, pp. 41-42.

³⁷² Kahane, *Passions of the Voice*, p. 129

³⁷³ This is not to be explored any more crudely than Ponge's difficulty with speech in relation to speech in his poems, but likewise it is significant on some level, that 'Hysteria' was 'composed not long after Eliot's marriage to Vivien Haigh-Wood, which quickly proved to be unhappy; a failure often blamed on Vivien's own nervous disorders.' (Cited in Murphy, *Tradition of Subversion*, p. 56.)

³⁷⁴ Murphy, *Tradition of Subversion*, p. 56.

moving from an object to a relative object or subject. Instead, our focus shifts within the poem itself and around the spectacle only, so, for example, from the 'unseen muscles' to the breasts. Is this for the purpose of claustrophobia, or is it that language is so powerless that it cannot find any correlative? The answer, based on a first reading, seems to be found in the nightmarish fact that it is what it is and nothing can compare to the situation because that is not the point. The poem, on the one hand, is terrifying because the narrator's experience of hysteria is not compared to anything; there is no objective correlative and instead our focus is kept circulating around the details of the object. On the other hand, however, by the end of the poem it is precisely this lack of shift 'outside' of the poem that provides the 'speaker' with the hope of retaining control, and that by focussing rather than escaping or comparing, he can hold onto the life that he has. As Kahane puts it: 'This shift in focus...is an attempt to halt his disintegration through visual control of an object'.³⁷⁵

As a visible object subject to the gaze, the shaking breasts can be 'stopped' by a focused act of attention; similarly the shards of the afternoon, a reflected projection of the speaker's own fragmentation can be collected and ultimately composed as contained object – the very objective correlative that is the poem.³⁷⁶

The object poem, therefore, can also be seen as an inversion of what 'Hysteria' indicates in terms of the external as being in motion and the internal as a point of stillness, of death. For the object poem, like the majority of its object-subjects, is still on the outside and can be seen to move as it is looked at, and scrutinised. In this respect, the object poem is a natural progression from the prose poem which 'having no necessary exterior framework, no meter or essential form, must organise itself from within'.³⁷⁷

The question, and ambiguous answer, of how to overcome annihilation are intriguing parts of the endings of both poems. Each poem concurs that in order for the

³⁷⁵ Kahane, *Passions of the Voice*, p. 129

³⁷⁶ Kahane, *Passions of the Voice*, p. 129

³⁷⁷ Caws; Riffaterre, *Prose Poem in France*, p. 181.

threat of this 'visible speech' to be overcome or destroyed, there has to be a promise of re-birth, and they end somewhat suggestively. Destruction, they seem to say is only possible if there is a re-birth of some sort to follow. In the case of the spider, re-birth is inevitable simply because of the spider's appetite for sameness, and the fact that its art is its speech and vice versa, and as long as that continues to be the case the spider shall find other victims. The spider overcomes annihilation because its process works as part of a life and death cycle and it holds the power of this speech; as long as this continues as an absolute, the spider's, and therefore Ponge's discourse-web is indestructible. In the case of 'Hysteria', however, the overcoming of annihilation is more complicated, and less inevitable for two reasons. The first is that the decision which will determine the narrator's salvation (stopping the woman's breasts shaking by the power of his gaze) given the level of hysteria on the woman's part, is at best, a risk, and the effect, therefore, that his attempt at control will have on the situation is more unpredictable, than assured. The second reason concerns Eliot's use of the prose poem form. Arguably, Eliot is taking advantage of the unfamiliarity of the form at the time in England and the undoing of the conventional poetic line, and by writing about 'Hysteria' in the context of this fairly unrecognisable form feeds into another kind of panic – that of the reader when confronted with a form in which one would have been unsure of where he/she was. Where Ponge's spider resists its own silence and death through the natural process of consumption and secretion, Eliot's subject is less redeemed by his own action of focussing on the woman's movement to establish stillness, than he is rescued by Eliot's own use of the form that contains him on a formal, rather than emotional level. If annihilation is overcome, it is through Eliot the writer of the prose poem, and his symbolic as well as formal use of the form, rather than through the subject's decision:

If the speaker moves to contain through his focus on the visible female form his inchoate apprehensions of self-dispersion, one can argue that as poet Eliot makes

the same move, containing dispersion by formally embodying it in the poem's mimesis of hysteria, in its purposeful undoing of the old poetic line.³⁷⁸

The undoing of the old poetic line performed by the prose poem creates a new kind of visual containment which is informed by the poet's overriding discipline of remaining attentive to the object throughout the poem's subtler dispersions, encircling the object closely in order that the narrative does not become poetic prose, or a short-short story. Unlike Eliot's poem, however, Ponge's open texts do not adhere to the same visual rules, or even length criteria, of the typical block paragraph of the prose poem. Consequently, rather than remain faithful to the object itself, and encircling and holding onto the object's 'fur', to recapitulate Bly for a moment, the poem becomes possessed by another kind of movement intoxicated by the confusions of where Ponge's own tongue crosses and tries to separate itself from the 'rhetoric' of the object. Containment of form and of language, are thus undone in the open texts and Ponge's verbal clashes move from the realm of juxtaposed words to strange hybrids of human, object and language. Hysteria exists in these texts, but in a far more sinister version, as the focus shifts violently between Ponge's unconscious and conscious betrayal of the voice of objects, and the inability to restrain his own tongue at the expense of things themselves.

³⁷⁸ Kahane, *Passions of the Voice*, p. 129.

Part Two: The Monsters of Speech

Chapter Seven: The Closed Text

Where Part One was predominantly a biographical study of Ponge's relationship with speech, and looked at emotional and contextual factors which may have influenced his choice of language, object and the form of the prose poem, Part Two probes more deeply into the poems themselves to reflect back the verbal transitions in his life through his creative voice. The crisis of speech that is witnessed in crucial moments of Ponge's life from his oral exam failure through to his inability to talk adequately about his friend Leynaud, in this Part is discussed in terms of its creative manifestation. The relationship, therefore, between his spoken and written voice is seen from an artistic rather than a biographical perspective. The charting of Ponge's neuroses which build up to something close to hysteria in the poet's voice in Part One, here becomes a study of the monstrous in Ponge's work, from his description and choice of object in the early poems through to his longer meditations on where his spoken voice interferes with and eventually becomes part of the objects themselves. If the first Part showed Ponge's inability to put a brake on his subjectivity, the following sections show the overwhelming repercussions of this failure, with the growing awareness that these silent things are potentially violent reflections as well as catalysts of his unquiet voice.

The Loch Ness Monster

For a poet whose predominant focus was on the real world of things, the very idea that monsters or anything remotely monstrous seems about as likely to appear in Ponge's work as a personal event from his family life. However, as early as 1917, when Ponge was only eighteen years old, there is a line from a paragraph he wrote which indicates that the

monster was not only a part of his writing, but was a motivating factor to write in the first place. Higgins acknowledges this paragraph as containing the 'words which lay the foundation for his adult work'.³⁷⁹ The line concerns Ponge's anger towards humankind, and what he calls, the debauched and 'hideuse' society which it created. It reads: 'Que l'homme est un monstre par rapport aux enfants' (That man is a monster in comparison to children).³⁸⁰ In the sense that this is one of the few times that Ponge mentions children in his writing, this statement is atypical, as well as chilling, but it is unnervingly typical of his bitterness as a young man, and in his later work, this anger does not so much transform man into a monster as it serves to observe the monstrous in objects. Although Ponge's later texts exemplify what I call the monstrous in his work, it is apparent in some of his early texts that Ponge was already observing a kind of monstrosity in nature.

In relation to the hybrid form of the prose poem itself, the fact that three of its main protagonists and initiators, Aloysius Bertrand, Charles Baudelaire and Arthur Rimbaud, all delved into the nightmares of human nature, frequently citing devils, fairies, giants, and people as savage monsters in their prose poems, suggests that the form lends itself to the monstrous quite naturally. The prose poem has also been directly compared to the Loch Ness monster by George Barker in his short study of the prose poem, a text also discussed in Nikki Santilli's book on the status of the English prose poem, which is the only full-length publication on the English prose poem available, the genre's position in the UK indicated by the first part of her title: Such Rare Citings.³⁸¹ The prose poem's rare position in literature in general is precisely the standpoint that Barker takes, and hence his choice of monster for his comparison:

³⁷⁹ Higgins, *Francis Ponge*, p. 2.

³⁸⁰ Ponge, cited in Higgins, introduction, *Francis Ponge*, p. 2 (originally cited in Jean Thibaut, *Francis Ponge*, p. 29.)

³⁸¹ Nikki Santilli, *Such Rare Citings: The Prose Poem in English Literature* (Madison N.J.: London; Cranbury, N.J.: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press; Associated University Presses, 2002).

Like the Loch Ness monster the prose poem is a creature of whose existence we have only very uncertain evidence. Sometimes it seems to appear like a series of undulating coils, out of the dithyrambs of Walt Whitman; several French critics claim to have taken photographs of this extraordinary beast, and a great many American poets possess tape recordings of the rhapsodies it chants up from the depths of the liberated imagination....Where is this phenomenal animal?...What is this monster really like?³⁸²

Written in 1985, the point of view of this document now seems slightly dated given that there are now published anthologies of the prose poem, using the works of American, Russian, Spanish, and French writers. The English prose poem, however, is still a comparatively rare phenomenon. Barker's comparison of the prose poem to something monstrous is interesting, precisely because of the fact that the monster is both a mythical and marginalized part of culture and literature. The prose poem to Barker is very much a form that acts outside of literature, one that subordinates and sacrifices certain essential characteristics of poetry, rather than intensifying and enhancing what we know of the poetic form and style:

When we read prose which exploits our imaginative responses more than our rational responses we are reading a prose poem. This is prose in which the meaning has been subordinated to the analogical or metaphorical implications. It is a poem with two wheels instead of four. The two missing wheels of the prose poem are, first, the recurrent rhythms of versification, and, second, the emotional intensity engendered in the reader by these recurring rhythms...a prose poem is a poem that abstains from incanting or casting a spell.³⁸³

Barker thus moves from comparing the prose poem to something mythical or magical, to denouncing the prose poem as a form that is lacking in magic, accusing it of being deficient as far as a bewitching and spell-like use of language and sound is concerned.

In spite of his initial mocking tone, overall, Barker draws attention to the importance of the hybrid and marginal nature of the prose poem, which arguably were the main characteristics that influenced other anti-traditional movements within

³⁸² Barker, *The Jubbub Bird*, p. 1.

³⁸³ Barker, *The Jubbub Bird*, pp. 4-5.

European literature. Indeed, the prose poem's marginal approach to genre is not dissimilar to that of the later Post-War French writers, particularly Alain Robbe-Grillet, Nathalie Sarraute and Jean-Paul Sartre, all of whom practised, during the 1950s, a form of antiliterature, or nonliterature. These writers encompassed in their writing a variety of fresh literary terms – among them 'l'école du regard',³⁸⁴ translating as the 'school of the look' – all of which were part of their subordination of the traditional novel's priorities, particularly linear narrative progression, and decision to focus instead on objects. If we use a popular understanding of the monster as existing in the margins of society and engendering a threat to a central and established sense of order, these writers in their exclusion of the conventional novel's development and sustainability of the story's plot, and character development, represent a comparable contest to pre-conceived and well-established notions of literature. Narrative becomes disordered in their texts, and a forced sense of neatness avoided; the chaos, destruction and meaninglessness of their Post-War environment is assimilated into the language itself, producing texts of a sometimes rational and cool tone, but disturbing a scientific attention to the concrete world by focussing on moments that exist somewhere between a conscious and an unconscious use and awareness of language. Sarraute's first book, for example, a series of twenty-four sketches or short texts, *Tropismes*, first published in 1939, was based on the scientific use of the word tropism, but the author re-situates its meaning in language and thought. Tropisms are the things that are not said, that exist prior to speech, but are unable to be captured because of their fleeting nature. In Sarraute's definition of the term:

These movements, of which we are hardly cognizant, slip through us on the frontiers of consciousness in the form of undefinable, extremely rapid sensations. They hide behind our gestures, beneath the words we speak and the feelings we

³⁸⁴ Bettina Knapp, 'Nathalie Sarraute: A Theatre of Tropisms', *Performing Arts Journal*, MIT Press, 1: 3 (1977), 15-27; 17 (original citation: Simone de Beauvoir, *La Force des Choses*, (Paris: Gallimard, 1958), p. 648.)

manifest...while we are performing them, no words express them, not even those of the interior monologue.³⁸⁵

The combination of Sarraute's as well as Sartre's attention to ordinary things and their communication with these hidden moments or sensations provided an unsettling departure from the Nineteenth-century realist novel, and in terms of their lack of focus on linear plot, character development and the format of the traditional novel, gave way to further debates about the distinctions between poetry and prose.

In relation to Ponge's move from short to long texts, for example, note here a contemporary criticism or observation of the prose poem by Charles Simic, which concerns the tension of the prose poem's embodiment not just of two different forms, but via this, two different lengths. This, of course, is based on a generalised understanding that lyric poems are distinguishable from prose in terms of their relative brevity, and for argument's sake, Simic, in his essay which discusses the prose poem, goes ahead with this assumption:

The prose poem is a pure literary creation, the monster child of two incompatible strategies, the lyric and the narrative. On the one hand, there's the lyric's wish to make time stop around an image, and on the other hand, one wants to tell a little story.³⁸⁶

This tension is certainly evident not only in the individual texts themselves, but more so in the movement from the closed to the open texts, and is a significant part of what denotes the monstrous in Ponge's work and how this monstrosity finds a congenial form – born out of the prose poems – in the pieces he wrote on art and artists. The distinction between the closed and open texts which is useful for measuring Ponge's move between forms – or moves within the prose poem form – is given by Jordan in her book on

³⁸⁵ Nathalie Sarraute, foreward, *Tropisms and the Age of Suspicion*, trans. Maria Jolas (London: John Calder, 1963), p. 8.

³⁸⁶ Charles Simic, 'The Poetry of Village Idiots', *Verse*, 13:1 (1996), 7-8.

Ponge's art criticism, in which she probes the relationship between the criticism and the poetry. The following statement implies that the shift marks a different approach in attitude towards chaos and order, that the closed texts are more finished and in this sense, ordered, and the 'open', more note-like and haphazard texts are literally more at ease with the unfinished nature of Ponge's writing and perhaps more in control of his own awareness of the chaos around him, in nature and society:

For Ponge the difference between the closed and the open texts represents the difference between rejection and acceptance of human contingency and finitude. The closed texts typically combat the chaotic, unsynthesized experience of life through the temporary imposition of order. They manifest a certain will to eternity and denial of contingency. By contrast, the open texts embrace and perpetuate the relative. Ponge retains and revels in the chaos of the universe which he imitates with his style and form.³⁸⁷

The line between the two kinds of texts, is not of course, so neat, but rather progressive and witnessed through the appearance and manifestation of the monstrous; in the changing nature of Ponge's language, his use of analogy and inclusion of people, the reader observes the increasing justification for the monstrous as Ponge displays a less controlled approach to chaos and his own position in the text.

Before examining the context where in many ways monstrosity climaxes in Ponge's work, in order to appreciate what is meant by the monstrous in this case, the next section examines where this characteristic began in the prose poems themselves, at a time in Ponge's career when he was writing closed texts and the poems assumed the boxed, paragraph look associated with the prose poem today.

³⁸⁷ Jordan, *The Art Criticism of Francis Ponge*, p. 107.

'The Oyster' and Nausea

Ponge associated the abstract with ideas, which in turn made him feel physically ill: 'Ideas give me a queasy feeling, nausea'.³⁸⁸ To counter this vagueness, Ponge needed to discover language through contrast, verbal analogies, and what Montague translates as 'the clash of words',³⁸⁹ and to show that the struggle in his text is a reaction against perfection that is synonymous with amorphousness and blandness. Imperfection, Ponge suggests, saves one from annihilation, as the surprising juxtaposition of words in language refreshes our notions of speech. As Ponge puts it in his text 'Banks of the Loire' (1941), 'the object is always more important, more interesting [but] the clash of words, verbal analogies is one of the ways to scrutinise it'.³⁹⁰

'The Oyster', (n.d.), in its physical combination of hard shell and soft insides, is a physical manifestation of where the concrete and distinct meets the vague and the strange in Ponge's early poems. Certain images bordering on the monstrous, or what is essentially a threshold between observation and perversion, appear in a few of these shorter texts, but the description of the oyster's 'inside', in 'The Oyster', is a particularly good example of what we experience more explicitly in the later poems and art pieces:

À l'intérieur l'on trouve tout un monde, à boire et à manger: sous un *firmament* (à proprement parler) de nacre, les cieux d'en-dessus s'affaissent sur les cieux d'en-dessous, pour ne plus former qu'une mare, un sachet visqueux et verdâtre, qui flue et reflue à l'odeur et à la vue, frangé d'une dentelle noirâtre sur les bords.

Parfois très rare une formule perle à leur gosier de nacre, d'où l'on trouve aussitôt à s'orner.

³⁸⁸ Francis Ponge, *The Voice of Things*, trans. Beth Archer (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1972), p. 93. The original context of this quotation appears in Ponge: 'My Creative Method', and was composed during a brief stay in Algeria in 1948.

³⁸⁹ Ponge, 'Banks of the Loire', in Preface to 'Pièces: Live Studies', trans. John Montague, *Francis Ponge: Selected Poems*, p. 111.

³⁹⁰ Ponge, 'Banks of the Loire', in preface to 'Pièces: Live Studies', p. 111. NB: In another translation of the same poem, by Cid Corman in *Things* (1971), p. 82, Montague's 'clash' is translated as 'accidence'. In terms of Ponge's scrutiny of language, 'clash' is more purposeful, but 'accidence' draws attention to the more neurotic, and often haphazard nature of Ponge's texts.

Inside, a whole world, both food and drink: under a firmament (strictly speaking) of mother-of-pearl, the heavens above sinking onto the heavens below form a mere puddle, a viscous, greenish sack fringed with blackish lace that ebbs and flows in your eyes and nostrils.

Sometimes, though rarely, a formula purls from its nacreous throat, which is immediately used as a personal adornment.³⁹¹

In the above translation by C.K. Williams, who has focussed on many of Ponge's sea poems, the monstrosity of the object is slightly more apparent than it is in Robert Bly's translation. The latter's translation is safer, more conservative somehow, and in many respects is less in keeping with Ponge's edgy use of language and more suited to his own poem about an oyster included in the same collection, entitled: Ten Poems of Francis Ponge translated by Robert Bly and Ten Poems of Robert Bly inspired by the poems of Francis Ponge. Bly's translation is less invasive, more remote from the oyster and closer to the human's interest in the creature, or the pearl it holds:

Once inside, you will find an entire world, for drinking and for eating: beneath a firmament (to speak properly) of mother-of-pearl, the upper heavens slowly approach the lower heavens, making what is really only a pool, a viscous and greenish pillow that rises and falls as you smell and look, decorated at the edges with a fringe of blackish lace. Occasionally – it is rare – a beautiful expression rises in their mother-of-pearl throats, and you find good reason then to adorn yourself.³⁹²

If we compare the last two lines of each translation, there is a sinister edge and cynicism bordering on contempt in the Williams' version, which seems more appropriate for Ponge's style and attitude at this time towards 'man' and nature. The translation is curt as well as creepy, the image of a 'formula' rather than a 'beautiful expression' purling rather than rising in the 'nacreous throat' far more unnerving a description. Bly's version on the other hand is longer, more drawn-out, and also includes the adjective 'beautiful' which does not appear in the original and seems unnecessarily frilly and explicit.

³⁹¹ Ponge, 'The Oyster', in Francis Ponge: Selected Poems, p. 27 (original is parallel with translation).

³⁹² Ponge, 'The Oyster', trans. Robert Bly in Ten Poems of Francis Ponge translated by Robert Bly & Ten Poems of Robert Bly Inspired by the Poems of Francis Ponge (Canada: Owl's Head Press, 1990), p. 23.

Likewise, his choice of 'pillow', rather than 'sack', and 'decorated' rather than 'fringed' are all words which alter and soften the poem, and bring the oyster closer to a benign, or domestic thing rather than something which is strange, peculiar and unique.

In Williams' version, we have the sense of an implied comparison between something monstrous and an object invading our senses, rather than passively smelling, and looking at the viscous greenish mound of the oyster that represents its mouth. Not only is Williams' translation a clearer illustration of the monstrosity of the oyster's mouth, the kind of mouth you might find in any number of mythical legends and fairy tales, but also in terms of the mouth representing the threshold between the normal and the abnormal (what and how we eat and consume, and the manner and content of what we say and emit, determining to a large extent what is construed as deformed or acceptable human behaviour); the fact that the oyster's 'mouth' is described in a ghoulish manner gives the impression of something beyond the oyster, where the site of ingestion and the sight of language is far from straightforward.

If we take into account what John Stout in his article on Ponge's verbal texts as 'still-lives' has observed of 'the symbiotic relationship between creation and destruction' in Ponge's texts,³⁹³ together with the inextricability of text and object in his work, the food and mouth of this poem can be read as a metaphor for the digestive process of writing, reality and expression. Stout's interpretation of Ponge's use of the object has an almost vampirical slant. Of 'The Oyster', he says that it 'becomes a martyr to its cruel fate',³⁹⁴ and then points to the 'halos' that appear on the oyster's 'envelope' as the hands of the human, and poet, become violent in their attempts to access the oyster and its pearl. He goes on to say that:

Violent actions presented in these poems may be viewed as analogous to the writer's own destruction of objects, his appropriation of their essential qualities

³⁹³ John Stout, 'The Text as Object: Francis Ponge's Verbal Still Lives,' *Symposium*, 47:1 (1993), 50-63; 58.

³⁹⁴ Stout, 'The Text as Object', 57.

through language, man's instrument and means of self-expression... In a sense, the object has thus sacrificed itself to 'feed' literature, the reader's imagination... Literary language... nourishes itself by assimilating reality into itself.³⁹⁵

Finally, he postulates that in general literature's continuous 'ingestion and transformation of reality... may well be viewed as monstrous'.³⁹⁶ For this last statement, Stout also uses Ponge's poem 'Le Feu', as an example of the monstrous in his work. In this poem, fire changes from its original form into a hybrid creature, an 'amoeba-giraffe', a being not unlike the monstrous hybrids found in the margins of medieval art, and, as Stout elaborates, through Ponge's 'double simile, he transforms fire in motion into a monster so odd that it recalls those of no existing bestiary: a creature half giraffe, half amoeba'.³⁹⁷ The poem is extremely short, just five lines long, and this memorable change takes place immediately, albeit expressed within brackets:

(Fire's walk is like that of an animal: it must leave one place to occupy another; it walks like an amoeba and a giraffe, leaping the length of its neck, crawling along on its feet).³⁹⁸

In spite of what the image might look like as, for example, a Dali-esque painting, or as Stout exclaims, 'a creature from some horror film!',³⁹⁹ it is the juxtaposition between the hideous and the beautiful that works as such a motivating factor in these poems, and the energy of these contrasts keeps them alive and is all the more terrifying to read as we approach this trait in the longer texts. The last lines of 'Fire' read:

Then, while the contaminated bulk methodically caves in, the escaping gases are transformed into a peculiar slant of butterflies.⁴⁰⁰

³⁹⁵ Stout, 'The Text as Object', 57.

³⁹⁶ Stout, 'The Text as Object', 58.

³⁹⁷ Stout, 'The Text as Object', 58.

³⁹⁸ Ponge, 'Fire', trans. Andrew Boobier, who has translated three of Ponge's fire poems from *Le Grand Recueil*, but there are only two of them in my edition. For Boobier's version, see: www.english.chass.ncsu.edu/freerverse/Archives/Winter_2003/poems/A_Boobier_on_F_Ponge.html.

³⁹⁹ Stout, 'The Text as Object', 58.

⁴⁰⁰ Ponge, 'Fire', trans. Andrew Boobier.

This image is striking and recalls the 'halos' which occur as a result of repeated 'blows' to the oyster, but it is the specific combination of butterflies and fire which is all the more arresting in the way it appears again in 'The Butterfly' (n.d.). In this short poem, the insect is described as a 'flying match whose flame's not contagious', its 'shrunk rag of a body' a 'tiny sailing ship of the air, which the wind buffets about like a superfluous petal' as 'it vagabonds the garden'.⁴⁰¹ This beautiful but tragic set of changes in the butterfly's delicate form ends with a ghostly image of loss; a marginal thing that in its humiliated shapelessness is not only lost, but whose past form seems set on haunting its current state, the caterpillars described earlier in terrifying detail, and perhaps coincidentally, resembling Fautrier's hostages, and Giacometti's burnt and starved looking figures:

But as the caterpillars all had their heads blinded and blackened their torsos emaciated by the veritable explosion from which their symmetrical wings blazed up,

The erratic butterfly now only alights, or at least so it seems, haphazardly.⁴⁰²

Possibly one of the darkest butterfly tales in poetry, this poem's idea of metamorphosis, relative to Ponge's hopes and failures within language, is beautifully crafted – the rises, falls and sacrifices as part of the collecting and rejecting process of writing brilliantly realised, especially in the following paragraph, the only mention of a human being, carefully and subtly used so as not to intrude on the collective of tiny monstrous forms, mislaid in this nameless garden. Here the butterfly as flame 'arrives too late, after the flowers have bloomed', but it continues regardless, like someone who has lost their job, but refuses to break the habits of their trade out of pride, shame, or anger:

Never mind: like a maintenance man it checks their oil one after the other. It sets the shrunk rag of a body it still carries with it on their summits, and avenges its protracted, shapeless humiliation as a caterpillar at their feet.⁴⁰³

⁴⁰¹ Ponge, 'The Butterfly', in Francis Ponge: Selected Poems, p. 47.

⁴⁰² Ponge, 'The Butterfly', p. 47.

In both 'The Oyster' and 'The Butterfly', the aspects, even scenes of violence, loss, greed and sacrifice rightfully attributed to the poems need to be contrasted with what Ponge says of his own creative process, not only to cite another contradiction between his poetry and poetics, but to accentuate the way in which violence and monstrosity are manifest in his poems in spite of his own awareness of his work or artistic intentions. I am thinking here of Ponge's memory as a school-boy blowing into bottles and using this process as an analogy for listening to the sound of each object, and recording that sound in words in order to do justice by the particularity of the object itself.⁴⁰³ 'The Oyster', however, in its allusion to monstrosity and violence indicates that both language and objects do not yield easily to anyone, writer nor passer-by. Through this, both object and language become deformed, uneasy and resistant to the metamorphosis inflicted upon them for the satisfaction of a writer or collector. It seems in this poem that listening itself is what is really sacrificed – subordinated to the visual, the oyster becomes imbued with the frustration that transpires from what we cannot see.

In alignment with the time and literary atmosphere in which Ponge was writing, the oyster is closely related to a passage from Sartre's *Nausea*, in which Roquentin, the main protagonist, seems to demonstrate what Ponge was trying to achieve in his aim to listen to and assume the object's voice. In the following part of his life, Roquentin has decided to discontinue his book on a character upon whom he was exceptionally dependent. The effect is one of confusion – liberation from himself, but identification with an other – which begins as a peculiar, and claustrophobic empathy and then turns into a scene which describes a disturbing existential loss of parts, rather than the whole of himself. At first he is consumed:

⁴⁰³ Ponge, 'The Butterfly', p. 47.

⁴⁰⁴ See Gavronsky, 'Interview with Francis Ponge', in *Poems & Texts*, p. 39.

The thing which was waiting has sounded the alarm, it has pounced upon me, it is slipping into me, I am full of it... I am the Thing... I exist... Gently, gently. There is some frothy water in my mouth. I swallow it, it slides down my throat, it caresses me – and now it is starting up again in my mouth, I have a permanent little pool of whitish water in my mouth – unassuming – touching my tongue. And this pool is me too. And the tongue. And the throat is me.⁴⁰⁵

This metamorphosis from the human to a thing, in theory, is what Ponge set out to do in terms of capturing in language something of the other through it, rather than through himself, but it is more blatantly executed in Nausea. In contrast to Sartre's ability in Nausea to get inside the thing, albeit because of a feeling of invasion rather than identification, Ponge's oyster keeps him well and truly outside of his ambition. Again, I cite Williams' translation here rather than Bly's as it reads as a more appropriate, or convincing account of the violent and difficult act of capturing the object in words:

The Oyster is about as large as a medium-sized pebble, but rougher looking and less uniform in color, brilliantly whitish. An obstinately closed world, which however, can be opened: grasp it in the hollow of a dishcloth, use a chipped, not too sharp knife, then give it a few tries. Prying fingers cut themselves on it, and break their nails: crude work. Blows mark its envelope with white circles, sort of halos.⁴⁰⁶

Bly's translation deflates the intensity wrought by the writer's struggle, in a somewhat more literal and clumsy phrase. Instead of 'prying fingers' we have 'fingers that are curious', and the sharpness of 'crude work' is lengthened or over-explained in Bly's, 'it's not an elegant task'. Finally, where as a reader one feels the physical impact of 'blows mark its envelope with white circles' in the confidence and simplicity of Williams' syntax, Bly's version is more hesitant and somehow less engaged, or engaging: 'The knocks you give it leave whitish rings on the shell'. What is significant about both translations together, however, is the individual narrative they tell on the one hand of violence and

⁴⁰⁵ Jean-Paul Sartre, Nausea, trans. Robert Baldick (England: Penguin Books Ltd, 1965), p. 143.

⁴⁰⁶ Ponge, 'The Oyster', in Francis Ponge: Selected Poems, p. 27.

determination to penetrate the object, and on the other hand, the uncertainty involved in the process. Both narratives jointly are suggestive of a conflation between anger and neurosis that sees its full expression in the open poems, and is hinted at in 'The Oyster', as a poem in its own right, but also because of the way it feeds into other texts, like Nausea, which identify the object with a sense of alienation and the monstrous.

To return, then, to the above extract from Nausea where we witness the image of a mouth, akin to Ponge's oyster, the proximity of monstrosity and where the place of speech is played out through Sartre's observation of what happens to language in relation to the idea and position of self and other. The movement from Roquentin's identification or consummation with what could be Ponge's oyster from its own point of view, to an image of uncanny animalistic monstrosity that is situated more outside of the self, is so closely juxtaposed that it is hard to discern whether the monstrous to these writers is something the writer sees in the object, or is that which the thing reflects back to the writer. The answer perhaps is both, and the whole point an uncomfortable exploration of the relationship between writer, writing and world, but it is also interesting to note that whereas with Ponge it is the verbal that is reflected back through his written evocation of the monstrous, with Sartre's Roquentin it seems to be thought that leads him to these monstrous fantasies and identifications. The extract below demonstrates what he sees at the end of his own arm after losing himself in the pure experience of existence. The point of view is interesting as Roquentin seems to occupy both a position of control and lack of control as his hands and arms assume the body of an animal:

I see my hand spread out on the table. It is alive – it is me... It looks like an animal upside-down.... My hand turns over, spreads itself out on its belly, and now is showing me its back... you might think it was a fish, if it weren't for the red hairs near the knuckles. I feel my hand. It is me, those two animals moving about at the end of my arms... wherever I put it, it will go on existing.⁴⁰⁷

⁴⁰⁷ Sartre, Nausea, p. 144.

This combination of human and nature comes about as a result of Roquentin not just thinking, but either thinking too much, or too little. It is both excess and a sense of the incomplete that seems to lead to the monstrous in both these writers; with Ponge, verbal excess and the unfinished, and with Sartre's character, excess and sketchiness of thought. As Roquentin jumps to his feet, he despairs:

If only I could stop thinking... they stretch out endlessly and they leave a funny taste in the mouth. Then there are the words, inside the thoughts, the unfinished words, the sketchy phrases which keep coming back... Thoughts are born behind me like a feeling of giddiness, I can feel them being born behind my head... the thought grows and grows and here it is, huge, filling me completely and renewing my existence.⁴⁰⁸

The essential difference, with Ponge, of course, is that we rarely get the sense that he loses himself to such an existential extreme in what he is writing – that there is always, even when we witness the poet in the poems, the impression that commentary, even an element of reportage is close at hand. Therefore, although we may not witness in Ponge's poems the same kind of existential identification as Roquentin has with the object, what we do observe is a battle between a desire to know the object's voice without being swallowed by it, and a curiosity about his own voice that surprises him when he thinks he is lost in the object. To remark upon this voice, or not, is the crux of the battle which the next section examines in view of Ponge's ambiguous relationship with anthropomorphism.

'The Frog'

A closed text that has elements of the self-conscious use of language typical of the later open texts, 'The Frog' (1937) is a useful study of Ponge's confusing approach to

⁴⁰⁸ Sartre, *Nausea*, pp. 144-45.

anthropomorphism, as well as his assertion and negation of his own voice in his work. To begin with, Martin Sorrell's discussion of Ponge's negative affirmations in 'The Frog', in which he states that they are a way of giving the reader the 'impression of having come as close as is possible to the essence, the definitive truth of the frog',⁴⁰⁹ needs questioning. I would argue that, rather than the 'essence' of the frog being achieved as a direct and sole result of these positive and negative juxtapositions – if an 'essence' is to be discerned in this poem – it is not so much the frog's as it is the relation between the human, Ponge, nature and the poem. What interests me, above arguing for the separation or non-separation of humans from animals and objects in Ponge's work, is how humankind and nature and language, particularly spoken language, collide in a number of his prose poems, and do so through these negative comparisons. The combination of that which-is-not in order to affirm that which is, and the unnerving hybrids that occur as a result of the close proximities of these comparisons, create a number of other polarities and clashing registers, which lend far more layers to the poem than mere contemplation affords. Sorrell goes on from his observation about Ponge's comparisons, and claims that Ponge's frog poem ends affirmatively and without complications, but I want to offer another way of interpreting the end, that feeds back into Ponge's complex relationship with speech, and shows the ending as far from simple, and less than affirmative.

The poem is simultaneously observational, subjective, and anthropomorphic, as well as alluding to one of literature's most verbally complex and tragic heroines, Ophelia. Most of what we learn in this poem concerns the relation not between things and other things, but things and people, and Ponge himself. There are, of course, ways that Ponge undermines the fact that he is alluding to specifics, in terms of himself as the 'I' and

⁴⁰⁹ Sorrell, *Francis Ponge*, p. 89.

'Ophelia' as Ophelia. This is achieved simply by his use of indefinite and definite articles – 'an' and 'the' – with 'an' appearing before 'Ophelia', and 'the' before 'poet':

Lorsque la pluie en courtes aiguillettes rebondit aux prés saturés, une
naine amphibie, une Ophélie manchote, grosse à peine comme le poing,
jaillit parfois sous les pas du poète et se jette au prochain étang.

When stabbing needlepoints of rain rebound from the sodden fields, an
amphibious dwarf, an Ophelia with amputated arms, no bigger than a fist, springs
up sometimes under the poet's feet and hurls herself into the nearest pool.⁴¹⁰

Although the above translation by John Montague is quite different from that of Cid Corman's below, Corman's notably less violent in its adjectives, the generalising of the subject and the poet in the original remains the same:

When the rain in short slivers bounces in the saturated fields, a dwarf
amphibia, a one-armed Ophelia, hardly as big as a fist, leaps at times under the
poet's steps and plunges into the next pool.⁴¹¹

In spite of the poem's generalisation, its brevity and exactness of observation makes it impossible to ignore the loaded name of Ophelia as well as the fact that we are reading a poem, and that the 'poet' becomes 'I' at the end: 'cette bouche hagarde m'apitoyent à la lâcher' (that haggard mouth inspires such pity that I let her go).⁴¹² These are mere details, however. What is significant about the inclusion of Ophelia, the frog and the poet, is the tale which can be created through how they relate to one another, literally, visually and verbally, and how this combination reveals layers of the monstrous, grotesque and violence in the poem.

In the story of the Frog Prince, the frog speaks in order to try and attain freedom through the princess, and in this sense freedom moves from nature to humans. In *Hamlet*, Ophelia seems to be trapped within a speech that no one understands, but

⁴¹⁰ Ponge, 'The Frog' in *Francis Ponge: Selected Poems*, pp. 130, 131.

⁴¹¹ Ponge, 'The Frog', in *Things*, trans. Cid Corman, p. 18.

⁴¹² Ponge, 'The Frog' in *Francis Ponge: Selected Poems*, p. 131.

other readings suggest that she finds freedom in an irrational voice, speaking through puns, allusions, and riddles. In investigating how Ponge's interest in speech manifests itself in his poems, it is important to ask: where do these aspects of speech meet in Ponge's frog poem and how does their collision create a monstrous discourse that is comparable to the strange collisions Ponge discerns, or creates, between the human and the animal? I propose that instead of the humanised physical features of the frog being listed as prompts which moved him to release the creature, it is the sound of the frog and what emerges from its 'haggard mouth', the frog's speech, that I think urges him to give her freedom:

Goitreuse, elle halète...Et ce cœur qui bat gros, ces paupières ridées, cette bouche hagarde m'apitoyent à la lâcher.

Goitrous, she gasps...And that heart which throbs so heavily, those wrinkled eyelids, that haggard mouth inspires such pity that I let her go.⁴¹³

'Goitrous, she gasps', or in Corman's case, 'Goiterous it pants', is separated from the heart, eyes and mouth by ellipsis in both the original and the translations, and these marks act as a form of visual onomatopoeia by resembling the splashes of the frog's hops, in turn giving the impression of freedom before we are told of its release in words. The ellipses also mimic stones and slow the poem down. They create a pause and a bridge – a penultimate end, which leads one to surmise that there is an equal relationship between speech and freedom, as much as there is a freedom which can occur through an understanding between humankind and nature, in this case manifest anthropomorphically.

However, the idea of freedom, speech and objects being in alliance is questionable in relation to a number of things Ponge has said, to things, as well as about them. When Ponge addressed things directly in his 'Introduction to the Pebble', in effect

⁴¹³ Ponge, 'The Frog', p. 131.

he was drawing up a kind of treaty or bargain between his aims for language and his service to things. As he later questions and answers in his poem 'The Carnation': 'why bother to elicit them? To acquire for the human spirit those qualities of which is it capable and which only its routine prevents it from appropriating'.⁴¹⁴ This in turn is directly related to negative affirmation, which forces the individual to see what he/she is not in terms of language and things, and remind him/her of their potential, and by subversive implication, their laziness or irresponsibility. In relation to my initial point, however, I think that Ponge implies, by the fact that he let the frog go after she spoke, that the frog has served him, armed him with a new word, 'Goitreuse', so he can now let her go. This verbal metamorphosis moves directly from nature to poet and emerges as language, and marks the success of the poet's ambition: to give the thing its voice at the same time as giving Ponge a new phrase for his own. Both the French and the English 'Goitrous' in sound could be the verbal equivalent of the frog itself, but the word is juxtaposed, or expressed with a human emission, 'gasps' in Montague's version and 'pants' in Corman's. Can we go so far as to say that the poem is thereby complete, in that Ponge has succinctly achieved in one word his desire to successfully find a verbal equivalent to the object of the poem itself? This is surely too simple, however, and there is too much in the poem that alludes to verbal discomfort, and that within speech one is constantly struggling between freedom and entrapment. The gasp implies distress, where the pant alludes to breathlessness, but in both cases we witness a physical discomfort with, and during speech – manifest in the features of the frog – that follows on from speech, and implies that there is something strangulating about this meeting between the language of humankind and the language of nature. In addition, 'Goitrous' pertains to the goiter, the uncomfortable swelling of the front of the neck caused by an enlarged thyroid gland which is indicative of iodine deficiency, and in itself not only lends the poem an

⁴¹⁴ Ponge, 'The Carnation', in *Things*, p. 83.

intense level of discomfort and effort, but one which is based on human suffering, rather than that of an animal's.

In his Introduction to the French Poets, Geoffrey Brereton acknowledges Ponge's anthropomorphism, but reads it as 'inverted...with the supposed essence of the object projected back on the human consciousness'.⁴¹⁵ In terms of Ponge giving precedence to the right words of the thing, this is an apposite perception, but there are times when the inversion is reversed again, and not only do we see the human projected onto the object, we also see Ponge himself. Margaret Guiton, in her introduction to Ponge's Selected Poems, has another way of affirming Brereton's point of view: 'Instead of comparing Hegel's dialectic to a plant, [Ponge] compares a plant to Hegel's dialectic'.⁴¹⁶ According to Brereton, however, this does not render Ponge successful in his objective unemotional stance, and far from being convinced that Ponge is a detached observer, he goes so far as to state that 'in most of his work he constantly comments and even moralizes, creating a new, if pessimistic and materialistic didacticism'.⁴¹⁷ But Ponge, however moralistic he may sound, actually considers this resistance as ultimately positive, and is quoted as saying:

I know that the further and more intensively I search for resistance to humans [...] the more luck I will have finding a man [...] with a thousand new qualities [...], finding the man that we will become.⁴¹⁸

This hopeful and optimistic attitude has been noted even in his tendency to describe through negation. Indeed, it seems that the process of this form of 'via negativa' is essential to a positive assertion, both of things and of humankind. Martin Sorrell not only

⁴¹⁵ Geoffrey Brereton, An Introduction to the French Poets: Villon to the Present Day 2nd ed. (London: Methuen, 1973), p. 301.

⁴¹⁶ See Guiton, introduction, in Francis Ponge: Selected Poems, p. xii.

⁴¹⁷ Brereton, An Introduction to the French Poets, p. 301.

⁴¹⁸ Ponge, in Vesna Rodic, "Are There Any Words for Painting?" – Objects and Objets in Francis Ponge's Poetry," Berkeley McNair Journal 8 (2000). Here cited at: <<http://www.mcnaair.berkeley.edu/2000journal/Rodic/RodicEnglish.html>> (original context: Francis Ponge, Méthodes, p. 197.)

elaborates on this point, but continues to assert a positive and hopeful reading of Ponge's approach to nature and language:

It does seem from the negative comparisons that what Ponge is in fact achieving is a positive statement. He suggests that a comparison between an object and something else is not valid, and yet the terms of that comparison generally are close enough to charge the original object with a greater degree of life and clarity.⁴¹⁹

With the above two statements in mind, if part of Ponge's ambition through this process of negation was to bring us closer to the frogness, or quiddity of the frog, and as Sorrell implies, accentuate the essence of the original object, to what extent do the translators help, hinder, or change Ponge's ambition? If we take, for example, three different translations from 'The Frog' of the word 'manchote' (armless) from Robert Bly, Montague, and Corman, two of them especially, I think let this ambition down in progressive stages:

'an Ophelia with amputated arms' (Montague)

'a one-armed Ophelia' (Corman)

'an Ophelia with empty sleeves' (Bly).⁴²⁰

The translations move away from the frog towards the human, starting with Montague's 'amputated arms', Corman's 'one-armed' and finally, Bly's 'empty sleeves', which is the most blatantly anthropomorphic of them all. Bly's image is closer to what clothing would look like without arms, which removes the reader away from the frog into the territory of the human. If it is the case that resistance to humans is a necessary requirement of Ponge's assertion to discover a new 'man', who is more sensitive and responsible towards

⁴¹⁹Sorrell, *Francis Ponge*, pp. 88-89.

⁴²⁰In order of quotation, see Ponge, 'The Frog' in *Francis Ponge: Selected Poems*, p. 131; in *Things*, p. 18, and finally in, *Ten Poems of Francis Ponge translated by Robert Bly*, p. 21.

things, surely it is the responsibility of the translators to mirror this in their choice of words and image. This said, Ponge is ambiguous, and he did seem to want to occupy two worlds at once while drawing attention to their difference – criticizing ‘man’, for ‘his’ voice, praising the voice of things, while forgetting and asserting his own. As Sorrell’s remark sharply accentuates, the division between the language of humankind and that of things is not so conveniently set up for Ponge’s intention:

It is one thing to stand back from the world and to make philosophically and religiously neutral statements about it. It is another to claim that a new use of language will tip the balance in favor of things against man, and allow them to speak for themselves, independently of him. The main problem, then, which arises from the central issue in Ponge’s work is simply that man will not go away on those occasions when Ponge might like him to.⁴²¹

With the latter point in mind, it is interesting to observe what happens when Ponge invites humans into his poems more directly, rather than implicitly. As we observe in the next section, there is the example of ‘The Minister’, in which, as we have seen, Ponge takes a male figure of authority as the subject, but rather than suffering him as an inconvenient influence as Sorrell suggests, Ponge looks at him critically, and sardonically, and proceeds to exaggerate his humanity to such an extent that he is rendered totally absurd, and far from human at all. On the contrary, and in this case, ‘man’ when looked at directly, is pushed out of his human skin into another’s, not of a man, or a new man, but that of an animal. In ‘The Minister’, ‘man’ becomes monster through this kind of exaggeration, and takes on the form not of one creature, but two, part cockroach, part snake. Likewise, language follows suit in terms of adopting an absurd and unlikely appearance, and the reader is pulled further towards the longer poems which transgress

⁴²¹ Sorrell, *Francis Ponge*, p. 142.

boundaries between humans and nature, rather than attempt to create them for the sake of 'siding with things'.

'The Minister'

'The Minister' (1934) is one of Ponge's least known poems, written fairly early on in his career and appearing in his 1961 collection of various texts, among them poems, and essays on modern artists: *Lyres*. The poem is a satire on a Minister⁴²² delivering a speech, and the image which describes the spoken act itself is one of the most striking and useful images or devices for reading and interpreting Ponge's revulsion towards public, or official rhetoric, and his determination to remedy or offer an antidote to what he deems as society's slipshod and misleading use of language. We have discussed this image in relation to Surrealism, but here it is discussed as an essential bridging piece between the short prose poems and the open monstrous texts in terms of his increasingly physical and disturbing approach to the spoken word as effected by the object-subject. As we recall, the description in 'The Minister' is composed of an analogy drawn between something physical (in this case a material object, streamers), and the verbal (a public speech):

C'est quand les phrases du discours qui s'achève, lancées comme des serpents,
enrubannent la statue récente qu'elles lient à la foule, puis flottent comme ces
panaches de fumée dont le vent forme et défait plusieurs fois les nœuds avant de
tout dissiper.⁴²³

⁴²² We assume political, rather than religious, because of the mention of the applauding crowd, the state furniture, and because 'Minister' in France is political, but Ponge blurs the boundaries between politics and religion in the details of the poem, which are a deliberate way of manifesting his play with the word. The 'snake motif' and the sinister alleyway play as prominent a role as the mention of signatures and state furniture. My argument will take advantage of this deliberate confusion, and observe the religious leanings of the poem relative to medieval iconography.

⁴²³ Francis Ponge, 'The Minister' in *Le Grand Recueil: Lyres*, pp. 18-19.

It is when the sentences of the speech, thrown out like streamers, come to an end, beribbon the recent statue which they bind to the crowd, then float like plumes of smoke with their knots tied and untied by the wind which ends by dispersing everything.⁴²⁴

In this context, rather than surreal, the image can be read as super-real, lending the poem a spooky rather than a dream-like atmosphere. The apparitional slant to the image lies in the relationship between the image of the spoken word becoming matter – a floating object that shifts between the innate invisibility of the utterance, through to the material and the transient – and the atmosphere created by the details around the speech.

The manifestation of speech as an object is reminiscent of what Chrysippus (Greek Philosopher, born in 280BC, and co-founder of Stoicism), taught, which was that 'if you say something, it passes through your lips; so, if you say "chariot," a chariot passes through your lips'.⁴²⁵ I allude to Chrysippus because I am interested in the relationship between the fact that his theories of knowledge were largely based on perception, and his rejection of the logic that the impossible does not follow the possible. His statement of the object, chariot, passing through the mouth as the word "chariot" does not, at first, seem an especially empirical view of the world, and indeed in relation to the streamers emitted from the Minister's mouth, both images should be used more figuratively, or symbolically, but instead Ponge's rendition of speech through analogous objects is far more pertinent to what we understand of the term 'exact metaphor'. For example, Ponge does use the word 'comme' (like, or as) in 'The Minister', but begins the sentence with 'C'est quand' (it is when), which indicates that this image is actually taking place as an event. Akin to Chrysippus, Ponge's knowledge and interest is based on perception, rather than pre-conception, and an empirical approach to things and language, albeit combined

⁴²⁴ Francis Ponge, 'The Minister', trans. Michel Delville, in Michel Delville, *The American Prose Poem*, p. 154. (I am quoting this passage again to show the reader a pertinent example of where Ponge is transgressing boundaries, not only between humankind and nature, but also between Surrealism and the concrete use of image in the prose poem.)

⁴²⁵ Cited in Giles Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense*, (New York: Columbia UP, 1990), p. 8.

with language games, though, arguably, the ability to alter language through puns and riddles is an acknowledgment of the plasticity and flexibility of language. One of the obvious differences, between Chrysippus' statement and Ponge's image of the streamers is that the Minister is not directly saying 'serpentins', so what is passing through his lips is not the thing he utters directly, but what Ponge observes in his manner, and the look of his speech. Significantly, the end result is the same – of the subject emerging as object from the speaker's mouth and the concrete manifestation of the utterance as it is spoken.

Arguably, Ponge achieves this on a far more complicated and subtle level than Chrysippus, by using the nature and implications of the Minister's deceptive rhetoric to expose the speaker, and in turn draws on the etymology, sound and look of the word to ensure that something as close as possible to a serpent passes through his lips. It is worth mentioning here another context in which the prose poem has been compared to the monstrous. Baudelaire, for example, used the monster, and more significantly the serpent, as an analogy for his own prose poems. As he says in his famous letter to Arsène Houssaye:

Take out a vertebra and the two halves of my torturous fantasy will join together quite easily. Slice it into any number of chunks and you will find that each has its independent existence. In the hope that a few of these slices will have enough life in them to please and entertain you, I venture to dedicate the whole of this snake to you.⁴²⁶

Coupled with this, and Barker's comparison of the prose poem to the Loch Ness monster, the prose poem's form seems to lend itself to something both illusory and treacherous, in keeping with its double nature. In this respect, Ponge's poem about the Minister is a useful and disturbing analogy for discussions and ideas about the form itself.

⁴²⁶ Baudelaire, 'Letter To Houssaye', in *Poems in Prose*, trans. Francis Scarfe, p. 25.

To begin with, the surface details of the poem are highly informed by subtle mechanisms of sound and image in relation to the main word of the poem, and they render the ground and the air untrustworthy and uncanny. The Minister's shoes, for example, far from being objects which represent a figure of reliability and importance, are each denigrated; in spite of their polished appearance, they denote warning signs, and Ponge points to them as defective characters: 'l'un affectant de n'y prendre garde dans les raclons d'une exposition, l'autre sur le recèlement de poussière des tapis épais d'un salon' (one pretending insouciance among the leftovers of an exhibition, the other on a pile of dust hoarded from thick drawing-room carpets).⁴²⁷ The final image of the poem is again unnerving and enhances the disorder which escorts the superficial authority of the minister's rhetoric: 'Et bientôt les signatures processionnent comme des cafards sur les feuillets qui jonchent en désordre une table du mobilier national' (And soon the signatures line up like cockroaches on pages that are strewn chaotically over a table from the nation's furniture).⁴²⁸ In the centre of the poem, the clapping of the crowd is described as 'frenzied' (an auditory equivalent of being led astray, towards hope, by charm), and the Minister enters the poem through 'an imposing covered entrance resting on two pillars' in the shape of an M, 'at the opening of a twisting SINISTER alley cut off at its origin by a signboard showing an upright snake' wearing a 'black robe' with a rectilinear cut, which makes him look like a 'cockchafer':⁴²⁹

Un habit noir à pans longs, de coupe rectiligne, le fait ressembler à un hanneton. Au besoin, quelque applaudissement de mains frénétique accuse le rapprochement.

A black coat with long tails, of rectilinear cut, makes him look like a cockchafer. If needs be, some applause of frenzied hands accentuates the comparison.⁴³⁰

⁴²⁷ Ponge, 'The Minister', trans. Anna Reckin. (See also Appendix A, for Reckin's experience of translating Ponge.)

⁴²⁸ Ponge, 'The Minister', trans. Michel Delville, *The American Prose Poem*, p. 154.

⁴²⁹ Ponge, 'The Minister', trans. Anna Reckin.

⁴³⁰ Ponge, 'The Minister', trans. Michel Delville, pp. 153-54.

The consistent citing of insects and reptiles amidst an atmosphere of 'whistling blasts' and exaggerated applause renders the baleful meander of the speech as emblematic of the devil's tongue itself, shifting the shape of its form in the manner of its content.

It is this kind of allusion to monsters, or the monstrous, in this case, literally and metaphorically the serpent, that is distinctive of Ponge's treatment of nature and his indirect inclusion of the human in the portrayal of his objects. Again, *via negativa* is an appropriate term and concept through which to examine his way of seeming to find affirmation in nature and negation in humankind. Ponge's following claim in 'Notes Towards a Shellfish' (c. 1932) appears to be a clear indication and conviction of this:

A lord emerging from his manor is a far less impressive sight than the monstrous claw of a hermit crab glimpsed at the mouthpiece of the magnificent comet which shelters him.⁴³¹

It is predominantly in his poems on nature that one can detect a particular kind of deception in Ponge's method, or intention, to side with things, seeming to begin with the impetus of explicating or exploring humankind and acknowledging, or judging his/her irresponsible use of language, but ending by speaking about him/her sideways. Through this slant manner of combining beings and nature and language – and I am not implying that Ponge is sly with a malicious or distrustful tone – all three things (as they are apparently treated) are rendered, in some way, deformed, or deviate from how they would otherwise stand in more explicit isolation, or juxtaposition to one another. It is this humble, yet determined, approach of Ponge to his work, which underlies the paradoxes, inadequacies, juxtapositions, negative affirmations, and mixed registers of his prose poems. By placing the lord and claw side by side, Ponge is saying simultaneously

⁴³¹ Ponge, 'Notes Towards a Shellfish', in Francis Ponge: Selected Poems, p. 65.

that they are both alike and unlike each other, and it seems as if the poet is using this comparison morally to indicate where humankind is wrong and nature is right. However, my question is: rather than a description of nature in comparison to what it is not – giving Ponge licence or a method through which to express his appreciation of the natural world, and his frustration with the human world – is it not more accurate to note that man imposes his form even more violently on nature through this force of the poet's negative comparisons, aimed at alerting the individual of his/her potential, and lack of responsibility towards language and things?

Ponge denies anthropomorphism in his work, this much is clear, but his poems seem to reveal the opposite of what he has declared in his poetics in this area almost as strongly as he reveals contradictions between his subjective and objective stance. The passion and responsibility he felt towards objects, nature and humankind is evident, although the titles of the poems do not honour the human an obvious place at the summit. Once again, it is not in my interest to draw attention to Ponge's contradictions and to be conclusive about him as an anthropomorphic poet, but rather to observe where the monstrous in his work breaks down the known barriers between nature and humanity, and to observe where the two bleed into one another to form strange objects and hybrid forms, in spite of Ponge's command to allow the object to dictate its own language.

Chapter Eight: The Open Texts (i)

'Via Negativa'

As Ponge looks towards a longer and more 'open' form of writing based on the prose poetry, but focussed on expanding its definition and challenging its form yet further, his relationship with the object and his ambitions for its 'voice' starts to include something else, very much outside of what we might expect from the poet of objects. In a selection of his longer, and more 'open' texts, the poet's handling of objects, alive and dead, renders the thing not only as greater than the object itself, but at times greater, or bolder than life itself, a deviation which accentuates the essence of the thing in question. 'The Carnation' (1941-44), for example, as we have seen from a discussion earlier in the thesis exhibits that essence in a grotesque and repeatedly violent manner.⁴³² This long poem of multiple pages, divided into 15 marked sections, is just one example of an unsettling development in the Pongean text, which sees the poet make direct references, as well as more subtle allusions to something other than the ordinary and natural object, founded on what he has seen (then exaggerated) in the object's relationship to something it is not, thus shifting the focus from the is-ness of things towards the negative of this concept. Below is an extract, similar to what we have read earlier on in the introduction to the thesis, but it is this very repetition of the images which intensifies the discomfort and force of the poem's language:

A marvellous rag of cold satin
a frill abundant with cold sparks
of little tongues of the same tissue
twisted and torn
by the violence of their purposes

⁴³² See my introduction, pp. 15-16. For an interesting comparison between the above image of violence and the mouth in Ponge's 'Carnation' and a passage on the corporeal brutality of the process of speech written by Lucretius, see Lucretius, On the Nature of the Universe, trans. R. E. Latham, pp. 108-109 (Book Four.)

A trumpet choked
by the redundancy of its own cries
with mouthpiece torn by their very violence.⁴³³

Other disturbing images comprised of positive and negative combinations recur, and render some of the poem senseless – for example, ‘panties, torn to lovely shreds, by a young girl who takes care of her linen’, or speaking of the carnation in comparison to other flowers, he ‘reasons’, ‘not that is it mad, but it is violent (though nicely huddled, assembled reasonable limits).’ The purpose of the poem seems to be to wreck any ideas we may have of carnations, and perhaps flowers in general, and to shock the reader not only into experiencing the garden as something alien rather than familiar and domestic, but to undo and redo the words we normally use to describe the flower. In other words, it is part of Ponge’s intention to force the way we assume we can describe things into close contact with how we cannot describe them. Indeed, Ponge states at the beginning of the poem that ‘carnations defy language’ and that he chooses ‘the most indifferent objects possible’ in order to ‘guarantee...[an] opposition to language, [and] to common expressions.’ ‘Mute opposable evidence’ is how he sees the carnation and this is what the poet needs in order to ‘acquire for the human spirit those qualities of which it is capable and which only its routine prevents it from appropriating’.⁴³⁴ In this section, then, I am interested in what happens to Ponge’s language and studies of nature when working in what I perceive as a process of *via negativa*, with particular emphasis on how this transpires in his use of analogy.

Via negativa is primarily associated with the Christian concept that we can only know God through knowing what He is not. It was also used among many Classical philosophers and mystics. In the OED, it is defined as ‘the approach to God in which his nature is held so to transcend man’s understanding that no positive statements can be

⁴³³ Ponge, ‘The Carnation’, in *Things*, trans. Cid Corman, p. 88.

⁴³⁴ Ponge, ‘The Carnation’ in *Things*, pp. 84, 83.

made about it; the way to union with God in which the soul leaves behind the perceptions of the senses and the reasoning of the intellect; a way of denial; so via affirmativa, the approach to God through positive statements about his nature.’ The via negativa, which Pseudo-Dionysius used in the *Mystical Theology*, insists on speaking negatively about God, ruling out that which the divine mystery is not, as a way of speaking indirectly of what the divine mystery is. *Via negativa*, in its use of unknowing and apophasis (the unsaying of a subject or thing) is pertinent to Ponge’s aim to see the object anew through a process of unknowing the object and stripping it of pre-associations. Apophasis, defined in the OED as ‘a kind of an Irony, whereby we deny that we say or do that which we especially say or do’, is very much associated with the Medieval tradition of Christian rhetoric, which, sympathetic to Ponge’s struggle with language through language, is ‘also the science that most emphatically underscores the limitations of human discourse as a means to understanding and representing the true nature of reality’.⁴³⁵

It is my argument that *via negativa* operates in Ponge’s work as a variant of his own use of verbal clashes, and is a crucial part of his conflicted relationship with language. This chapter moves on from the psychological impact of verbal inadequacy as explored in his poems, and observes the extent to which these inadequacies and struggles are similar to the process of *via negativa*, and the various ways they are manifest in the mix of grotesque and the wonderful, the positive and the negative. The notion of *via negativa* is also a useful way of re-observing his fear of the annihilation of speech. For Ponge, perfection is based on paradox and, according to Higgins, it is this kind of ‘tension between qualities which prevents Ponge’s fear of ‘the “annihilating” quality of perfect symmetry.’ Higgins goes on to elaborate on Ponge’s interest in the ‘mind’s paradoxical taste for, and fear of, symmetry’ and that ‘what is frightening and degrading

⁴³⁵ Williams, *Deformed Discourse*, p. 8.

is, of course, not the symmetry or the featureless in itself, but its hypnotising, unvarying, “annihilating” simplicity: as long as the mind can introduce variation and complexity and say no to the thing in itself – whether crystal or ocean – by expressing it in terms of what it is not, as a set of differences or tensions, the threat is avoided’.⁴³⁶

This process of negation and its ability to get closer to the quiddity of the thing that it describes is phrased well in Williams’ book, in which he claims that ‘the monster becomes the fullest aesthetic expression’ of *via negativa* during the ‘development of grotesque art from the Romanesque period onward’.⁴³⁷ In the section on the context of the monstrous, Williams discusses the positive component of negation, which is its freeing of the subject’s qualities, rather than its limiting:

To assert that a subject ‘is-not’ any of its qualities is not to eliminate that quality but to open the subject’s ‘is-ness’ indefinitely: in this kind of negation, a thing is what it is and is-not (merely) what it is, but instead is more than what it is and more than what it is named.⁴³⁸

Although *via negativa* is here looked at in relation to Dionysian negation, I am taking it out of context to relate to Ponge, and what has been said of his work. Esther Rowlands, for example, in her book on Ponge’s wartime discourse notes his tendency towards negatives also in a positive light, as a form of negative affirmation, whereby he is indirectly showing the human what he/she is capable of, by revealing that which he/she is not:

By revealing the incapacity of objects to express themselves, and to, thereby differentiate themselves from each other, his analysis prevails as displaced affirmation of human capacities to instigate this process. It is a radical process which defines a deepened sense of human being through its constant revelations of the alternative void.⁴³⁹

⁴³⁶ Higgins, *Francis Ponge*, p. 132, n. 5.

⁴³⁷ Williams, *Deformed Discourse*, p. 87.

⁴³⁸ Williams, *Deformed Discourse*, p. 33.

⁴³⁹ Esther Rowlands, *Redefining resistance: the poetic wartime discourses of Francis Ponge, Benjamin Peret, Henri Michaux and Antonin Artaud* (England: University of Nottingham, 2000), p. 67.

Other critics of Ponge's writing have also discussed his methods in terms that allude, or bear resemblance to *via negativa*. Higgins, for example, uses the phrase 'description through negation', and Sorrell 'negative comparisons'. What is achieved by these negations, according to Sorrell, is that by describing what, for example, ferns are not, 'is explicitly to see their characteristic quality in dynamic suspension between the conventional representation of a fern and objects never associated with it or one another – a difference'.⁴⁴⁰ Significantly, almost exactly the same observation has been made of the prose poem, one definition by Murphy being 'a prose text that seems to be something which it is not' and a form that 'relies on its difference from other forms of prose for its "identity"'.⁴⁴¹ We assume Ponge was aware of this, and that his treatment of his objects through negation in the form of the prose poem is not a coincidence. What is, however, a strange coincidence, or irony, is the fact that the first of his 'open poems', 'Fauna and Flora', in which he explores this negation, is an example of his move away from the prose poem.

Ponge's Post-War texts herald a significant change in his approach to the distinctions between the subjective and objective, and one of the most crucial reasons for the emergence of the poet in the poem concerns his changing relationship with the prose poem and his experimentation with its form, in his move after the Second World War from short to long prose poems. In terms of how poetic distance and objectivity are recorded in his writing, the reader witnesses a dramatic shift in Ponge's use of expression according to this distinct development of the prose poem, from a closed to an open text. In the former, the qualities of the object are often convincingly mirrored in the words and the rhythm of the poem, whereas in the longer and more open use of the form, the poet steps in and out of the writing, moving between his observation of the object, and self-consciousness of his own use of expression, and consciousness of how each

⁴⁴⁰ Sorrell, *Francis Ponge*, p. 57.

⁴⁴¹ Murphy, *Tradition of Subversion*, pp. 82, 73.

individual object informs and challenges his choice of words. Where Ponge loses the ability to individualise each object, however, becomes apparent in another and more significant reason for his emergence in the poem: his own difficulties with speech, and the fact that each object on some level challenges his fear of silence, and his profound anxiety around his own awareness of his verbal inadequacy.

This change in Ponge's approach to the form of the prose poem demarcates a transition between an early more overt objective stance, to a later (albeit awkward) subjective viewpoint. These observations are not just based on his writing, but take into account certain biographical details and his strong opinions and attitudes towards literary and social change and practice in France, particularly Paris. As Ponge becomes more visible in the poems, verbally drawing attention to his writing practice and struggles within his hopes for new ways of expressing things distinct from his peers, the separation or lack of communication between human and object of the early poems begins to disappear, and by the end of his writing career, the reader is left with an expanse of unnerving hybrids, between writer and reader, prose and poetry, creative and critical writing, and, stranger still, between human, object, and linguistic forms. All that Ponge wanted to name, or re-name, in the end becomes unknowable and unnameable, and his desire for a more truthful relationship between humankind and language through a rediscovery of the object becomes confused with his own difficult relationship with self-expression. Ponge's greatest ambition was his greatest dilemma: wanting to be understood, but less through himself than through the other. In the end, the observer becomes the observed, and the spoken for, the speaker.

'Deformed Discourse'

Ponge's neurosis with language before the Second World War claiming speech made him feel inadequate as well as dirty, and his reliance on writing to make him feel clean and precise, accentuates just one aspect of the writer's personal relationship with language that interfered with, or complicated his ambitions to keep himself out of the object poem. The failure of this ambition, I have suggested above, becomes more apparent as the writing develops and he begins to experiment with the prose poem, moving from early closed texts to open texts which look more like essays, but actually read as a bridge between the object poem and an impassioned monologue which attempts to deflect the self. Ponge the poet and his struggles with the verbal process feature more obviously in the longer poems, and he incorporates more drafts and notes and broken soliloquies into the pieces the older he becomes, and speech and writing begin to merge the looser the form becomes. Ironically, as he got older, Ponge began to overcome his fear of public speaking, but the poems in some ways defy this as the open texts explore the terror of expression more fervently.

Using the poems which best illustrate this, this chapter studies the ways in which the notion of the monstrous is manifest in his work with reference to the idea of a 'deformed discourse', a term which emerges out of the concept of 'via negativa', as used by David Williams in his book on the monster in medieval literature. In his words:

The deformed discourse, as I have called it, finds its original conceptual basis in the pre-Christian tradition of philosophical negation....the more unwonted and bizarre the sign, it was thought, the less likely the beholder was to equate it with the reality it represented...Concepts such as paradox, negation, contrariety, nonlimitation, and related ideas were...attractive and useful in aesthetic speculation...the basic concept of non-being found symbolic representation in the monsters and misshapen fantasies of mediaeval art and poetry.⁴⁴²

⁴⁴²Williams, introduction, *Deformed Discourse*, p. 4.

As Williams says later on in the introduction, stepping in and out of affirmation and negation produces a self-consciousness around language which prohibits pure objective knowledge, and an accepting and unquestioning relationship with words. It is with this key characteristic of a monstrous discourse in mind that Ponge's longer texts, and changing relationship with objects will be examined. In spite of its relevance to an era remote from that of Ponge's, Williams' explanation of a monstrous discourse provides one of the most useful and pertinent means of understanding Ponge's progressive struggle with language in the 'open' texts:

[The] difference between constructing the object to be known through the logical analysis that language makes possible and showing, pointing to that object as it is in itself, is crucial to understanding the function of the monster in mediaeval thought. The Middle Ages understood that our knowledge of a thing is obscured by the fact that our representation becomes confused with the thing itself, and our knowing merges with the known to form a subjective knowledge of the object. It is by emphasizing the subjective aspect of this kind of cognition that modern relativists call into question the possibility of objective knowledge.⁴⁴³

Ponge's self-conscious struggle with language during the shorter, or closed texts, in the longer texts becomes acute, sometimes to the point of violence, and Ponge's focus seems to be less determined by establishing a 'verbal equivalent' of the object, than about observing in nature a correlative for his destructive approach to language. Ponge's observational practice in itself will be under scrutiny, as objectivity gives way to contortions and manipulations of the natural world, and his stance as 'ambassador' for nature's voice, increasingly questionable. On the subject of voice, the monstrous and violent aspects of the longer texts are not so much conveyed in the tone or delivery of the language, as they are in the images and juxtapositions themselves. This is not to say that voice is subordinate to the visual, but there is a sense that the voice is being more

⁴⁴³ Williams, introduction, *Deformed Discourse*, pp.10-11.

controlled than the images, and the combination of Ponge's control over the tone of his voice, and the aggressive, and unnerving choice of descriptive words for the object in conjunction with the long and dense passages, makes for an uncomfortable, and at times sinister read.

To give a brief example of the viciousness of the words, in both French and English the violence comes across most effectively in 'The Pebble', the poem itself riddled with words and images conjuring visions of torture and asylums: 'scissiparité' for what is translated by Guiton as 'schizogenesis'; 'monstrueuse camisole de force' (monstrous strait jacket); 'dramatiques bouleversements intérieurs' (shattering inner dramas) and 'des explosions intimes' (inner convulsions).⁴⁴⁴ This is just one example of a long poem in which Ponge seems to reveal not only a more intense use of the object and language, but an almost apocalyptic and wasteland vision of the earth, full of corpses, mutilated bodies, and remnants of humanity where the only mention of God is an image of one with 'dirty hands', kneading 'stone dough' lumps, 'under the trees.' God is very much brought down to the level of an object, 'dieu' in lower case, and physically engaging with the earth, rather than casting a clear eye over the world from above. The stone god, who in the next line is an 'enormous ancestor', shrinks again to 'a man who has stopped shaving, dug out and filled in by loose earth, incapable of reacting' and rendered mute'.⁴⁴⁵ What was large is now fractured, and what we might consider small in nature takes on the appearance of the human, and with this an increase in size. Of stone resigning to being overtaken by nature, he says:

Their faces and bodies are split apart. Naïveté approaches and settles into the wrinkles of experience. Roses sit on their grey knees and carry on their naïve diatribe.⁴⁴⁶

⁴⁴⁴ Francis Ponge, 'The Pebble', in *Francis Ponge: Selected Poems*, trans. Margaret Guiton, pp. 91, 93.

⁴⁴⁵ Ponge, 'The Pebble', p. 95.

⁴⁴⁶ Ponge, 'The Pebble', p. 95.

These shifts in scale are not only part of the sub-text of Ponge's move between the closed and the open texts, but in terms of content, the conflict Ponge experienced by taking on objects as his main focus in relation to wanting to suppress himself. The shifts in scale from the contained to the vast indicates a sub-narrative of Ponge's own feelings towards being perpetually overwhelmed, frustrated, and humbled by things.

In On Longing, a psychological, literary and cultural observation of objects in literature, Susan Stewart discusses the relation of narrative to objects, and language to experience, focussing on manifestations of scale in literature, and helps put these conflicts into perspective. Her chapter on the gigantic as metaphor for 'infinity, exteriority, the public and the overly natural' looks at the scale of the human in nature and the feeling of being overwhelmed by its vastness, of being surrounded by nature, moving through it, rather than it moving through us.⁴⁴⁷ In this respect, the giant is seen as container, where the miniature represents being contained. This is quite a different approach from Williams' interpretation of the giant as representing 'excess, superfluity, and abnormal strength'⁴⁴⁸ and defying the control that 'container' implies:

Whereas the pygmy or dwarf negates the norm of bodily quantity and proportion because it is a form that is too restricted and too contained, the giant denies the norm by violating the concept of containment altogether. The giant shows us what would be possible if the body were not a container and if being were not limited.⁴⁴⁹

In 'The Pebble', there is not a consistent exploration of human beings as either miniature or giant within nature. Instead, the poem is designed so that any fixed idea we may have of humankind's position within the natural world is upset, the poem moving between the human as diminished by stone, and stone as diminished by the human.

⁴⁴⁷ Susan Stewart, On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection (USA: Duke University Press, 2003), p. 70.

⁴⁴⁸ Williams, Deformed Discourse, p. 113.

⁴⁴⁹ Williams, Deformed Discourse, p. 113.

In his choice of analogy, his comparison of small forms to the gigantic, his selection of images and words to depict what are otherwise benign aspects of nature, Ponge creates bizarre, dark and surreal forms and hybrids of nature. He then undercuts the surrealism by employing an almost matter-of-fact tone, which is disturbing and haunting in relation to the content. In his focus on plant life, for example, as demonstrated in 'Fauna and Flora' (1936-37), the directness of the tone in which the images are delivered confounds our sense of disbelief at the strangeness of the objects themselves, the most disquieting of which are those that convey botanical forms of an anthropomorphic nature. Again, such combinations between animals, humans and plant life occur in Williams' study of medieval images, among them trees whose 'leaves become animate and walk about when they have fallen to the ground' and the 'Vegetable Lamb of Tartary',⁴⁵⁰ a lamb whose feet do not touch the ground on account of its body growing out of a stalk. Like these images which defy our sense of belief, Ponge's longer poems destabilize the possible reality of natural forms by describing them in terms of what they are not, namely as human, which ironically serves to magnify the significance of humans in his work.

To keep in mind throughout this chapter, in line with Ponge's reliance on the etymology of the object and the writing process, are two points of a coincidental nature. The first is that 'monster' is a derivation of the Latin verb, 'monstrare', which means to show, make known or point out, and the second, that 'utter' shares with this meaning, to make known or show. Ponge fuses these meanings together in these poems. The poet seems to be continually trying to reach out into speech, to make something hidden or unheard, as revealed and heard, not unlike Sarraute's aim in 'Tropisms'. He wants to utter rather than remain silent, and to demonstrate the process of expression as part of this outing of speech and thought. Both monster and utterance reach beyond themselves, are

⁴⁵⁰ Williams, *Deformed Discourse*, p. 208.

outward movements, and in their shared meaning, Ponge's work pertains to both. His ability to enlarge the small through comparison is equally applicable to notions of the monstrous, and this movement from the small to the large is indicative of words moving, and growing from an inner to an outer expression. As part of this, the next section examines one of Ponge's most significant objects relative to the act of speaking, and the repercussions of the repetitions and paralyses that occur as part of seasonal changes and cycles in nature.

'Fauna and Flora'

The movement and growth of plant life as an analogy for language is one of Ponge's most frequented correlations, or 'verbal clashes'. In an interview with Gavronsky, Ponge reflects on the first time that he publicly exposed this comparison: in 1947, five years after the publication of Le Parti pris des choses, the collection that most carefully expounds this fascination. The extract below is a good description and explanation of what 'Fauna and Flora', his longest exploration of language and plant life in the collection, attempts to do in poetry:

As early as my first public speech, entitled 'Tentative Orale', I said that one could compare verbal expression to a forest... We too grow leaves. We push words out and it is like the spring of speech. But then again one only has to consider autumn, that is, the time when leaves fall. One can also consider words, which I am in the process of saying, as falling leaves, leaves made to fall, and that if I want to describe the clearing in the forest, then the leaves have got to fall. So that, instead of the spring of speech, it will become the autumn of speech, and I can, at will, I can be optimistic and even pessimistic, you understand – whatever I want, simply by changing the word....With words, you can change things in a radical way. You can change evil into good.⁴⁵¹

One of the main features that this reflection demonstrates is Ponge's interest in writing in positives and negatives, through which he has created some rather incongruous

⁴⁵¹ Francis Ponge, 'From an interview with Francis Ponge – Serge Gavronsky', Books Abroad, 48:4 (1974), 680-687; 682.

analogies. However, the purpose of these juxtapositions is not only to surprise the reader, but also to challenge our understanding (or Ponge's consideration of our lack of understanding) of objects in relation to other objects, and even more cogently, the extraordinary differences and similarities between human nature and the living and inanimate things that surround us. What is striking in 'Fauna and Flora', primarily due to Ponge's use of positives and negatives, is the way our attention is drawn to disparities and parallels simultaneously, and plant life and human nature are not so much illuminated against each other, as they are strangely compounded. Although in theory the poem explores Ponge's interest in opposites and the differences between the stability of plants and trees in relation to the restlessness of people and animals, what in fact occurs through these polarities are images and startling fusions which belie the essential differences between humans and plants. Before giving an example from the poem itself, below is Ponge's summation of these fundamental differences, in a discussion he had with Dr Sutton, an ornithologist who read Ponge and was deeply impressed by him. In this interview, Dr Sutton questions why Ponge had dedicated so few texts to birds. Ponge replied,

that he preferred plants and trees to animals and human beings because the first two had found their definite place in nature, whereas the latter two search a lifetime for their final resting place in a kind of restless slalom race.⁴⁵²

'Fauna and Flora', however, does not follow this clear distinction between animal and human life and plants, and as a result exposes the reader to some rather peculiar fusions between the stable and the unstable, the rooted and the nomadic, and further complicates Ponge's discriminations. The way in which these fusions, or perversions of these differentiations are executed is reminiscent again of *via negativa* as a process of gaining knowledge of the thing's truth or quiddity through unknowing, and challenging

⁴⁵² Ponge, in Ivar Ivask, 'Notes Towards a Francis Ponge in Norman', *Books Abroad*, 651.

language by denying all we know about an object. As Williams puts it, truth is gained by 'building up propositions and assertions about a subject and then dismantling them through progressive negation, so as to free the object of knowledge from all characteristics not inherent to it, but imposed by the human mind in the process of knowing and representing'.⁴⁵³

It is exactly Ponge's assertions, more specifically his assertive tone and clear prose, when talking in negatives about flora, that is so effective in dismantling any given notions we might have about the differences between plants and, as we will see, 'vagrant kinsmen', the latter, we assume, denoting both animal and human life. Below is an example that occurs very early on in the poem, of Ponge's emphatic prose which builds an image of what flora are 'not' with such immediacy, that the reader is left unsure of what to believe:

Différents en ceci de leurs frères vagabonds, ils ne sont pas surajoutés au monde, importuns au sol. Ils n'errent pas à la recherche d'un endroit pour leur mort...

Chez eux, pas de soucis alimentaires ou domiciliaires, pas d'entre-dévoration: pas de terreurs, de courses folles, de cruautés, de plaintes, de cris, de paroles. Ils ne sont pas les corps seconds de l'agitation, de la fièvre et du meurtre. ...Sans aucun souci de leurs voisins, ils ne rentrent pas les uns dans les autres par voie d'absorption. Ils ne sortent pas les uns des autres par gestation.

They are not, like their vagrant kinsmen, superfluous adjuncts to the world, intruders on the earth. They don't have to wander about looking for a place to die...

They don't have to worry about food and lodging, they don't devour one another: no mad pursuit, no struggle to escape, no cruelties, laments, cries, words; no fret, no fever, no murders.

...They pay no heed to their neighbours for they neither ingest nor gestate one another.⁴⁵⁴

Isolating this section gives an almost apocalyptic image of the world as it would look like ruled by plants wandering the earth looking for rest, but being compelled to perform as people, and, as the end suggests, repeating one of the most extreme human acts:

⁴⁵³ Williams, *Deformed Discourse*, pp. 6-7.

⁴⁵⁴ Ponge, 'Fauna and Flora', in *Francis Ponge: Selected Poems*, p. 69.

cannibalism. Baudelaire would indeed be in agreement with this side of nature, claiming that:

No sooner do we take leave of the domain of needs and necessities to enter that of pleasures and luxury than we see that nature can counsel nothing but crime. It is this infallible Mother Nature who has created parricide and cannibalism.⁴⁵⁵

Unlike Baudelaire, however, in spite of writing about nature through negation, Ponge did not do so out of contempt, but rather out of a curiosity into how closely he could get to know nature's particularities, and both revere and attack them as they emerged in his own language. Further to a shared awareness of nature and the negative, Baudelaire and Ponge both sought ways in their poetry to fill a sense of the void that they experienced in nature, based on the notion that 'man', as Sartre puts it, 'panics when he is enveloped by Nature, because he feels trapped in a vast amorphous, gratuitous existence'.⁴⁵⁶ However, we also witness an interesting divergence in the two poets when dealing with equally strong reactions towards the same subject matter. Where Baudelaire detested what he understood of the natural world, so avoided it in his poems based on the belief that 'Nature...produce[d] only monsters', Ponge feared rather than abhorred nature, but eventually began to produce 'monsters' the more his poems focussed intensely on natural things.⁴⁵⁷ This peculiarity in his work was less because he also saw that nature produced 'monsters', and more that his language produced them when dealing with nature.

It is in his open texts that Ponge, perhaps inadvertently, by exploring his own language in relation to the natural world, feeds into a more general nightmarish and perverse use of nature and language in French existential literature. Again, Ponge's literary traits – in this case based on the hybrids he creates between nature, language and the human – are taken to extremes by Sartre in Nausea which was written two years after 'Fauna and Flora'. The reason I want to use the following passage from Sartre is to

⁴⁵⁵ Charles Baudelaire, *The Painter of Modern Life and Other Essays* (London: Phaidon, 2001), p. 32.

⁴⁵⁶ Sartre, 'Baudelaire', in *Modern Times: Selected Non-Fiction*, p. 267.

⁴⁵⁷ Baudelaire, *The Painter of Modern Life*, p. 99.

illustrate a similar apocalyptic vision to 'Fauna and Flora' as demonstrated in the above passage of the poem where Ponge observes plants in terms of what they are not. This kind of negation, comparing plants to humans, however, has the opposite effect on the reader's imagination and instead plants replace the acts of people. The fact that Ponge gives over half a dozen examples of what plants do not do in comparison to the acts of humans does no more than enhance and feed this uncanny vision. In Nausea, we witness in extreme examples other manifestations of the effect of Nature were it to infiltrate people, through their language to their behaviour. Here Nature is no longer immobile and rooted to one spot, but is described as a threat to civilisation, or in Roquentin's case, less a threat than a hope that society will be woken from its stupor and habits by something that will defy everyday expressions, not merely on a literal level, but a physical one. This is the effect of 'vast, vague Nature' on language and physical expression,⁴⁵⁸ used here as a visual manifestation of what Ponge at times experienced in both the void and intoxication of nature:

Somebody...will feel something scratching inside his mouth. And he will go to a mirror, open his mouth: and his tongue will have become a huge living centipede, rubbing its legs together and scraping his palate. He will try to spit it out, but the centipede will be part of himself and he will have to tear it out with his hands.⁴⁵⁹

This example serves two main purposes. The first is to contextualise Ponge's work again, and not isolate him as much as he seemed to extricate himself from his contemporaries, and the second, which is more direct to his methods and aims in poetry, is to try to understand the extent to which Ponge's obsession and difficulty with expressing things was coming from his extreme identification with nature, and where it was coming from his difficulty in writing directly about people.

⁴⁵⁸ Sartre, Nausea, p. 226.

⁴⁵⁹ Sartre, Nausea, p. 226.

In 'Fauna and Flora', this conflict between the language of things and people is apparent in Ponge's strange way of fusing them together through negative ways. In the poem, the immobility of plants in speech and body is rendered in terms of what it is not, and again what we actually witness is quite the opposite of what we are told:

Ils n'ont pas de voix. Ils sont à peu de choses près paralytiques. Ils ne peuvent attirer l'attention que par leurs poses. Ils n'ont pas l'air de connaître les douleurs de la non-justification. Mais ils ne pourraient en aucune façon échapper par la fuite à cette hantise, ou croire y échapper, dans la griserie de la vitesse. Il n'y a pas d'autre mouvement en eux que l'extension. Aucun geste, aucune pensée, peut-être aucun désir, aucune intention, qui n'aboutisse à un monstrueux accroissement de leur corps, à une irrémédiable excroissance.

They have no voices. They are all but paralysed. They can only attract attention by their postures. They don't seem to experience the pangs of an unjustified existence. In any case they wouldn't be able to escape such an obsession by running away, or believe, in the intoxication of speed, they are escaping it. Their every gesture, thought, perhaps desire, intention, ends up as a monstrous growth, an irremediable outgrowth, of their bodies.⁴⁶⁰

This nightmarish, almost apocalyptic vision successfully traverses translations, and Cid Corman's below, akin to Guiton's above, confirms the original text as a strange and terrifying confusion of the human and the non-human world, rendering Ponge's use of language and nature all the more claustrophobic, given the similarity between the images of the translations and the original. Indeed, if we note the last sentence of each passage, the way that Corman describes the plant's growths and extensions of development in the negative, and Guiton in the positive, means that together they appear to demonstrate what Ponge is achieving within the poem itself through positive and negative juxtapositions:

They have no voice. They are just short of being paralytic. They can draw attention only by their poses. They haven't the air of knowing the pains of non-justification. But they couldn't in any way escape through flight from this obsession, or think to escape it, in the drunkenness of speed. There's no other

⁴⁶⁰ Francis Ponge 'Fauna and Flora', in Francis Ponge: Selected Poems, trans. Margaret Guiton, pp. 69, 71.

movement in them than extension. Not one gesture, not one thought, perhaps not one desire or intention, that does not end up in a monstrous increase of their body, as an irremediable excrecence.⁴⁶¹

Another point worth noting concerns the use of the French word 'aucun' itself. An indefinite pronoun, it is both a negative and positive word, translating either as 'any' or 'none', governed by certain grammatical rules such as placing the negative 'ne' before the verb, when it is used as a subject, as Ponge does with 'n'aboutisse'. Each translation, perhaps unintentionally, picks up on these various layers and indications of positive and negative means of expression and remain faithful to the instabilities and surprises of Ponge's relationship with speech.

The example below from Sartre's Nausea, although by no means another translation of Ponge's poem, certainly occupies a similar nightmarish image of the effect of things on language and people, exploring the themes that Ponge is claiming the natural world does not experience, such as loneliness, isolation, frustration, monstrosity, and the desire to escape:

Men, all alone, entirely alone, with horrible monstrosities, will run through the streets, will go clumsily past me, their eyes staring, feeling from their ills and carrying them with them, open-mouthed, with their tongue-insect beating its wings.⁴⁶²

Although in this passage, these themes are particular to people rather than plants, it is Nature that is causing this chaos in them, or rather an amalgamation of things and people, which Roquentin tentatively calls 'variations on existence', and Ponge, in 'Fauna and Flora, an 'infinite diversity of forms.' In both cases, this vision implies that language would have to change according to these new and unexpected combinations between people and nature. As Sartre says: 'hosts of things will appear for which people will have

⁴⁶¹ Ponge, 'Fauna and Flora', in Things, trans. Cid Corman, p. 33.

⁴⁶² Sartre, Nausea, p. 227.

to find new names – a stone-eye, a big three-cornered arm, a toe-crutch, a spider-jaw'.⁴⁶³ Sartre's proclamation, however, is part of Ponge's point about the distance between names and things – that the names of objects have become estranged precisely because the object has changed through misuse and twisted or wrenched away from its original meaning and impact through symbolism and commerce. The irony of this observation is that Ponge's subjects become increasingly estranged from the name the more intent he is on reclaiming their roots. Ponge's 'Fauna and Flora', for example, despite its titular straightforwardness, is anything but a poem which calls a spade a 'spade', and the longer the poems the further away the subject is from the title which marks the beginning, and ideally the end result of the poem. Siding with things consequently morphs into something closer to sliding from things.

A final example of the way Ponge perverts what would otherwise be a straightforward affinity with things is likewise closely related to an image from *Nausea*, in which Roquentin sees in himself what he sees in the madness of others as they run past him, looking down at his body 'covered with filthy, suspicious-looking scabs blossoming into fleshy flowers, violets and buttercups'.⁴⁶⁴ In 'Fauna and Flora' Ponge likewise compares flowers to ruptures of the skin, claiming that flowers are one of their most dramatic means of expression through their inability to move:

Their only means of attracting attention are postures, lines, now and then an exceptional signal, an extraordinary appeal to our eyes and sense of smell in the form of light bulbs and perfume atomizers that are called flowers and are probably wounds.⁴⁶⁵

Where with the other examples the abiding question that we ask of both Sartre and Ponge is, will the effect of humans on the natural world be more devastating than the

⁴⁶³ Sartre, *Nausea*, p. 226.

⁴⁶⁴ Sartre, *Nausea*, p. 227.

⁴⁶⁵ Ponge, 'Fauna and Flora', in *Francis Ponge: Selected Poems*, p. 73.

effect of nature on the human world, with the latter example, the answer seems to be: the same, exactly the same.

Anthropomorphism: Unsayings Humankind

Martin Sorrell in his conclusion to his book on Ponge's poems compares Ponge's act of turning to the object, rather than people, to phenomenology:

Like a phenomenologist, Ponge adopts the method of staring as hard as possible at the world, aiming to disclose its solid presence uncontaminated by the distorting attitudes of mind which men normally interpose between themselves and it.⁴⁶⁶

If Ponge was a phenomenologist, he gives the impression that this was not a conscious choice on his part, and in an interview with Serge Gavronsky held as late as 1977, he acts surprised by the fact that Sartre called him the 'magus of phenomenology':

Sartre wrote that I was the 'magus of phenomenology!' I was delighted. It is true that I am sensitive to things, as Husserl says it—to things in themselves—but if I reacted that way, and a new school of young writers was needed to put this in its proper focus, in order for this to be partly understood today, if I confronted language with something neutral, something which had neither feelings nor ideas, I was doing it for man. If I placed language in front of something neutral, something which is not in itself poetic, it was simply to put it to the test. As simple as that. What interested me the most was not so much...yes, of course, I am sensitive to things, that's clear, but I believe that in order to be a writer or any sort of artist, in any discipline, one has got to be sensitive to the exterior world, but also, and as much, one has got to be sensitive to the means of expression. My means of expression is language, and words the way they are; with their existence and then semantical representation. And it is in order to revitalize language that I place myself before something neutral, which is not yet poetical in itself, and has not yet been 'sentimentalised'.⁴⁶⁷

Inasmuch as phenomenology is a science devoted to the pre-consciousness of things, Ponge is certainly a practitioner, but he also had his own personal agenda for the object and language which led him to look back in time, at himself and at his present

⁴⁶⁶ Sorrell, conclusion, *Francis Ponge*, p. 142.

⁴⁶⁷ Ponge, *Sun Placed in the Abyss*, p. 96.

environment. This in itself is indicative of too many different perspectives and viewpoints to allow the kind of Husserlian focus on things required of phenomenology. Ponge's reasons for such intense focus on the object world and desire to approach humankind in as honest a language as possible, in part was dictated by his rebellion against the lyrical tradition of French poetry, not unlike Baudelaire's denial of the alexandrine. According to Gavronsky in his thorough introduction to Ponge's influences, convictions, poems and critical writings, Ponge's refusal to 'commit his emotions to paper [and] exclude formally any allusion to his own subjectivity' enabled him to 'free himself from a long historical lyrical continuum [and] situate himself outside of the major evolution of French poetry as of the Renaissance'.⁴⁶⁸ However, and I believe this to be more of an incentive given his particular neuroses, Ponge was acutely aware that a number of risks were involved in talking about a person directly.

Among the most significant of these risks was that the individual, like his/her use or because of his/her use of speech, was dangerously formless and vague and in need of an objective counterweight. As he states in 'Tentative Orale', 'humanity can grasp itself only in reaction to things other than itself',⁴⁶⁹ and again he phrases this conclusively in his notes on Giacometti's art, 'Joca Seria' (1951): 'Man will only nourish himself...if he can forget himself...Let him, therefore, consider the world, the slightest thing'.⁴⁷⁰ In support of an apparent desire to diminish man in order to reposition his place in the world, Ponge's critical text 'The Object is Poetics'⁴⁷¹ (1962) reflects on and tries to explain the necessity of a more immediate relationship between humankind and things. In the text, Ponge says that 'Man is a curious body whose centre of gravity is not in himself',⁴⁷² and that therefore he cannot grasp himself by looking inwards. The alternative, not unlike

⁴⁶⁸ Gavronsky, introduction, *The Power of Language*, p. 10.

⁴⁶⁹ Ponge, cited in Ian Higgins, 'Language, Politics and Things: The Weakness of Ponge's Satire', *Neophilologus*, 63, (1979), 347-362; 819.

⁴⁷⁰ Ponge, 'Joca Seria' in *The Power of Language*, p. 133.

⁴⁷¹ A phrase originally used by the artist, Georges Braque.

⁴⁷² Ponge, 'The Object is Poetics', in *The Power of Language*, p. 47.

Eliot's 'objective correlative' as 'a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of that particular emotion',⁴⁷³ is to find 'an object that affects it, immediately, like a direct complement'.⁴⁷⁴ In this respect the object does retain a practical use, but Ponge is speaking less about its utilitarian value, than its aid to the soul – the object as a reliable way of gravitating the human, 'a heavy ship, a heavy bird, on the edge of an abyss' and greatly in need of 'docking'.⁴⁷⁵

Martin Sorrell also writes of Ponge's poems that there seems to be no 'regard or respect for the human presence in the world, except insofar as human beings can be reduced to the quality and status of objects'.⁴⁷⁶ Gavronsky goes so far as to say that 'without ever anthropomorphizing the universe he describes' Ponge establishes an 'absolute concurrence between words and things'.⁴⁷⁷ And finally, which is the view most pertinent to my reading of the unnerving reality of Ponge's open works, Hamburger quotes Hugo Friedrich, a Twentieth-century German novelist and researcher of French Classical and modern literature and poetry, who writes of Ponge's peculiar absence, and the thing's even stranger presence in the language of the object poems:

The ego that captures them is fictitious, a mere carrier of language. This language, however, is anything but realistic. It does not so much deform things as make them so inert, or impart so strange a vitality to things inert by nature, that a spooky unreality is created. But man is excluded.⁴⁷⁸

The conclusion of Ponge's absence affirmed by these writers seems to follow on logically from various things that Ponge has written against a human presence in his work, including something he wrote in a review of Braque for a mass newspaper.⁴⁷⁹ The

⁴⁷³ Eliot, 'Hamlet', *Selected Prose*, p. 102.

⁴⁷⁴ Ponge, 'The Object is Poetics', p. 47.

⁴⁷⁵ Ponge, 'The Object is Poetics', p. 51. (Ponge also discusses 'man's' vertigo and the object as a way of steadying or focussing this fear of falling in 'Tentative Orale', *Le Grand Recueil: Méthodes*, p. 246.)

⁴⁷⁶ Sorrell, preface, *Francis Ponge*.

⁴⁷⁷ Ponge, 'Text on Electricity', in *The Power of Language*, p. 165.

⁴⁷⁸ Hugo Friedrich, cited in Michael Hamburger's *The Truth of Modern Poetry*, p. 29.

⁴⁷⁹ Francis Ponge, 'Braque ou l'art moderne comme événement et plaisir' (Braque or modern art as an event and a pleasure) (May, 1947), in Ponge, *Le Peintre à l'étude, Tome Premier*, pp. 511-518.

following excerpt explores Braque's portrayal of objects, and by implication, the affinity between the artist and the poet's desire to know the object 'outside' of man, turning instead to objects and asking,

that they take us out of our night, out of man's old forms (and out of a so-called humanism), [and that] since we have chosen them as far away from the old quaintness, the old setting, indeed, the old language, consequently, there is nothing more to do but to rename them honestly, untouched by any anthropomorphism, as they appear to us every morning, at dawn'.⁴⁸⁰

Given this, what are we then supposed to make of Ponge's analogies between humans and nature? In 'Fauna and Flora', he refers to plants with terms such as 'limb(s)', 'person', 'bodies', 'arms', 'hands', and 'fingers'. The following example is interesting in relation to anthropomorphism and *via negativa*, as the comparison is not simply between the growth process of plants and that of humans, but more appropriately to one of the many images of Buddha, as a deity of manifold limbs. Of the way that plants attempt to express themselves, Ponge says: 'No gestures; they simply multiply their arms, hands, fingers – like buddhas'.⁴⁸¹ In terms of *via negativa*, Buddhism shares some affinities with the western concept of the negative way, and in the *Udāna* (Buddhist scripture otherwise known as 'the solemn utterances of the Buddha'), Gautama Buddha, the supreme Buddha and founder of Buddhism, is believed to have described Nirvana in terms of what it is not: 'There is...an unborn, unoriginated, uncreated, unformed. Were there not...there would be no escape from the world of the born, originated, created, formed'.⁴⁸²

Whether or not Ponge was aware of this, is not essential to the fact that he has referred to Buddha in this poem, only an interesting additional layer to the poem's

⁴⁸⁰ Ponge, 'Braque or modern art as an event and a pleasure', in *The Power of Language*, p. 153.

⁴⁸¹ Ponge, 'Fauna and Flora' in *Francis Ponge: Selected Poems*, p. 71.

⁴⁸² *The Udāna, or the Solemn Utterances of the Buddha*, trans. Dawsonne Melanchthon Strong (London: Luzac and Co., 1902.), chapter 8: 3. Cited here in reduced HTML version by Christopher M. Weimer at www.sacred-texts.com/bud/udn/index.htm, p. 111.

affinity to *via negativa*. What is more significant in relation to Ponge's 'unsaying' of anthropomorphism in his work, as cited in other contexts, is the fact that in the poem he has chosen a figure who is considered a symbol of perfection, enlightenment, representing for some, the apogee of total freedom, from suffering and human vice. This marks a profound counterpoint to Ponge's line prior to this which concerns the sedentary and repetitive lifestyle of plants, whereby 'a tree's reach cannot exceed its grasp'.⁴⁸³ Unlike the Buddha or the Buddhist notion of at least being humanly able to attain enlightenment and reach 'perfection', the plant is 'no more than a will to expression'⁴⁸⁴ trapped inside the 'impossibility of adopting any other mode' outside of its 'preordained' repetition.⁴⁸⁵

It is visions of nature such as this, and Ponge's use of language to convey them, that I think gives his poem the 'spooky unreality' of which Friedrich speaks. The image, however, of the Buddha complicates the argument that the human is excluded from the often sinister world of Ponge's objects, as although the main purpose of using the Buddha analogy seems to be to illustrate multiplication, in other ways it is a perplexing choice for Ponge, and adds further complex layers to the poem in terms of anthropomorphism. For example, the inclusion of Buddha, albeit mentioned somewhat flippantly, is a typical act of contradiction, in that the Buddha is both a way of denying a human presence, or typical human presence, in his poetry and also of alluding to it. Buddha seems to fit somewhere inbetween what Sorrell and Sartre would refer to as Ponge's reification of people, of literally objectifying them, in order to better humankind, and Gavronsky's observation of what he sees as Ponge's 'eloquent plea for a New Man whose traits would no longer be cast in the disproportionate mold of ancient humanism'.⁴⁸⁶

⁴⁸³ Ponge, 'Fauna and Flora', p. 71.

⁴⁸⁴ Ponge, 'Fauna and Flora', p. 71.

⁴⁸⁵ Ponge, 'Fauna and Flora', p. 75.

⁴⁸⁶ Gavronsky, introduction, *The Power of Language*, p. 44.

This leads onto another compound aspect of this poem, which involves fate, and control, and concerns where plants are captives of their own fate, and where they are creators of it: in other words, where they are passive victims of various repetitive patterns of growth and where they are active demonstrators of it. As Ponge asserts:

For all their efforts to 'express' themselves, they merely repeat the same expression, the same leaf, a million times. In spring when, tired of restraining themselves, no longer able to hold back, they emit a flood, a vomit of green, they think they're breaking into a polyphonic canticle, bursting out of themselves, reaching out to, embracing all of nature; in fact they're merely producing thousands of copies of the same note, the same word, the same leaf.⁴⁸⁷

Repetition is indicative both of excess and at the same time limitation, and it is these particular connotations of things repeated in language and nature from which Ponge is trying to escape. The distinction he seems to be making between plants and people, in terms of physical and verbal expression, is that humans have the capacity for will and freedom, to move beyond repetition and fixity. It is the comparison that Ponge makes between plants and humans that is supposed to help humans realise the pleasure and importance of this difference, but because the comparison is less apparent than the merging of plant and human, the distinction is equally unclear. As Higgins notes in his commentary on 'Fauna and Flora', 'the nightmare of paralysis' in the poem is wrought through the anthropomorphism, which in turn brings about a Beckettian vision of verbal impulse while physically entrapped:

Imagine an entire life spent literally rooted to the spot, compulsively speaking, but able only to repeat one word, 'men'... the text is a reminder of the uniqueness of man's gift of language, and an exhortation to a proper practice of it.⁴⁸⁸

What is so different from Beckett, however, is that the human is looked at indirectly through what he/she is not. The same could be said for the inverse; that plants perhaps

⁴⁸⁷ Ponge, 'Fauna and Flora', p. 71.

⁴⁸⁸ Higgins, *Le Parti pris des choses*, p. 101.

have a will beyond their plant-ness, and in the same way that Ponge questioned the 'pride' of snails, so he wonders about plants and their 'intention or will beyond that of growth'. This is short-lived as a notion, however, because he immediately resolves this fancy by retorting that,

any will to express themselves otherwise than in their development of their bodies is impotent. It would be as though our every desire exacted an obligation to nourish and support an additional limb.⁴⁸⁹

In spite of the somewhat hideous image that this leads to, this rational mode continues to emphasise his earlier emphatic belief that 'a tree's reach cannot exceed its grasp', which is translated more literally by Fahnestock as: 'There is no getting away from trees by way of trees'.⁴⁹⁰ Fahnestock's translation is a particularly clear and useful way of illuminating what Ponge is trying to do with language, which is to try and get away from language by using language. But the repetition of the 'trees' does not take into account that there are different kinds of trees within the general domain of trees, and this lack of particularity and generalisation does not allow for what Ponge is also trying to do, which is to create individuality within the general, by approaching the general via a particular kind of expression. In other words, he will use language, but in an unusual way. Consequently, there are various examples in the poem which render the actual forms of plants as not merely unusual, but often grotesque and deformed, where even their flowers are referred to as 'wounds',⁴⁹¹ their gestures, 'monstrous' growth[s]', a 'vomit of green'.⁴⁹²

Just as muteness is part of the struggle towards perfection in speech, so is the inability to be mobile crucial to the creation of other kinds of movement, of both a strange, sometimes unsightly, and often beautiful nature. In the first chapter to his book,

⁴⁸⁹ Ponge, 'Fauna and Flora', p. 75.

⁴⁹⁰ Ponge, 'Fauna and Flora' in *The Nature of Things*, trans. Lee Fahnestock, p. 51.

⁴⁹¹ Ponge, 'Fauna and Flora', in *Francis Ponge: Selected Poems*, p. 73.

⁴⁹² Ponge, 'Fauna and Flora', p. 71.

Seeing Voices, on the study of the deaf and their use of language, Oliver Sacks looks at the way the deaf have been isolated from language and society, and on questioning how far back this prejudice goes – to the ‘biblical exaltation of the voice and ear as the one and true way in which man and God could speak’⁴⁹³ – remembers Socrates’ remark in Plato’s Cratylus as one of those voices who expressed doubt over this as an absolute truth:

If we had neither voice nor tongue, and yet wished to manifest things to one another, should we not, like those which are at present mute, endeavour to signify our meaning by the hands, head, and other parts of the body?⁴⁹⁴

Ponge’s ‘Fauna and Flora’ is also sympathetic to the possibilities of expression that occur as a result of a disability, and again refers to humans, rather than things, to explain what he is trying to say:

They say that the handicapped people who have lost an arm or a leg, experience a prodigious development of other faculties: the same with plants: immobility is the source of their perfection, their meticulousness, their beautiful decorations, their rich fruit.⁴⁹⁵

In a chapter from Approaches to Nature in the Middle Ages, entitled: ‘Aristotle’s Concept of Nature’, James Weisheipl offers an interesting definition from which to read the distinctions Ponge makes between the different kinds of movement among living things. Ponge distinguishes them thus:

Among animate beings, we can draw the following distinction: those which, apart from the movement of their growth, contain a force that enables them to move the whole or part of their bodies and thereby, each in its own way, get from one place to another, and those whose only possibility of movement is extension.⁴⁹⁶

⁴⁹³ Oliver Sacks, Seeing Voices: A Journey into the World of the Deaf (Great Britain: Picador, 1991), p. 15.

⁴⁹⁴ Sacks, Seeing Voices, p. 15.

⁴⁹⁵ Ponge, ‘Fauna and Flora’, in Francis Ponge: Selected Poems, p. 77.

⁴⁹⁶ Ponge, ‘Fauna and Flora’, p. 75.

Where Ponge looks at the ability and inability of movements among the living, Weisheipl's definition draws more attention to another aspect of Ponge's study, which is observations of how movement occurs and differs between what Weisheipl calls the 'self-mover' and the non-'self-mover', according to that which is living and that which is non-living:

By definition, a living body is one that moves itself by means of its parts: it is by definition a self-mover, an efficient cause of some of its motions... But a non-living thing simply moves of itself, and not by itself. A stone simply falls to the ground, if there is no obstacle; it does not move itself to the ground. It is not a self-mover.⁴⁹⁷

The question is: how does the object, according to whether it is a 'self-mover' or a 'non-self-mover', influence Ponge's use of language? 'Flora and Fauna', which appears to be primarily a close study of language relative to the immobility of plants, is six pages long in the Faber edition, and displays a distinct lack of fixity in its formation and structure, as well as its wide variety of tones and registers of speech and styles. 'Fauna and Flora', thereby draws attention to something of particular significance in Ponge's poetry: the notion of immobility as a guiding force towards verbal perfection, and as importantly, the various signs of awkwardness and revulsion that appear through stubbornly moving towards precise and individual expression.

The fragmented and somewhat disparate, often incongruous passages and images that occur in 'Fauna and Flora' are indicative of the fusion of Ponge's determination and anxiety around adequate expression. Either his poems are openly transparent about this difficulty with expressing his subjects, as with 'The Carnation', and 'Baptême Funèbre', in which Ponge consciously shows the reader the workings of his mind, and weaves his

⁴⁹⁷ James Weisheipl, 'Aristotle's Concept of Nature' in *Approaches to Nature in the Middle Ages: Papers of the Tenth Annual Conference of the Center for Medieval and Early Renaissance Studies*, ed. Lawrence D. Roberts (State University of New York, Binghamton: N.Y.: Center for Medieval and Early Renaissance Studies, 1982), 137-160; 147.

'notes' on how writing, expression, and the object work with and against each other, or he is more obtuse about these struggles, comparisons and paradoxes between the object and expression, and tells it aslant, through the form and voice of the object, rather than his own. 'Fauna and Flora' reveals the peculiar, often deformed and bizarre manifestations that emerge as a result of being rooted to one place, and striving towards self-accomplishment. The poem has as much to say about the way plants work botanically within this restriction as it has about the process of writing, and expressing in general. As Ponge's spider's expression is 'nothing more than salivated talk in the air',⁴⁹⁸ a 'vegetable is a living analysis, a new dialectic in space'.⁴⁹⁹ This dialectic is the plant; expression and plant are inseparable and visible, just as the snail secretes its speech and wears its expression upon its back.

This particular entwining of expression and expresser, is, of course, eminently pertinent to humankind and language, and the need, or pressure, to perfect expression before it is seen, or heard, is a constant source of anxiety as well as stimulation for Ponge's incentive to say what he wants to say, in his own time. Plants, Ponge claims, are 'interested only in perfecting their expression: They groom themselves, adorn themselves, and wait for someone to come and read them'.⁵⁰⁰ In this sense, humankind's voice is closer to 'vegetable expression' than it is to the voice of animals, where the comparison between the plant's process of visible speech in leaf, stem, flower, line and posture, and the visible speech of the human in print is made clear. What is less clear is Ponge's level of comfort or discomfort with being able to trace the writing, and its 'presence' back to the writer. This begs the question: would Ponge at times prefer people to be what they are not, and remove language from themselves like a garment, rather than waiting to be seen? As Ponge puts it, like 'A lobster that can check its shell in the

⁴⁹⁸ Ponge, 'The Spider', in *Francis Ponge: Selected Poems*, p. 163.

⁴⁹⁹ Ponge, 'Fauna and Flora', in *Francis Ponge: Selected Poems*, p. 75.

⁵⁰⁰ Ponge, 'Fauna and Flora', p. 71.

cloakroom... A spider that could put its web in a hangar and repair it with the tips of its fingers... slaver out a new one'.⁵⁰¹ Although such images are indicative of an active, rather than passive relationship with language, they point also to a fear of exposure, created by the idea of language on the one hand being able to be removed and therefore leave the speaker vulnerable and without language, and on the other, of language as attached and fixed, and permanently identified with the source, or speaker. The fear of the latter is indicated in the italicisation of the last line of this section, and enhanced further in the shortness and emphatically quick pace of each phrase, implying panic from this kind of exposure:

Animals express themselves orally or with gestures that erase each other. Vegetable expression is written down once and for all. There's no way of retracting it; second thoughts are ruled out: revision is only by addenda. Correcting a written and *published* text by appendices, and so forth...

Each of their gestures leaves not only a trace, as with man and his writings; it leaves a presence, an irremediable birthmark *to which it is still attached*.⁵⁰²

However, this fear of disclosure is undercut by both the extent and the layout of the poem, which is broken into sections of varying lengths, divided by asterisks, and further emboldened and coloured by frequent italics. Visually it climaxes in the final block which is composed purely of capitals, barring the last word, 'immobility', the threading term and conceit of the entire poem.

Motivated by exploring the freedoms and restrictions within this paralysis, the sections move between confident affirmative and possible beginnings or introductions to essays or other poems, and phrases of a less assured nature, as though we have just interrupted a thought halfway through its formation, and barged in on Ponge pacing, speaking aloud, and noting, rather than polishing what he observes. Compare, for example, the change in tone in the following section, which typifies what occurs

⁵⁰¹ Ponge, 'Text on Electricity', in *The Power of Language*, p. 205.

⁵⁰² Ponge, 'Fauna and Flora', pp.75, 77.

throughout the poem. The extract continues from Ponge's above distinction between self-movers and non self-movers:

The first, once freed of their obligation to grow, express themselves in several ways about thousands of concerns – lodging, food, defense [sic] and, if granted sufficient leisure, certain games.

The second don't have these pressing needs. We can't be sure they have no intention or will beyond that of growth, but any will to express themselves otherwise than in the development of their bodies is impotent.⁵⁰³

This gives the immediate impression of a lecture, or biology lesson, and has the tone of someone who is intending to teach, and make himself and his subject understood. However, lurking nearby this rational mode are hints of something else, less interested in projecting outwardly to others, and more introverted and slightly obsessive, or possessed. In the same section, the language and focus shifts from lesson-mode to interior determination, or quest, as he exclaims that 'each new idea imposes an infernal multiplication of my substance! Each urge to flee another link in my chain!' And shortly afterwards, just two sections on, a truncated sentence which indicates a sort of half thought, half-spoken reflection, expressed in a short horizontal list as though he is answering a question only audible to himself: 'Their postures, or tableaux-vivants: mute entreaties, supplication, intense calm, triumphs',⁵⁰⁴ as though the text is not so much lacking an author, but a reader. Further to this, the next section observes Ponge's ambiguous relationship with the reader, and notes how the tensions in the dynamic between the poet, reader and text, are a direct result of Ponge's battle between the human and the non-human world.

⁵⁰³ Ponge, 'Fauna and Flora', p.75.

⁵⁰⁴ Francis Ponge, 'Fauna and Flora', pp. 75, 77.

Anthropocentrism: Saying and Unsayings the Reader in Soap

It is precisely Ponge's ambiguous relationship with the reader which moves him into a different, but related light from that of anthropomorphism towards anthropocentricity. The degree to which he can be accused of being anthropocentric, however, is determined by the question: does Ponge consider the reader's role as passive or active in view of the above discussion of movement, and in light of this question, where does Ponge's speech falter or move on in his poems? If we establish that Ponge's poems are all the more cast in human shadow not just because of his human analogies, but through his awareness of the reader in his work, it is necessary to discern who or where is the 'reader' to whom Ponge refers in many of his poems. How does he or she compare to the implied reader of his art criticism discussed by Jordan? Jordan links the implied reader of his poetry and of his art criticism simply through the consistency of Ponge's uncertainty and fear of annihilation, of being struck silent again. She suggests that one reason for the junctures in Ponge's texts where he hesitates and draws attention to being unable to go on or even to begin, is 'his reader awareness, prevalent in the poetic texts' and the art criticism.⁵⁰⁵ Jordan's development of this idea draws attention to the kind of control and manipulation that Ponge displays in the poems:

One of the recurring features which dictates the development of his idiosyncratic critical discourse is his dialogue with the reader, who is manipulated according to Ponge's own notions of readerly requirements.⁵⁰⁶

Ponge is therefore a demanding writer, and where his art criticism aims to 're-educate and prepare the reader, producing an inquisitive frame of mind', his 'comments about his poetic texts are evidence that the reader has an especially demanding role to play'.⁵⁰⁷

Ponge's late open text, Soap, for example, in trying to free the object's 'language'

⁵⁰⁵ Jordan, *The Art Criticism of Francis Ponge*, p. 20

⁵⁰⁶ Jordan, *The Art Criticism of Francis Ponge*, p. 20

⁵⁰⁷ Jordan, *The Art Criticism of Francis Ponge*, p. 20

also in many ways tries to assert the ultimate control over the reader and his/her interpretation of the language in order that language will not interfere. It is, however, precisely Ponge's acute awareness of the reader that undermines the soap's language again. The poem begins with the writer directly addressing the reader, and is a good example of the author giving the distinct impression that he is stepping out of the shadows and assuming a more transparent role within the reader's otherwise private experience of reading, and within this role creating an equilibrium between the writer and reader: 'I am in the act of writing these first lines. I am no more advanced than you. We are going to advance, are advancing already, together'.⁵⁰⁸ At first, Ponge appears to assume nothing of the reader, least of all the physical or mental context from where one is reading him: 'As for you, God knows where you are. You know well, yourself, where you are, you know it better than I'.⁵⁰⁹ This apparent generosity towards the reader's individual situation, however, gradually disintegrates. Just prior to this, it appears that the physicality of the book very much provides a tangible bridge between Ponge and the reader, which again keeps them on the same level: 'Let's begin! Let's open the dossier!'⁵¹⁰ But no sooner is this joint act announced, than all apparent equality falls to self-consciousness on the part of the writer about his style. Based on his assumptions of the reader's response to his writing, Ponge displays ambivalence towards his own confidence about his work as well as a discomfort about the reader's capacity for control or judgment. The awareness of the reader may imply Ponge's experience of the finishing and handing over process of the text, as well as soap's release to the author's imagination and interpretation, but this is contradicted by Ponge's presence in the text, and the fact that his attendance is an intrinsic part of the style and reminder that he is never far from

⁵⁰⁸ Ponge, *Soap*, p. 7.

⁵⁰⁹ Ponge, *Soap*, p. 7.

⁵¹⁰ Ponge, *Soap*, p. 9.

the reader; even the italics make his presence felt more intensely as they give the impression of the voice's vibrations:

But first, I must warn you!

You will be startled, perhaps – as it is not very usual in literature – by the frequent, the tedious repetitions which the present text contains.

Very often you will remark: 'But he just repeats himself!'

...

*Well then, should I apologize for this? No! I do not overly like to apologize and then, after all, these ways....why should they, in literature, be forbidden?*⁵¹¹

It is here that through his awareness of the reader, and the reader's expectations of what should occur in writing and what should occur in speech, that Ponge draws attention to the fact that he is breaking down the barriers between speech and writing, for which he is not going to apologize, or humiliate his position as a writer or speaker. Relative to Derrida's distinction between writing and speaking – that language pertains to writing rather than speech – and his inversion of the assumed hierarchy according to Western thought in his famous statement 'that writing both precedes and follows speech',⁵¹² Ponge seems here to be inverting Derrida's theory. If we take into account Barbara Johnson, one of Derrida's translators, and her summary of Derrida's analysis of what he sees as the misguided Western prioritisation of speech over writing in Western metaphysics, and analyse the passage in relation to Ponge's awareness and conversation with the reader as exemplified in *Soap*, we can infer that Ponge does indeed side with this assertion of Western metaphysics. Below is Johnson's summary of Derrida's distinction between the written text and the spoken word:

The spoken word is given higher value because the speaker and listener are both present to the utterance simultaneously. There is no temporal or spatial distance between speaker, speech, and listener, since the speaker hears himself speak at

⁵¹¹ Ponge, *Soap*, p. 9.

⁵¹² Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore; London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), p. 238.

the same moment as the listener does. This immediacy seems to guarantee the notion that in the spoken word we know what we mean, mean what we say, say what we mean and know what we have said. Whether or not perfect understanding always occurs in fact, this image of perfectly self-present meaning is, according to Derrida, the underlying ideal of Western culture.⁵¹³

Relative to Ponge, and as exemplified in Soap there is every attempt at a breaking down of the temporal or spatial distinction between the position of the writer and reader, and therefore the text acts as a conversation between poet and reader, rather than a book. Although Ponge is guilty of hesitancy and doubt wrought by his consciousness of the reader, this awareness is none-the-less announced at the beginning of the text as a way of being with the poet, rather than abstaining from him:

Ladies and Gentleman,

*Perhaps you are going to listen... You have, in any case, begun to hear...BOOM!
(Are you listening?) You are now hearing the first lines of a text*

...

I am seated, myself, at my table, in France, in my house...you are listening or only hearing, as you go about your business in your apartment, and perhaps, even, as you have some conversation...BOOM !! From here on, I will pretend that you are listening to me...

So listen !⁵¹⁴

The immediacy of Ponge's hope for the communication between himself, the text, and the reader is crucial to an understanding of his relationship with the object, which can only come alive as speech, when interacting with the hands, or ears of both poet and reader. The text is reliant on many different levels of interaction: object, reader, poet and text all fused through the immediate nature of the spoken word, but only if the reader participates in Ponge's particular destruction of the boundary between speech and writing.

⁵¹³ Barbara Johnson, introduction, Jacques Derrida, Dissemination, trans. Barbara Johnson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), p. x.

⁵¹⁴ Ponge, Soap, pp. 7-8.

The crisis, or interruption of the text as a verbal rather than a written account of soap, occurs through Ponge's sudden change of attitude towards the reader in terms of being involved in the act of conversation. Ponge concludes the beginning section of the poem by one of the most telling ironies in his work:

*This is how, after all, I work, this is how developments happen in me, this is how the mind goes forward, - and it is very necessary, isn't it? To be honest, very necessary not to tamper with the mind's movement?*⁵¹⁵

It is, however, an inevitable part of conversing that the mind's movements will be tampered with, and this statement shifts not only the role of the reader as listener, but as occupying an active rather than passive role in the text. The irony of the statement above all is interesting, not only in terms of Ponge inflicting on the reader what should not be done to him if his/her mind is to develop, but also in terms of Ponge's control over the reader becoming something closer to condescension, and upsetting the balance between him/herself and 'us'. If Ponge claims that development of his mind, and the writing, relies on not apologizing for repetitions, but allowing them to unfold uninterrupted, then by implication Ponge's own interruptions are depriving the reader's of a similar development, thereby undercutting the aforementioned parity, and placing Ponge in the position of representative, and the reader in the position of hostage.

In order to continue the uncertainty of the text, and prolong the crisis, rather than the success of the eminence of speech in the poem, Ponge's approach here to the reader seems to be rather at odds with something else he wrote in Soap, also about the reader, which seems to be more of a democratic and generous appeal to his readership. Ponge's other desire was 'to be able to be read by members of an unhappy, unfortunate class...' But then the quotation goes on: 'whose first duty I figure it to be to rise by

⁵¹⁵ Ponge, Soap, p. 10.

strength and by courage to a materially better situation'.⁵¹⁶ This is more in keeping with the poet who has ambitions for his own role as a poet and teacher, not only for objects, but people too, the difference being that he aims for the reader to become suspicious of language, whereas the object is a vehicle for Ponge's disruptions of language and linguistic surprises to prevent the reader becoming complacent. It is precisely the fact that this moralistic tone – or what Jordan calls the 'moral element' of Ponge's poems – appears in both his texts on objects and his thoughts on humankind that undermines Ponge's ability to side with things, and see things as unknown. The 'moral element' or lesson within Ponge's work binds objects and humankind, rather than separates them. As Jordan puts it:

Despite Ponge's attempts to represent 'La nature hors-les-miroirs', washed clean of the layers of preconceived ideas with which we have soiled it and liberated to communicate to us in its own voice, it is certain that the snail would have no notion of itself as proud, modest or saintly....The moral element Ponge includes in his fables inevitably involves anthropomorphism, and its glaring, humorous presence in his work constitutes his open admission of failure in freeing the concrete world from man's shadow.⁵¹⁷

What is interesting here is the way that Jordan refers to humour as Ponge's way of openly admitting his failure to speak the language of things, but then continues immediately with the implication that this admittance is not open or glaring at all, but that Ponge is quite deceptive through his use of objects:

Objects, then, are still coaxed into yielding messages for us; they are still the 'tools' in relation to which we define ourselves, and Ponge's use of them remains... a form of appropriation in sheep's clothing.⁵¹⁸

⁵¹⁶ Ponge, *Soap*, p. 47.

⁵¹⁷ Jordan, *The Art Criticism of Francis Ponge*, p. 116.

⁵¹⁸ Jordan, *The Art Criticism of Francis Ponge*, p. 116.

Ponge's inability to assign to things a degree of autonomy from the human's ideas about their place in the world will not disappoint them, as they did not choose to be assigned a voice in the first place. However, by implication this seemingly deceptive way of addressing the reader, or the poet's presentation of the object's 'language' to the reader, renders the poet not so much a fraud of his own aim, but a victim of his own fear that 'to speak is to betray'.⁵¹⁹ Ponge betrays himself by betraying the object through the fact that his own speech becomes an increasing focal point of the text, and the text, therefore, rather than freeing the object's speech, or the poet's, becomes a trap. Ponge does not speak on behalf of objects as he promised them in his address, but uses them as 'tools' for him to use in the process of his own self-definition. In trying to unsay himself, Ponge both witnesses and speaks himself, and falls into his language as though the text were a trap. 'The Spider' is one of the few poems in which Ponge openly draws attention to the possibility of the text as a trap, and this is actually an example of where Ponge is both humorously open while at the same time deceptive, telling the reader what he will do to trap them, rather than actually doing so. However, in spite of this disclosure redeeming the text of its snare-like quality, there is one reader, Philippe Bonnefis, who sees the Pongean text as 'un piège aux mots'⁵²⁰ (a trap, or snare in words), rather than 'an exercise in thoughtful description as the reader might expect',⁵²¹ and he does so with suitable reference to Ponge's spider.

Ponge's control over man or woman, whether critic, poet, reader, citizen, businessman, or writer, overall is as tenuous as the control he has over himself, and it is the fact that he was torn between a fear of saying nothing and a desire to say everything that makes this fragile control over things and people so crucial to an understanding of his work. The extremity between his fear of silence, his experience of silence, and the

⁵¹⁹ Denat, *Francis Ponge and the New Problem of the Epos*, 38.

⁵²⁰ Philippe Bonnefis, 'Faisons carrément l'éloge de l'Araignée', *Revue des sciences humaines*, 38, 151 (July-September 1973), 379-409, 382. Cited here in Jordan's *Art Criticism*, p. 20.

⁵²¹ Jordan, *The Art Criticism of Francis Ponge*, p. 20.

amount of writing he produced is another manifestation of his choice of objects that are mute, like stone, and his intense desire to want to communicate and make, not things, but himself understood to people.

Chapter Nine: The Open Texts (ii)

'The Pebble'

'The Pebble', written between 1927 and 1932, is the only poem in Le Parti pris des choses in which Ponge has taken on the subject of stone directly. It is also perhaps Ponge's most exemplary and ambitious illustration of language in relation to the themes of form and formlessness, examined more frequently through his fascination with shelled creatures. A detailed and complex exploration of language in relation to the external hardness and soft-centredness of shrimps and snails, 'The Pebble' is a giant version and culmination of these seemingly opposing forces, the pebble itself the 'product of the interaction of two formless monsters, the land and the sea'.⁵²² It is the repeated mention of the monstrous in 'The Pebble' in relation to formlessness, as well as Ponge's consideration of soap as a 'magic stone', that brings to mind other considerations of stone that took place not quite as far back as before 'the flood', the time that Ponge attempts to revisit in the poem, but during the Middle Ages. According to Williams, 'gems were considered cosmic monsters in the Middle Ages and were so identified in the lapidaries',⁵²³ while some of Ponge's poems themselves are similar to those of the French Renaissance poet, Remy Belleau, whose work, as discussed later in the section, was influenced by lapidary catalogues. As Ponge considers the stone to be a product of two 'equally shapeless monster[s]',⁵²⁴ the land and the sea, so the mineral kingdom was

⁵²² Higgins, commentary, 'Le Galet', in Francis Ponge, p. 107.

⁵²³ Williams, Deformed Discourse, p. 213.

⁵²⁴ Ponge, 'The Pebble', in Francis Ponge: Selected Poems, p. 105.

considered as an entity between two realms, 'between Earth and the heavens', 'and were thus, paradoxically, neither one nor the other, yet both'.⁵²⁵ The implication of being a part of two realms, of being split, is further accounted for in 'The Pebble', in which Ponge states that 'all rocks descended by schizogenesis from the same enormous ancestor'.⁵²⁶ Monroe says something very similar of the prose poem when discussing Ponge's pebble:

Exemplary, like the prose poem, of a breakdown of existing forms, the pebble clears the way for new ones. Born of that 'formless monster' the sea, on the one hand, and of the land, that 'equally formless monster of stone,' on the other, the pebble, like the prose poem, is situated on the shifting terrain between prose and poetry.⁵²⁷

The second argument, which supports Monroe's use of the prose poem as a perfect form for this ambition, is that the prose poem mimetically enforces Ponge's work in its historical search for 'a maximum concreteness'.⁵²⁸ As Monroe's study of the prose poem and things states:

Ponge's privileging of the pebble...and of small, tangible natural forms and material objects generally, is not to be separated from his selection of the prose poem as a literary genre... Like the prose poem, the limits of which they expand and break by 'extension,' the 'definition-descriptions' Ponge speaks of as his chosen genre in 'My Creative Method' are a genre *en mal de notions*, seeking out, as the prose poem has done historically, a maximum concreteness.⁵²⁹

In its block-like formation the prose poem on a visual level has been compared to the object, as well as in terms of its approach to content:

In accordance with the objectlike density and compactness of its form, the prose poem has evidenced over the course of its relatively brief history an extraordinary preoccupation with the prosaic world of everyday material objects.⁵³⁰

⁵²⁵ Williams, *Deformed Discourse*, p. 213.

⁵²⁶ Ponge, 'The Pebble', p. 91.

⁵²⁷ Monroe, *A Poverty of Objects*, p. 255.

⁵²⁸ Monroe, *A Poverty of Objects*, p. 254.

⁵²⁹ Monroe, *A Poverty of Objects*, p. 254.

⁵³⁰ Monroe, *A Poverty of Objects*, p. 11.

And specific to Ponge, he has chosen the prose poem because akin to the snail's expression, it lacks pretension and does not exceed itself:

Like the pebble, which is small enough to be held and turned over in the hand, the prose poem is a form 'of a human measure'... As the pebble is 'the stone in the era where the age of the person, the individual... the age of speech begins'... the prose poem is for Ponge the genre that most lends itself, by virtue of its characteristic brevity and its appearance on the page in the block-print of prose, to a treatment of small, prosaic, individual phenomena such as the pebble itself.⁵³¹

As well as these critical observations, it has been said of Ponge that he himself 'considers many of his poems as approximations, or, at best, tunnels hewn out of rock, rather than positive constructions like buildings or statues',⁵³² and that his 'early texts typically imitated sculptural perfection, striving towards the lapidary and escaping the haphazard, provisional and contingent nature of the spoken word'.⁵³³ 'Lapidary' itself has two meanings, one deriving from the Latin 'lapidarius', 'of stone',⁵³⁴ and the other which relates to the precise act of cutting into these gemstones, is 'having the elegance and dignity associated with monumental inscriptions'.⁵³⁵ As inscriptions were laboriously chiselled into stone, a 'lapidary' style had to be condensed, succinct and elegant. It was a sign of verbal accomplishment if you could write in this way.

I do not dispute Ponge's awareness and exploration of the analogous relationship between language and stone, and that this influence can be traced back to Belleau is equally viable, given what we know of Belleau. A poet who not only experimented during the 1560s with a form that combined prose and verse, based on *Arcadia*, by Jacopo

⁵³¹ Monroe, *A Poverty of Objects*, p. 254.

⁵³² Nancy Willard, *Testimony of the Invisible Man: William Carlos Williams, Francis Ponge, Rainer Maria Rilke, Pablo Neruda* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1970), p. 6.

⁵³³ Jordan, *The Art Criticism of Francis Ponge*, p. 105.

⁵³⁴ 'Lapidary', *Encarta World English Dictionary* (London: Bloomsbury, 1999).

⁵³⁵ 'Lapidary', *The New Penguin Dictionary* (London: Penguin, 1986).

Sannazaro, Belleau is also renowned for his paradoxical poems which praise simple things, as well as his poems about precious stones, his last work Les Amours et Nouveaux échanges des Pierres Précieuses (The Loves and Transformations of Precious Stones) (1576), a collection of semi-scientific poems inspired by Medieval and Renaissance lapidary catalogues. What is perplexing in light of these influences on Ponge's work, however, is what happens to 'The Pebble' in relation to these influences and the affinities between the pebble and the prose poem. Why is 'The Pebble' not only exceptionally long, but riddled with tortured and confused passages which do no more than express Ponge's difficulties with precision and brevity, particularly in view of what he has said about the pebble as an anchor when it comes to language?

I cast my eyes on the nearest object, the pebble lying at my feet, and if it, too, opens an abyss, at least this one is much less dangerous than the abyss of man, and by means of the expression at our command, it can be closed again.⁵³⁶

'The Pebble' hints at the open texts to come, and in many ways is a bridging poem between the short and the long texts in which Ponge is working out conflicts and issues of control with language, as we see him struggling against rather than with the lapidary style of the early poems, and producing one of his most laboured, and Sisyphean texts.

Nausea

The following sections chart the possible narrative behind 'The Pebble' and other influences that offer a challenge or counterpoint to Ponge's desire for a succinct and clear expression of stone. To begin with, Sartre's Nausea is as relevant to Ponge's open texts as it is to his closed forms, particularly, it seems, when it comes to the way each writer deals psychologically and linguistically with the relationship between hard and soft

⁵³⁶ Francis Ponge, in Twentieth-Century French Literature, trans. Germaine Brée (Chicago: Chicago UP, 1983), p. 217.

forms in nature. Where Nausea was relevant to 'The Oyster' in this respect, I want to refer to it again as another context in which a human comes into contact with a pebble. In this comparison, it is interesting to note the contrast between two contemporaneous French writers using the same object to explore the nature of power between the living and inanimate. Where Sartre's existential hero in Nausea finds himself as a victim of the pebble's effect on him, treating the object as something that is beyond his control, Ponge at times seems to be confident of being able to tame what he refers to as 'a wild, or at least undomesticated, species of stone'.⁵³⁷ Where the poet can examine the form closely, 'pick it up and turn it about'⁵³⁸ in his hand and for nine pages is able to sustain the position of observer – of the object and its effect on his use of language – Roquentin associates the pebble with other objects and not only undergoes nausea, but also panic from their palpable control over him and his reason:

Objects ought not to touch, since they are not alive. You use them, you put them back in place, you live among them: they are useful, nothing more. But they touch me, it's unbearable. I am afraid of entering in contact with them, just as if they were living animals.⁵³⁹

The increasing feeling of being invaded by the external object, normally at the individual's disposal, and the deterioration of a rational separation between the object and the human, has a damaging effect on Roquentin's ability to define himself against the outside world, and the nausea which Ponge associates with vagueness here is pertinent to Roquentin's state of mind:

Now I see; I remember better what I felt the other day on the sea-shore when I was holding that pebble. It was a sort of sweet disgust. How unpleasant it was!

⁵³⁷ Ponge, 'The Pebble', in Francis Ponge: Selected Poems, p. 101.

⁵³⁸ Ponge, 'The Pebble', p. 101.

⁵³⁹ Sartre, Nausea, p. 22.

And it came from the pebble, I'm sure of that, it passed from the pebble into my hands. Yes, that it, that's exactly it: a sort of nausea in the hands.⁵⁴⁰

It is interesting to note that in his 'Introduction to the Pebble', Ponge insists that 'for an individual who has a contemplative disposition, the whole secret of happiness is not to consider as an evil the invasion of his personality by objects'.⁵⁴¹ However, this tone of optimistic control is challenged during the writing of 'The Pebble' itself and Ponge experiences something closer to Roquentin's nausea than he would otherwise indicate in his 'Introduction'.

Nausea, as we know, is something Ponge did experience, but as he claimed to experience it from ideas rather than objects, so his recourse to nature and objects was very much a conscious decision prompted by a mental and physical discomfort around a non-figurative use of language. However, it was not just within language that Ponge discovered this sense of sickness towards the intangible. The poet also experienced unsettling and uncomfortable precipices within nature, the more vast and undifferentiated its features, the more frightening the experience, the sea for this reason, an example of 'oppressive immensity' and incentive for 'man' to rush 'to the edges or intersections'.⁵⁴² While the vastness of the ocean is an obvious representation of an unnerving formlessness, Higgins notices that even when choosing the smaller subjects, Ponge can still undergo a feeling of revulsion: 'the great majority of the things Ponge writes about are small things, but even these, if unvaried or amorphous, are repellent'.⁵⁴³ Something of this kind occurs in 'The Pebble'. Higgins later goes on to postulate that the unfamiliarity of the object gives way to a parallel sense of the abstract and formless, and cites the stone as an object that inhibits, even disallows, the observer's explanation and ability to reach its core, due to its 'irredeemable otherness, its inaccessibility to the

⁵⁴⁰ Sartre, *Nausea*, p. 22.

⁵⁴¹ Ponge, 'Introduction to the Pebble', in *The Power of Language*, p. 79.

⁵⁴² Ponge, 'Seashores', in *Francis Ponge: Selected Poems*, p. 51.

⁵⁴³ Higgins, *Francis Ponge*, p. 19.

mind'.⁵⁴⁴ Indeed, objects are strangers to Ponge until he has gone through the linguistic and observational process of restoring them back to themselves, so that they might be useful to him, not practically or symbolically, but verbally.

In both 'The Pebble' and Nausea, the image of the pebble in the hand and the pebble as wild are positioned in close proximity. With Roquentin this proximity indicates, albeit ironically, a logical train of thought, based on the growing intensity of the object's effect on him. Ponge, however, seems to bring about another one of his imaginative contradictions by initially referring to the pebble as tame, as its perfect form is turned with ease in the human hand, and then, a few words later, as untamed, 'wild, or at least undomesticated'.⁵⁴⁵ Comparing Sartre and Ponge through the way they have written about stone brings about these important questions about the complex dynamic between objects, the writer and language. Where Roquentin is prey to external forces and unquestionably undergoes a kind of physical invasion, indicating that the pebble is more of a dangerous abyss than the human, with Ponge, the dynamic of who is prey to whom, or what, is less clear. 'The Pebble' in this sense seems to conflate Ponge's aversion to human masochism and victimisation, with an absolute determination to explore, or portray, often sympathetically, the validity of the stone as undergoing a predestined journey. While, at times, stone is seen as 'punishing', able to dazzle, and 'wild', its status within nature is praised as it survives 'the monstrous efforts inflicted on it' by the sea, with dignity: 'It remains imperturbable in the disorder of the sea. It comes out smaller but whole and in a sense just as great, for its proportions are not affected by its volume'.⁵⁴⁶ At other times, stone is clearly depicted as a victim without any control over its destiny. It is referred to as paralysed, a body that has 'lost all mobility', and whose

⁵⁴⁴ Higgins, Francis Ponge, p. 55.

⁵⁴⁵ Ponge, 'The Pebble', in Francis Ponge: Selected Poems, p. 101.

⁵⁴⁶ Ponge, 'The Pebble', p. 105.

'history has been nothing but a perpetual disintegration', the 'shattering inner dramas' caused by being 'hopelessly beaten down', the 'faces and bodies...split apart'.⁵⁴⁷

It is this sense of being split and scattered into different parts in relation to Ponge's control or lack of control over the object that also emerges in another area of his poetry: pronouns. The following section observes the way in which he moves between different pronouns according to his view of the object and himself, and the effect that his occupation of various positions has on the status of the writer and reader, as well as Ponge's ability to occupy the voice of the other.

Pronouns

With Ponge's use of pronouns, there is no immediate or fundamental need to refer to his poetics in order to appreciate the way he moves around inside the poem. 'The Pebble' does not escape Ponge's characteristic use of pronouns and the way he shifts seamlessly between the 'I' and the 'you', and in the case of this particular poem, the 'us'. The use of 'us' means that when the sand enters the poet's eye, in effect, it also enters ours. This three-way interaction between the poet, the reader and the object is most clearly stated in the following paragraph which observes and reflects on the hazards of writing in the object's environment:

Cependant le vent souffle. Il fait voler le sable. Et si l'une de ces particules, forme dernière et la plus infime de l'objet qui nous occupe, arrive à s'introduire réellement dans nos yeux, c'est ainsi que la pierre, par la façon d'éblouir qui lui est particulière, punit et termine notre contemplation.

Meanwhile the wind blows and makes the sand fly. Sometimes one of the particles, the last and tiniest form of the object I am considering, succeeds in actually entering our eyes: this is stone's special way of dazzling us and thereby punishing and terminating our contemplation.⁵⁴⁸

⁵⁴⁷ Ponge, 'The Pebble', pp. 93, 95.

⁵⁴⁸ Ponge, 'The Pebble', p. 97.

Margaret Guiton's translation above actually turns Ponge's 'nous' in the second line, to 'I', where another translation by Cid Corman retains Ponge's 'we':

Meanwhile the sand blows. It makes the sand fly. And if one of these particles, the final and most minute form of the object concerning us, happens to really get into our eyes, it is thus that stone, in its peculiarly dazzling way, punishes and terminates our contemplation.⁵⁴⁹

Through this difference, the reader is reminded by the translators both of Ponge's frequent and fluid shifts between pronouns, and more significantly of the impression of Ponge's awareness of himself in relation to the reader. In Guiton's translation, because of the fact that 'I' is mentioned amidst the more overt use of 'our', the distinction between Ponge's role as an individual with an audience is more discernible than Corman's, and indeed Ponge's, inclusive use of 'nous'. The overall impression of both translations results in the notion of Ponge as a schoolteacher with a group of children during a lesson-in-things. Indeed, this perception can be taken further in the paragraph that immediately follows, as the tone of sentence is somewhere between that of a classroom teacher's and a moralist's, and gives the impression that something is expected of 'us'; that we are being tested, and yet controlled, as no sooner is this expectation set up, then Ponge quickly returns to the 'I'. On the one page:

La nature nous ferme ainsi les yeux quand le moment vient d'interroger vers l'intérieur de la mémoire si les renseignements qu'une longue contemplation y a accumulés ne l'auraient pas déjà fournis de quelques principes.

Nature thus closes our eyes when it is time to withdraw into our memories and see whether the information accumulated there by long contemplation has not provided some general principles.⁵⁵⁰

And, on the other, 'Je noterai enfin, comme un principe très important' (I conclude by noting a particularly important principle).⁵⁵¹ The latter translation is that of Guiton, but in

⁵⁴⁹ Ponge, 'The Pebble', in *Things*, p. 40.

⁵⁵⁰ Ponge, 'The Pebble', in *Francis Ponge: Selected Poems*, p. 97.

the original and both Guiton's and Corman's translations, the pronoun moves clearly from 'our' to 'I', a point which gives a more definite picture of Ponge the writer sending out contradictory messages to the reader. It is as though Ponge is prompting the reader to think for him or herself, at the same time as giving out some fairly didactic material and thoughts of his own; that while establishing a voice for objects, he is sacrificing, or undermining the voice of the reader.

One of the many ways that the individual voice of the reader is destabilized is in Ponge's generalisations, in this case, of what 'man' does and does not think about the pebble: 'Thus, contrary to man's customary view of it as a symbol of duration and impassibility',⁵⁵² and again, although here he acknowledges that he is being general, 'man does not generally put it to practical use'.⁵⁵³ 'Man' is constantly shown in a negative light in his treatment of the pebble, either by ignoring it, or rejecting it: 'Men sometimes absent-mindedly throw one of them into the distance'.⁵⁵⁴ When 'man' is acknowledged as a user of stone, it is to show his misuse of it, and that compared to nature's formations, man's buildings are gratuitous. Of 'the largest fragments' that 'form the skeleton of the globe', Ponge says, that 'these are real temples: not constructions arbitrarily raised above the ground but impassive remains of the ancient hero once actually present in the world'.⁵⁵⁵ By implication, Ponge is setting himself up as the only 'man' who is both recognising and appreciating stone, and therefore his siding with things becomes something less democratic and more hierarchical, in terms of a certain arrogance over humankind, and also, by referring to stone in heroic terms, over the pebble. If we read 'The Pebble' with reference to his poem 'Proême Capital' (which he reads aloud at his prize giving speech in Oklahoma in 1974), this pride, or rage is further evident in a rather

⁵⁵¹ Ponge, 'The Pebble', p. 99.

⁵⁵² Ponge, 'The Pebble', p. 99.

⁵⁵³ Ponge, 'The Pebble', p. 101.

⁵⁵⁴ Ponge, 'The Pebble', p. 103.

⁵⁵⁵ Ponge, 'The Pebble', p. 95.

bitter passage where his use of pronouns vehemently ostracises him from humankind and further entrenches his attachment to, or identity with nature:

On the one hand, there are you men with your civilizations, your periodicals, your artists, your poets, your passions, feelings, in short, the entire human world increasingly revolting, unliveable (unjudgeable). On the other there are the rest of us: the objects, and animals and plant life... It is this second half, entirely beyond the pale of man, which is my reason for being.⁵⁵⁶

How is the reader supposed to place Ponge within his work, given his use of pronouns and equally how are we to position ourselves within this divide between 'the entire human world' and nature? When Ponge goes on to snub other poets who have written about stone, we cannot help but question our validity as reader again, in that the words and lines of these other poets have entered 'our' vocabulary and become what Ponge would scorn as platitudes and clichés. He hints at the reader's ignorance, somewhat sarcastically, by saying that the following 'have been considered as most original':⁵⁵⁷

A heart of stone (Diderot)

A pebble flat and uniform (Diderot)

I despise this dust that composes me and speaks to you (Saint-Just)

Of the things I care for

Earth and stones and nothing more (Rimbaud).⁵⁵⁸

However, immediately after this image, control is given back to the pebble, as in spite of its being picked up by a human hand and thrown so effortlessly (presence of mind is not even needed to propel it through the air), the pebble is also seen as strong enough to defy nature: 'Winds strong enough to uproot a tree or demolish a building cannot dislodge a pebble'.⁵⁵⁹ This latter sentence is perfectly dense and subtle in its message, or principle: not only on a grand scale is nature stronger and more impressive than a person,

⁵⁵⁶ Francis Ponge, 'Proème Capital', trans. Ivar Ivask, in 'Notes Towards a Francis Ponge in Norman', *Books Abroad*, 647-51; 650.

⁵⁵⁷ Ponge, 'Introduction to the Pebble', in *The Power of Language*, p. 83.

⁵⁵⁸ Ponge, 'Introduction to the Pebble', p. 83.

⁵⁵⁹ Ponge, 'Introduction to the Pebble', p. 103.

capable of destroying his sense of order, but that on a tiny scale, is stronger still in its ability to defy nature, where the human is unable.

The significance of the fact that the rest of the poem is very much from the pebble's point of view, though 'her' is preferred over 'I', reinforces Ponge's determination to defy sentimentality in literature, and as much as is literally possible, keep stone in its natural habitat by observing and not reminding the reader of its place in literature, and to veer from the path of 'trite feelings' expressed above, 'in the minds of men who came before' him.⁵⁶⁰ This, of course, is the ideal situation, to be able to write about the pebble, without removing it from its 'home', through symbol, metaphor, and personification. At least this would seem to accord with Ponge's self-consciousness and slight self-disgust at the points when writing interferes, or overshadows the object itself. As he says in the last section: 'I shall say no more about it, for this erasure of traces reminds me of the defects of a wordy style'.⁵⁶¹ The 'traces' to which he refers are mentioned in relation to water, the traces it leaves and the traces it wipes out, a concept explored by Ponge, in relation to the snail, whose body leaves a trail on the ground at the same time as devouring or vanquishing it. An apposite metaphor for the writing process, and the writer's hand across the page, it is not surprising that 'traces' is a word, or action which moves, or distracts him from the object to the mechanics or artifice of writing. As he is aware of this at the end of the poem, he is also conscious of this at the beginning, asking the reader, to 'stop to admire, not my thick elegiac expressions, but the grandeur and glory of a truth that could make them partially translucent without seeming entirely overshadowed by them'.⁵⁶² In Fahnestock's translation, Ponge's irritation or embarrassment at language taking over his observation of the object is even more

⁵⁶⁰ Ponge, 'Introduction to the Pebble', p. 83.

⁵⁶¹ Ponge, 'Introduction to the Pebble', p. 107.

⁵⁶² Ponge, 'The Pebble' in *Francis Ponge: Selected Poems*, p. 91.

apparent: 'I'll say no more, for this idea of disappearing signs leads me to reflect on the faults of a style that relies too heavily on words'.⁵⁶³

The inclusion of so many pronouns and therefore positions and points of view seems to account for Ponge's confused position in the text – where he wants to be included, and be absent, and where he wants to remind us of our responsibility towards the text and the object, and where the object must remain independent from us all. Pronouns not only account for these points, but enable Ponge to roam the text and speak in as many voices as he deems necessary, not only to look under every stone, but constantly to pull the rug from under our feet, before we have a chance to discern where we are in the text. If, as Ponge states in his 'Introduction to the Pebble', 'the best solution is to consider all things as unknown, and to walk or rest in the woods or on the grass and to start everything over from the very beginning',⁵⁶⁴ the mere act of shifting points of view through alternating pronouns works as a clever metaphor for seeing things with different eyes, rather than relying on our own all the time. Further to this somewhat puppeteer use of pronouns, the next section discusses Ponge's need for control in the text, and observes that his objective to speak for things sides with his demand that objects will 'serve' him and be useful to him within language, which in turn reveals a complex and layered system of power and insecurity at work in his poetry.

Victim or Perpetrator

In many ways, even to discuss control in Ponge's work, at first, seems somewhat incongruous to his practice of 'siding with things', or as he states in 'Reasons for Living Happily', describing things 'in a way acceptable to things: when they are not slighted, that

⁵⁶³ Ponge, 'The Pebble', in *The Nature of Things*, p. 68.

⁵⁶⁴ Ponge, 'Introduction to the Pebble', p. 81.

is, when they are described from their point of view'.⁵⁶⁵ 'The Pebble' is a poem which clearly demonstrates Ponge's ambiguous relationship with control: that is, where he is in control of the subject and where the subject is in control of his language. On the one hand, the poem literally draws attention to the poet's difficult task of trying to write about a pebble, and woven into the description and definition is Ponge's own process of expression, the poem opening with the statement: 'it isn't easy to define a pebble', and in Guiton's translation, appropriately closing with a pun on the outcome of his ambition: 'I'm happy I thought of using a pebble for this debut: for a quick-witted man will be amused; but he will probably concur with my critics when they say: "He attempted to describe stone and petered out."' ⁵⁶⁶ On the other hand, this seeming lack of confidence in his grasp of the object could be interpreted as being slightly at odds with such a long, thorough and close observation – bordering on a moral, and educational lesson – of the history and formation of stone from its inception to its complex role in nature, and language.

Ponge has referred to himself as the 'ambassador' of the silent world, but something else he said, in a 1952 radio discussion with Pierre Reverdy and André Breton,⁵⁶⁷ complicates this diplomatic position, and moves him closer to what could be construed as a sympathetic authority over things. In the discussion, Ponge talks about 'representatives' and 'hostages' in relation to the 'mute' world, and he seems to be referring to his position as ambassador when he claims that the mute word is one where we are the representatives, but this is complicated by placing 'or hostages' in brackets directly afterwards: 'ce monde muet dont nous sommes un peu ici comme les représentants (ou les otages) (this silent world of which we are a little like representatives

⁵⁶⁵ Ponge, 'Reasons for Living Happily', in *The Power of Language*, p. 61.

⁵⁶⁶ Ponge, 'The Pebble', in *Francis Ponge: Selected Poems*, p. 107.

⁵⁶⁷ Francis Ponge, 'Entretien avec Breton et Reverdy', in *Le Grand Recueil: Méthodes*, pp. 287-302.

(or hostages).⁵⁶⁸ The sentence is not clear in terms of status. As Higgins wonders and demands: 'representatives to whom? Hostages for what? And what is the punishment if the ransom is not paid?'⁵⁶⁹ These questions are asked immediately beneath Higgins' subheading 'The Hostage of Things' in his book on Ponge, which provides part of an answer to his questions, in that Ponge's poems are demonstrations of the poet's own divide between being both a hostage and speaker of things. In spite of Ponge's use of 'or', one of the reasons his work is so literally riddled with contradictions is that Ponge is as much a captive of things, as he is their spokesman. It is important to remember, however, that although his entire oeuvre demonstrates that the poet's devotion towards language is equal to his love of things, it is the struggle, or challenge which exists within this dynamic that is paramount.

'The Pebble' is an important exploration of where Ponge is situated between language and the object – where he is hostage to the object, in the sense that the poem's language is primarily governed by the stone's effect on language, and where the very process of using language to attain the stone's essence, or individuality, in itself is counter-productive. In other words, the poem demands the question: to what extent is Ponge's expression determined by the particular qualities of the object, and in this sense, hostage to it, and to what extent is his mind rising above the object and assuming a superior position? In amidst the violence, grace and strength of the stone's history, too, where is Ponge? I ask this especially in relation to what he said in his 'Introduction to the Pebble', in which he aligns himself with nature, insisting that he does not adhere to 'man's' 'pitiful qualities', emotional, intellectual and physical, but insists that he is 'of another breed', and from identifying himself with animals, ends the list with the pebble:

⁵⁶⁸ Ponge, 'Entretien avec Breton et Reverdy', p. 289.

⁵⁶⁹ Higgins, *Francis Ponge*, p. 12.

Well! I insist upon saying that, as for me, I am of another breed, and for instance, besides all the qualities that I have in common with the rat, the lion, and the net, I hold to those that belong with the diamond, and besides, I am entirely at one with the sea and the cliff that it attacks, and with the pebble that finds itself created as a result.⁵⁷⁰

The passage in 'The Pebble' that discusses this very process, of the sea's inflictions on rock, and its continual polishing and forming of the stone as it shrinks, is tenderly expressed by Ponge, and with the poet's declaration of identifying with all elements, it is hard to read this passage outside of the poet's own process and experience of the stone, as it constantly eludes and comes towards the poet. The line between where the poet and where the sea is in control of the pebble at times is almost invisible:

On the other hand water, which makes things slippery and imparts her fluidity to everything she coats, sometimes is able to seduce these forms and carry them away. For the pebble remembers that it was engendered by the working of this shapeless monster on the equally shapeless monster of stone. And as the completion of its person requires continuous applications of the liquid, it is, by definition, that which always submits to her.

The pebble is dull on the ground, dull as day compared to night; but the moment water takes it back she makes it shine.⁵⁷¹

In the last few lines there is the sense of the poet's envy or regret that nature works more effectively on nature than does the poet, particularly when read in terms of the last line of the poem, where Ponge refers with sad irony to his feeling of failure, by petering out. In the incident that follows with the sand entering the poet's eye, however, we witness a more overt battle for control, or series of tensions between the object and the writer as not only reflected in the writing, the length, contradictions and somewhat fragmented style and train of thought, but also in the moments of 'direct' contact between writer and object. Here the sand is at once victim and perpetrator, subject to the wind, but for a moment in control of one of the most powerful tools in the poem: the poet's eye. This

⁵⁷⁰ Ponge, 'Introduction to the Pebble', in *The Power of Language*, p. 77.

⁵⁷¹ Ponge, 'The Pebble', in *Francis Ponge: Selected Poems*, p. 105.

control is almost immediately usurped by the poet, however, as he continues the poem for many pages thereafter, indicating that he has got enough material to use without the need for direct observation. It is interesting to note that in this passage and in a similar one further on in the poem, affection and violence are written in close proximity, and support Ponge's notion of 'verbal clashes' and the need for contrast at every turn.

In the second and following example, language, in the manner of the sea's maternal hold over stone, is as much a struggle against will, as it is a continual lure and means of attraction. The boundaries between a sexual and parental conflict of will versus need, or inevitability, are unnervingly vague:

Not far away the sea continually tears blocks off the rocky knees of the giant spectators on her edges, where they watch the foaming struggles of their battered wives: she holds these fragments against her body with her arms, hugs, pushes, cuddles, rolls, kneads, caresses and polishes them; or puts one in the corner of her mouth like a sugared almond, then takes it out and deposits it on a gently sloping beach among the already numerous flocks within her reach, for she intends to pick it up again soon and treat it still more affectionately, passionately.⁵⁷²

The portrait in this passage of the sea's destructive and affectionate influences on stone also conveys Ponge's own relationship with the subject in terms of his position as victim or perpetrator of the object itself. The fact that he is watching the sea's own writing on stone implies that he is outside of the object and in an inferior position of control to that of nature, but the fact that he is recording what he is watching in a language that is alien to the sea, places him in an equivalent position to the ocean according to his own equivalent means of inscribing, and likewise changing the nature of stone from an unmanageable size to something more intimate: the poem itself. That formlessness (water) gives birth to form (stone), and that the repetitive nature of the encounter

⁵⁷² Ponge, 'The Pebble', p. 97.

between the abstract, or general, and the precise is an intrinsic part of Ponge's writing process which in many ways is summed up in this passage. The distinction between his role as victim or perpetrator that Higgins wishes to clarify is therefore still left unanswered, not because Ponge is evasive, but because each poem is an intentional exploration of another related question: does nature write his poems before he has written them and is it merely his job to listen to its chord, or does he use nature to reflect his relationship with writing, and teach him how to better his expression according to its music? If Ponge in some ways achieves both the position of victim and perpetrator in 'The Pebble' as is exemplified in the passage which focuses on water, to conclude this section and begin the next on his later writing, I want to refer again to 'Swallows' in which he distinguishes between water and another force of nature: wind.

A poem written in the early 1950s, 'Swallows' is an example that looks forward to Ponge's later writing in art and poetry where it seems the wind has taken over any hold he once had over nature and placed Ponge in the far more precarious position of victim amidst chaos:

It would knock over its own father and mother to reach its goal...

...

A bit as water does. But water generally moves in the same direction. The wind rushes right, left, forwards, backwards, as if to an emergency, because of a low pressure zone, here or there. It contradicts itself frenetically.⁵⁷³

Although Ponge ends the poem with the hope that his words will remain 'unaffected' and firmly rooted in the face of this 'powerful breath of air coming to man from the exterior,'⁵⁷⁴ the writing that follows in the wake of this poem's decade tells of a different narrative. His 1950s art criticism on artists and their work affirms that his move into a different style of writing which is more inclusive of people rather than objects was not so much premature, as illustrative of a much earlier conviction of being overwhelmed by

⁵⁷³ Ponge, "...Just Wind!", in *Francis Ponge: Selected Poems*, p. 205.

⁵⁷⁴ Ponge, "...Just Wind!", p. 205.

looking too directly at the human form, and this includes himself. In reminding the reader below of something he wrote in 1933 which is relevant to this particular aversion, I will include a translation of his thoughts on art at the time:

What would appear to others as devoid of any complexity, such as for example, the face of a man about to speak, or a man asleep...still seems to me to be too difficult and charged with new meanings...for me to dream of harnessing myself to such a task for a long time to come. As a result, how could I describe a scene, review a play or a work of art? I have no opinion on such matters, since I have not even gained the slightest impressions about them.⁵⁷⁵

Admittedly, opinions of this kind can change over time; this is not strange in itself. What is worth exploring here, however, is the fact that in changing his mind Ponge is not so much showing that he is ready to write about art and divulge his newly formed impressions on artists, but that he is ready to display his lack of readiness to do so. The chaos in Ponge's voice during the composition of both the art criticism and the late and longest of the poems reveals him at his most uncertain stage in his writing, but by some accounts, notably Jordan's, at his most confident in his speaking. The irony of this is not important here. What is significant is that his increasing willingness to speak openly in public and in his poetry does less to display his confidence in writing, than it reveals his decision to no longer hide behind objects and instead face long-standing and unresolved issues with his own language, and not theirs.

⁵⁷⁵ Ponge, 'Introduction to the Pebble', in The Power of Language, pp. 77, 79.

Chapter Ten: Last Poems and Art Criticism

From Objects to Artists

Ponge's quirky and unnerving style of the longer poems during the 1940s and 1950s in many ways culminates in his period as an art critic of Post-War artists, among them Picasso, Braque and Fautrier. The longer poems, particularly those included in Le parti pris des choses, in terms of Ponge's use of language and manipulation of imagery and object, are the closest we get before the final and longest of his prose poems to his highly unconventional, and idiosyncratic art criticism begun in the early 1950s. Through the art criticism what becomes clear is that the journey from a relative exclusion of the self in the early poems, through to textual slips in the longer poems, finally culminates in the Sixties when most of his work was published in the large collection, Le Grand Recueil (1961), and exposed him to the public in a way he had not been before. In the mid Fifties he was becoming better known. The NRF published 'Hommage a Francis Ponge' in 1956 and Sartre's 'L'Homme et les Choses' – published just prior to his meetings with well-known artists in 1944 and during his time as the literary editor of the Communist weekly, Action – continued to bring Ponge more recognition. Together with his position as visiting professor at Columbia University between 1966 and 1967, and being a guest of Sollers for twelve radio interviews in 1967, any impression of Ponge as a hermetic figure seems to have been abolished. Art, and particularly the social aspect of meeting painters, enabled Ponge to intensify his 'meditation on forms of human communication',⁵⁷⁶ and as Jordan notes of the writer during this time, Ponge was at his most verbally and socially confident during the writing of his art criticism and his work after the War. It seems,

⁵⁷⁶ Jordan, introduction, The Art Criticism of Francis Ponge, p. 14.

primarily, that it was his contact with artists which heralded a new relationship to speech and expression, 'a greater fluidity and the breaking of old taboos':⁵⁷⁷

His popular image as an author concerned exclusively with objects, who produced closed texts and found the act of speech inconceivable, was already out of date by the end of the War. At this period Ponge began simultaneously not only to write on painters, but also to conquer his fear of the spoken word by addressing large audiences, and to experiment with 'open' texts.⁵⁷⁸

What is therefore interesting about this era in Ponge's life is that this combination of public and private factors, which indicate that in many ways he was overcoming his inadequacies around the spoken word, seems to have a paradoxical impact on his writing. If we examine some of his critical texts at this time, we witness Ponge being far too contradictory to be considered at his most stable when it came to his relationship with language. On the one hand, we observe Ponge reflecting on his own style when writing about Fautrier's paintings on twenty World War Two hostages, 'Otages',⁵⁷⁹ in Notes sur les Otages, Peintures de Fautrier,⁵⁸⁰ stating that 'it would be too little to say that I am not sure of the pages which follow: here are oddities of text, violent, maladroit. This is not infallible speech',⁵⁸¹ while on the other, during a discussion of Braque's painting in 'Braque ou le réconciliateur' (Braque the reconciler), in which Ponge analyses the function of modern art, his attitude is quite different:

The only reason and the justification of art [is] an imperious need for expression. Not in order to trouble but to reassure...the only way to express ourselves authentically is to throw ourselves into our difference – to express it, with the help of a matter treated without shame, not in relation to ourselves but to the world.⁵⁸²

⁵⁷⁷ Jordan, introduction, The Art Criticism of Francis Ponge, p. 14.

⁵⁷⁸ Jordan, introduction, p. 14.

⁵⁷⁹ Jean Fautrier, 'Otages', exhibited in Paris in 1945, and begun in 1943.

⁵⁸⁰ Francis Ponge, Notes sur les Otages, peintures de Fautrier (Paris: Seghers, 1946).

⁵⁸¹ Ponge, Notes sur Les Otages, in Jean Fautrier, 1898-1964, eds., Curtis L. Carter and Karen K. Butler, with Essays by Yve-Alain Bois, Benjamin Buchloh and Rachel E. Perry (New Haven, Conn.; London: Yale University Press, 2002), p. 48.

⁵⁸² Francis Ponge, L'Atelier contemporain (Paris: Gallimard, 1977), p. 296 (here cited in Vesna Rodic, 'Are There Any Words for Painting?' www.mcnaair.berkeley.edu/2000journal/Rodic/RodicEnglish.html.)

The question then remains as to why it was that these contradictions towards his self-expression are so pronounced in his art criticism when this was supposedly the time in his writing career that he displayed the most confidence and ease with verbal expression?

In part, this can be answered by the artists whom Ponge chose to critique, and befriend, Giacometti, Fautrier, Dubuffet and Braque – all investigators of insecurity, violence, ambiguity and the monstrous in humanity. Ponge's particular focus on Fautrier's 'Otages' (Nazi hostages) for example – the subject of which was motivated by the tortured cries that the artist overheard from nearby woods during his stay in a sanatorium outside of Paris – seemed to release in Ponge a writing style which reveals a new understanding of human torment. Before examining the writing, however, below is a brief description of Fautrier's hostage paintings as well as a written response to them by Jean Paulhan. In a collection of human heads – each image rendered in thick crude attacks of paint, showing a different version of the remains of bones and flesh once the whole or half of a head had been damaged or obliterated – Fautrier's work is a disturbing reflection of Nazi brutality and atrocity. Paulhan, when writing on this series, acknowledges that the monstrousness of what Jordan calls Fautrier's 'uncompromising language' was for him also paramount:⁵⁸³

Fautrier's world is, in all evidence, a world excessive and monstrous, violent and almost abusive: where pears are bigger than pears and flowers more convulsive than flowers... monstrous but without the difference that makes the monster.⁵⁸⁴

In Ponge's case, the deformities and paralyses of language suffered during the attempts to write an adequate poem-object relate on some level to Fautrier's images of hostages, whose 'tumescent faces, crushed profiles, bodies stiffened by gunfire, dismembered, [and] truncated'⁵⁸⁵ figures parallel the sense of trauma and pain of the poet's experience

⁵⁸³ Jordan, *The Art Criticism of Francis Ponge*, p. 46.

⁵⁸⁴ Butler, 'Fautrier's First Critics' in *Jean Fautrier*, p. 45.

⁵⁸⁵ Ponge, Appendix A, 'Notes sur les Otages', in *Jean Fautrier*, p. 174.

as a writer and a speaker, as well as the disfigured creations among his objects. In addition to Fautrier's artistic style, and in view of Ponge's history with a secretive and private way of working, it is highly likely that he would have also been drawn to the 'Otages' given the fact that they were begun in 1943 during the Occupation, but were unable to be exposed until the end of the War. As Jordan recognises, the hidden language of the paintings during their formation was consequently untouched by governing laws and all the more brutal and original for their initial concealment:

The secretive pleasures of clandestine communication or of contrebande work, involving the resourceful use of a language whose subtleties escaped the censors and the occupying forces, were creative outlets enjoyed only by writers. Naturally Fautrier's 'Otages' were compelled to remain in hiding with their creator during the Occupation.⁵⁸⁶

These kinds of correspondences and incentives of Ponge's towards Fautrier's work may well have been unconscious, but what was a definite and intentional means of association between the art and the poetry was the way that Ponge went about responding to the paintings. In relation to his discomfort with using words to describe painting, and the need to avoid the trap of one kind of form usurping another, he counters this tendency by introducing 'semantic ambiguity into his essay'.⁵⁸⁷ Ponge's answer to the art critic's use of language for painting, therefore, is to avoid description and to use analogy to evoke the quality and physical material of the painting itself. With his criticism of 'Otages', for example, he 'does not describe how Fautrier paints, but performs it through a parallel analogy',⁵⁸⁸ his language strategically ambiguous in order to be evocative, rather than interpreting the paintings for the viewer. As Karen Butler notes in her essay, 'Fautrier's First Critics', the fear of imposing himself on work that was of a different language and form was more prominent than his enthusiasm for the task:

⁵⁸⁶ Jordan, *The Art Criticism of Francis Ponge*, p. 47.

⁵⁸⁷ Butler, 'Fautrier's First Critics', in *Jean Fautrier*, p. 48.

⁵⁸⁸ Butler, 'Fautrier's First Critics', p. 49.

The problem with being an art critic, says Ponge, is 'that words tend to impose thought on painting.' He was 'troubled by his task as an interpreter of Fautrier's paintings, a discomfort increased by his knowledge of the nature of language....His challenge is to create a perceptual and corporeal experience through language. Ponge asks himself if there are words for paintings and replies, 'No, evidently not, no valid words, painting is painting, literature is another thing, and it is evident that words are made for literature, not for painting'.⁵⁸⁹

This view towards form and the avoidance of one discipline usurping another is reminiscent again of a monstrous discourse which by its very ambiguous and uncertain nature is incapable of imposing itself and acting as a replacement. Williams' distinction between language and a monstrous discourse echoes Ponge's above concern with language as an inappropriate form for art:

Language tends to involve itself in the nature of the thing by 'imposing' its own form upon the world that it seeks to know and calls the world thus formed the real. Monstrous discourse, by its very definition a deformity, possesses no such form that it can impose.⁵⁹⁰

As a way of evading the interpretive force of language and thereby assume something closer to a monstrous discourse, Ponge's solution is to do what he does in relation to the object – create an equivalent rather than an alternative version to the piece being observed by 'evoking the sensual experience' of the painter's materials themselves, and thereby suggest the trauma of the subject matter.⁵⁹¹ The suffering is conveyed in a two-fold manner: in the almost breathless style of the language, and in the palpability of the excessive use of paint conveyed in the words and images Ponge considers most analogous to the texture of the paint itself. The following quotation from Ponge's essay on Fautrier's hostages indicates both:

⁵⁸⁹ See Butler, 'Fautrier's First Critics', p. 48.

⁵⁹⁰ Williams, *Deformed Discourse*, p. 11.

⁵⁹¹ Butler, 'Fautrier's First Critics', p. 49.

Obliterated by torture, partially possessed with blood.
Offended by an atrocious fog red with blood, a fog sticky like
blood.

*

The deformation of the human face by torture, its shock from
Its own blood coming from the inside, from the blood it spills
Over, that it harboured, that it brusquely liberates...
Each face is shocked by its own blood.⁵⁹²

Although this is a translation of both the painting and Ponge's original text, it is the incessant repetition of 'blood' which serves as an inescapable continuity between the different renditions of text or image. Repetition in this case builds up layers in the writing as Fautrier thickened the canvas in coats of paint and colour, and its echo fortifies the claustrophobic horror of the subject matter. In this sense, Ponge has achieved what he set out to do in terms of resisting translating or interpreting the image for the viewer, but at times he forgets his own ambition and uses words to tell rather than to suggest or evoke.

An example of where Ponge displays this lack of control over his intention is to be found again in his work on Fautrier, in which the writer alludes to the artist's use of paint as scatological, a comparison which although pertinent to the excessiveness of Fautrier's use of paint is nonetheless an imposition on the work rather than an emulation of the artist's intention:

He has a way about him like a savage beast. One of the most characteristic manners of savage beasts. Their manner of excreting: in mortar, pasty, adhesive. And on top of that, by the application of their claws on the cinders, a little bit of earth, a little bit of ash (then they smell), thus their manner of ritually covering excrement.⁵⁹³

Although these slips in the art criticism between Ponge's objective and subjective stance could be interpreted as unintentional and indicative of a weakness in his writing in the

⁵⁹²Ponge, Appendix A, *Notes sur les Otages*, in *Jean Fautrier*, p. 174.

⁵⁹³ Ponge, *Notes sur les Otages*, in *Jean Fautrier*, p. 49.

sense of an unawareness of the gap between his will and his practice, there is another argument put forward by Butler, that rather than being indicative of a loss of control, Ponge's haphazard and paradoxical use of language is deliberate. As she says of his piece on Fautrier's hostages:

Ambiguity is built into the very structure of the text. Although his essay has five numbered sections corresponding generally to themes, within the sections his style is abrupt and disjunctive. Sentences are fragmented and often lack a subject. Arguments, presented without clear beginning and end, are divided into sections by asterisks, giving them force and impact while interrupting rational flow.⁵⁹⁴

Relative again to a monstrous discourse in Ponge's work, the term 'ambiguity' can also be found in the monster's name; the Greek root of 'monster', 'teras', meaning both 'horrible' and 'wonderful', the ancient Greek, 'star' or 'meteor'. Monstrous discourse embraces ambiguity, and although Ponge is not working consciously within this mode of language, he accommodates it unconsciously by questioning and playing with the notion of what is and is not the appropriate or correct word for the thing it signifies. To quote Williams again, this further interpretation of what a deformed discourse entails is pertinent to Ponge's intention to ascertain the true meaning or essence of Fautrier's work via a discursive rather than direct use of language:

The monstrous enigma deforms the fundamentals of signification to communicate what otherwise could not be communicated. While in normal discourse the similarity and appropriateness of the sign to its signified are the criteria for effectiveness and right representation, in deformed discourse similitude is not intended but rather rejected in favour of jarring and unsettling inaccuracy and impropriety on which enigmatic understanding is based.⁵⁹⁵

A good example of Ponge's enigmatic prose revealing the incommunicable is in a passage that tries to understand Fautrier's comprehension of the executioner and the victim.

⁵⁹⁴ Butler, 'Fautrier's First Critics', in *Jean Fautrier*, p. 48.

⁵⁹⁵ Williams, *Deformed Discourse*, p. 85.

What Ponge ends up communicating and revealing, unintentionally, is his own place in the painting as victim, and his feeling of compassion towards the sufferer as rendered by Fautrier. On the one hand, the passage reveals a divergence from his desire to mimic and emulate the subject, as he uncharacteristically divulges his awareness of art history and politics. On the other, in the exceptionally long sentence that describes religious depictions and other ways of dealing with horror in art comparable to Fautrier, we experience rapid speech and breathlessness, and a loss of control over subject and himself. If anything is mimicked here, it is Ponge's early and primal fear of not having enough time to say what he means. I quote the passage in full to convey something rarely witnessed in his work – allusions to social themes and historical events, combined with, and leading to his own emotional place within his rendition of other historical and artistic practices:

And just as the artists of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance rarely painted Christ's executioners, and we do not see the act of the crucifixion figured on their canvases (I mean that we do not see soldiers with hammers nailing the body to the cross or with hoists bearing up the cross) and they have, on the contrary, often, at every moment, on all occasions, represented a victim's body, taking it as a pretext for their study of the nude, undoubtedly because they considered Christ to be the ultimate man and his body the ultimate masculine body and, as such, they naturally identified with him, like them – although it would have been undoubtedly more logical and easier to stigmatise Nazi horrors by showing the act of torture, so as to leave no doubt as to the origin of, the cause of, the responsibility for these mutations – Fautrier did not have a taste for painting the executioner, did not feel it heart and soul; he therefore did not have the power. Whereas the victim, the victim, ah! I know very well that I could have been it, I feel it heart and soul.⁵⁹⁶

Ponge deepens this understanding of himself by comparing his reactions to the artist's approach to his materials and his own identification with Fautrier's lack of fear of his subject matter, and determination to speak and overcome the actual terror of the subject with a view to finding resolution. Ponge questions this identification and seems baffled

⁵⁹⁶ Ponge, Appendix A, *Notes sur les Otages*, in *Jean Fautrier*, p. 174.

almost by his ability to occupy both the role of victim and perpetrator, but it is clear that in talking about Fautrier he is referring to his own determination and obsession with objects and speech, and his will to resist silence no matter how traumatic the experience:

Fautrier has no fear of the subject. There is a rage of expression (of the tube of color) with him. He did not take up painting to say nothing, or to say just about anything. This is the *tour de force*. How does he do it? How is it that I recognize horror there, and the sympathy provoked in me elsewhere by the torture of human flesh, the deformation of human bodies and faces; horror, remorse, and, at the same time, the will to conquer, resolution?⁵⁹⁷

This is a telling paragraph in terms of revealing Ponge as using his writing on a subject outside of him to think about himself far more openly than we would have expected from his closed attitude towards self-expression in his work. However, Ponge failed to reach the stage of answering this rare question about his own identification with something outside of him satisfactorily. Instead, we have a strong collection of exemplary texts amidst the art criticism where we witness Ponge trying to form his identity in an agonising manner, as though he was climbing out of what he saw as the comfortable shell of the object into the uncomfortable skin of himself as a fallible human. This awkward transition is evident in the depiction of himself in a piece composed in close proximity to his art criticism, and which bears a resemblance to a portrait of Ponge by Dubuffet in paint.⁵⁹⁸ Among the few portraits of Ponge's face, these two examples wrench him back into a position of instability and monstrosity: a place of deformity within himself, his poetic work and the perception of him by others.

⁵⁹⁷ Ponge, Appendix A, *Notes sur les Otages*, p. 174.

⁵⁹⁸ Jean Dubuffet, 'Ponge Feu Follet Noir', 1947. Part of a series of portraits and texts for the Beyeler Collection at the gallery in Lausanne. Image found online at: <http://remue.net/cont/ponge.html>.

Monstrous Depictions of the Poet via the Artist

In one of his 1947 portraits of Francis Ponge, Jean Dubuffet entitles the poet and friend 'Ponge Feu Follet Noir',⁵⁹⁹ the black Will-o'-the-Wisp. One of the more complex and mysterious monsters in folklore, Will-o'-the-Wisp's name derives from the Latin, 'Ignis Fatuus', which translates as 'foolish fire', and the beautiful façade of this devilish spirit, in contrast to its purpose, is emulated in the binary disposition of its name. The first definition is that of a phosphorescent light that appears hovering over swampland at night, and is perhaps caused by a spontaneous combustion of gases emitted by decaying organic matter. The second is that of something misleading, charming and deceptive, 'a hope or an aim that proves illusory'.⁶⁰⁰ In mythology, these sprites or aberrations dance in the air like tiny flames above water and marshes, but lead those that follow their beauty into death. This, of course, is not so much a paradox as a well-known understanding of the nature of the devil, and monsters in general. Will-o'-the-Wisp, in its coalescence of the original Greek etymology of the word monster, 'teras', meaning both horrible and beautiful, encapsulates an important part of what characterises the dichotomous language of Ponge's poems, particularly when placed in conjunction with his art criticism. Drawing attention to the importance of art and artists in his work and life, this final section not only examines Ponge's use of language in his essays on art and artists, but also the similarity his somewhat idiosyncratic art criticism bears in relation to the violent and monstrous registers and images in a number of the nature poems of Le Parti pris des choses. The edition from which most of the translations that I have used

⁵⁹⁹ Jean Dubuffet, 'Ponge Feu Follet Noir', 1947.

⁶⁰⁰ 'Ignis Fatuus', Encarta World English Dictionary, 1999.

derive, is the 1998 Faber collection of his selected poems,⁶⁰¹ whose front cover hosts another of Dubuffet's 1947 portraits of Ponge.⁶⁰²

This portrait is another side of the poet according to the artist, portrayed as though the writer has assimilated the horror and strangeness of his subjects in art and the contortions of his language during his life-long scrutiny of objects. The painting offers a crude and deformed rendition, with Ponge looking almost burnt to cinders, sick, knotted and strange, from the artist's sculptured use of paint. Positioned in a black box situated in the middle of a pillar-box red surround, the beige-grey head and chest of the poet looks out from the centre of the cover. Unsettling blotches of red – as though his face has been scratched and the background allowed to bleed through to his features – are distributed over his skin: on his neck, perhaps from the 360° twist it seems to have endured; at the corners of his strained upturned mouth; on his ears, which have been squashed or bashed into the dents of his overstated spherical head; in his nostrils, bringing to mind a school-yard fight; and finally just beneath each eye, a smudge and a cut, descending towards the corners of his grimace. From a distance, he looks devoid of innards; his neck without throat or larynx, his chest a hollow outer crust of dried mud, or charred tree bark, his skin all surface grain and starved, but held closer to the eye, there is an argument to be made for the opposite case, albeit perverse: in the lines and squiggles that roam over his head, and the blend of grey, black, beige and red, his head resembles a child-like impression of a brain, as though he wore his inner substance outside of him, lending him a look not just of absurdity, but vulnerability. Among these lines are two highly pronounced arches for eyebrows, their shape of surprise, undercut, or ridiculed, by the marked differences in each eye – one, the worried smudge of an old man, the other a pecked-out hole of a boy. Above all, the most disturbing feature is his mouth: half human, half animal (the philtrum is an almost fleshy line which gives the lower part of

⁶⁰¹ Ponge, *Francis Ponge: Selected Poems*, (London: Faber, 1998).

⁶⁰² 'Francis Ponge', 1947, Jean Dubuffet, courtesy of the Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam.

his face, the look of a lion in caricature), and sealed in an awkward banana-shaped grin, locked and functionless: a non-portal, tongue-less and paralysed. From one perspective, the image is reminiscent of one of Beckett's floating heads; from another, we open the front door to the local, exhausted, benign, but ineffective smile of a country parson, nearing the last of his rounds. Finally, held at a distance, we find we are face to face with the cartoon image of a pig.

Although Ponge, as far as I know, never attempted to render himself in paint, and of course, evaded discussing himself directly and at length in words, in a text entitled 'Thought as Grimace' written in 1941 and translated by Cid Corman, Ponge makes this surprising comment:

I really should apply myself one day to describing my physical comportment in the presence of ideas, when I'm thinking....My grimace of mental tension, so marked that I surely would be taken for a nut, if anyone got a look at my face at such moments.⁶⁰³

The description of his working and writing face that follows is an uncomfortably amusing, and revealingly neurotic rendition of himself, many details of which are comparable to Dubuffet's portrait of 1947:

THE GRIMACE: lips drawn tight, jaws locked, nostrils and ears wide open (though noise bothers me at such times extremely), eyebrows knit, forehead wrinkled; the expression in my eyes much harder to grasp: a bit resolute and remote...

In sum, a very dour expression, both of attention and of conquest. A face prey to ideas, both watchful and ready (as at a village festival table). This mask, on a body rigorously immobile, fixed, preserving the same pose for hours...⁶⁰⁴

In the way that this piece moves from Ponge's physical experience of writing – the sudden snoozes and 'fits of hunger' – to what reads as a nightmarish metaphorical

⁶⁰³ Ponge, 'Thought as Grimace' in *Things*, p. 92.

⁶⁰⁴ Ponge, 'Thought as Grimace', p. 92.

experience, based on being interrupted by distracting thoughts ('for, at certain moments, from every point of the horizon incessantly arise these flocks, these ill-formed groups that require one's close attention'),⁶⁰⁵ Ponge's 'Grimace' is a sketch of the painful self-reflection to come in one of his last poems, 'Le Pré (The Meadow)' (1960-64), and its draft publication La Fabrique du Pré (The Making of the Meadow) (1971). In conjunction with both of these poems, Dubuffet's portrait of Ponge, far from stultified, reveals as much about the poet, the poetry, and the artist, as it does the hybrids of forms which emerge from the singular act of looking at humans indirectly, and, as Robert Hughes notes, the power to alienate man even from his flesh:

Dubuffet's art speaks directly to anyone who wants to abolish the humanist past... His images assert the opposite: a nude becomes a lump of hairy pink clay with a pinhead, swagging numbles (sic) and a skin so gouged by fissures, cracks and graffiti that it is on the verge of turning into a landscape. The hierarchy of human to animal to vegetable to mineral is abolished.⁶⁰⁶

In terms of revealing cracks such as those above and other signs of fallibility whereby the ambition to hide behind objects is reversed, both of these portraits of Ponge can be compared with 'Le Pré' and La Fabrique du Pré. Both of these pieces explore Ponge's physical experience of writing and speaking in a similar manner to 'Thought as Grimace', by way of its inclusion of the basic human needs of sleep and hunger and their impact on the physical process of writing. I include 'The Meadow' and its draft version here because together they act as a bridge between the poems and the art, and serve as a climax of them both in their manifestation of how human needs prey on the ability to remain objective.

⁶⁰⁵ Ponge, 'Thought as Grimace', p. 93.

⁶⁰⁶ Robert Hughes, 'Dubuffet: Realism as Absurdity', Time Magazine (Monday, April 30, 1973).

'The Making of The Meadow'

'Le Pré', written before the other late and open poem Soap, demarcates a correspondence or cross between Ponge's determination to write about art un-analytically, and the personal dilemmas he faced during the composition of an object poem. In order to fully appreciate this correspondence it is important to include Ponge's drafts of the poem, La Fabrique du Pré⁶⁰⁷ (The Making of the Meadow) because of the way they candidly record and verbalise Ponge's experience of the inability to speak and the way the physical sensation of being mute affects writing from the moment of contemplation through to the physical act of putting the pen to paper. Akin to the retrospective relationship between the publication dates of 'The Pebble' and 'Introduction to the Pebble', La Fabrique du Pré was published nearly seven years after the poem in book form in 1971, and is a photographic reproduction of most of the early 1960s draft versions of 'Le Pré', full of notes, paintings, photos of fields, sketches, Latin names, as well as observations of Ponge enduring days and nights of mental and physical anguish, alongside immense highs and feelings of relief. 'Le Pré' stands as a testament to Ponge's anxieties not only coming up to the surface of his writing, but being exposed to the public as for the first time he agreed to publish the rough drafts, and almost in their entirety. Tel Quel first published the poem in 1964, and Gallimard later in 1967.

In her introduction to the only published English translation of The Making of the Pré,⁶⁰⁸ Lee Fahnestock gives the impression that finally a kind of airing has taken place in the poet's work. She states that Ponge's interest in displaying not merely the finished piece, but also the process of the poet's thought was an early and long-standing one, but one that is more apparent in what she views as the comparative ease of the longer pieces:

⁶⁰⁷ Francis Ponge, La Fabrique du Pré, (Albert Skira: Genève, 1971).

⁶⁰⁸ Francis Ponge, The Making of The Pré, trans. Lee Fahnestock (Columbia and London: University of Missouri Press, 1979).

Since early in his career, Ponge has insisted that any shame in releasing unfinished work is far outweighed by the value of displaying a process of developing thought. An open searching form, a 'journal of aesthetic apprehension,' developed almost spontaneously in contrast to the closed perfection of the first prose poems.⁶⁰⁹

What is interesting about this statement is the fact that it takes place in the introduction to her translation that renders with acute sensitivity Ponge's ongoing struggles with verbalisation. Ponge was obsessive rather than spontaneous, and The Making of the Pré takes us back to some of his early experiences of speech, as well as keeping us informed that these verbal trials are not yet fully resolved, but continue to haunt the writer.

Throughout the drafts, there are moments which relive Ponge's first exposure to speech and inadequacy during his oral exams. The physical despair of trying to write about this subject, that of a meadow or field, is painful to read in light of how much hope Ponge has invested in the object, to counteract the contingent nature of speech. If we recall the section of 'Introduction to the Pebble', where Ponge slights humankind for its inadequate use of language and objects, we witness Ponge decades later falling into the same trap, but less out of neglect than pure exhaustion.⁶¹⁰ It is during the composition of 'The Meadow', in The Making of the Meadow on the night of February 23rd, 1963 at 10 o'clock (he dates and times the sections throughout), that Ponge seems to collapse and find himself inside his own criticism of humankind. The following succession of lines from the text, one of his longest and most tortured in parts, has a terrifying accumulative effect which becomes increasingly Beckettian in terms of a despair which is both using as well as fighting against silence. In light of the fact that this is the only available English translation of these drafts, and the way it reveals in detail, key moments in Ponge's subjective experience of writing, it is worth quoting the passages in full. The following

⁶⁰⁹Fahnestock, introduction, The Making of The Pré, p. 10.

⁶¹⁰ See Ponge, 'Introduction to the Pebble' in The Power of Language, p. 75: 'It is really unbearable to think in what a lowly rink, and for centuries, words have gone around, the mind and reality of men. In order to understand this, one only has to focus one's attention on the first object in sight... the most basic things remain to be said about it.'

extracts mark what Fahnestock considers to be 'the lowest emotional point in the struggle for the poem'.⁶¹¹

Here I am tonight completely discouraged, as though lost. Nothing. Things aren't working out at all. I realize that I no longer know how to write (I mean to hold a pen). My glasses seem unbearable too.

Completely discouraged
(for days and days) But what is new is that it takes this form (incapacity of pen, of glasses).

The Pré is one of the most difficult things in the world to say.
Why? Why is that?

'The Pré, agreeable surface, moraine, not good, too rocky, of the forests'; that is all that comes back to me spontaneously from my long labor, of so many days for so many years (three and a half). Nothing else.⁶¹²

This level of intimacy is rare in Ponge's work, and indicates a unique and significant moment in his work where he exposes his vulnerability in the face of speech and the object, and where he will show the horror of the poem's creation in order to reveal himself as a human, rather than as one of his objects. Although the agony of Ponge's expressive process is apparent, the difference here as compared with 'The Pebble' is that Ponge is not apologizing for his 'thick elegiac expressions' and telling the reader to look instead at the object. Instead, Ponge seems to have forgotten the reader altogether and seems so absorbed in the absence of the language he needs for the writing of 'The Meadow', that the reader cannot help note the irony of the fact that he wanted these notes to be published. The section which follows enhances the absence of the reader, and in the absence of the listener Ponge physically collapses and thereby becomes absent as a writer, and speaker:

Or then again (Does this mean that I will have to lay myself down there?)

⁶¹¹ Fahnestock, introduction, *The Making of The Pré*, p. 13.

⁶¹² Ponge, *The Making of The Pré*, p. 103.

I'll go all right I'll go and lie down
And then it will be all over.

Is that perhaps why I chose it (that I chose this subject)? Because I have to, will have to lie there, lay myself down, stretch out. Because I am no longer able, faced with this subject, (faced with any subject) to do anything but stretch out there (and be quiet, to remain in silence) and to drift right off.⁶¹³

This broken passage echoes the vocabulary, tone and circular word order of Beckett's much quoted extract from 'The Unnamable'. Here, Ponge's questions are replaced by Beckett's suppositions, but the tone, and the weight of the inability to use words to communicate something other than the inability itself, is characteristic of both pieces:

It will be I, you must go on, I can't go on, you must go on, I'll go on, you must say words, as long as there are any, until they find me, until they say me, strange pain, strange sin, you must go on, perhaps it's done already, perhaps they have said me already, perhaps they have carried me to the threshold of my story, before the door that opens on my story, that would surprise me, if it opens, it will be I, it will be the silence, where I am, I don't know, I'll never know, in the silence you don't know, you must go on, I can't go on, I'll go on.⁶¹⁴

The closed nature of these sections is predominantly created by the repetition of certain words, and in Ponge's case, a certain image, which leads the language towards the end 'silence', and the void of language when it only communicates itself, and reiterates the subject's desire or compulsion to speak. The linguistic inability to use language adequately seems also to turn in on the writer physically, and with Ponge not only do we observe the writer burdened with the weight of his instruments, the essential objects of his craft, but later on in the morning of June 28th, 1964, Ponge experiences words slipping between his fingers. The physical burden this time is not so much related to his pen, which points to writing, but to the mouth, and the bodily process of language from the human's point of view. Ponge circles repeatedly around the same question: 'How

⁶¹³ Ponge, *The Making of the Pré*, p. 103.

⁶¹⁴ Samuel Beckett, *Trilogy: Molloy. Malone Dies. The Unnamable* (London: Calder, 1994), p. 418.

could we possess it if it did not come out of our mouths',⁶¹⁵ and his emphasis here on the human act of speech rather than on writing is again unique in terms of providing an insight into his own proclaimed awareness of spoken expression:

Mere gratitude from then on obliges us from then in turn to call on speech, to say it.

'We wanted one, and here one is. There is one. There is a *pré*. But it keeps too great a distance. How to have it without being there. In short, how to have it without being it. And how to be it without saying it, without bringing it out of ourselves, of our mouths. How to be it without remaking it in words. How could we possess it if it did not come out of our mouths. From that moment on speech swells in our mouths (in our throats). We have no reason for being other than to say it. We cannot do otherwise, be otherwise.'

...

Immediately speech gathers in our mouths, amasses, disperses itself in a mass. And then how, once we recognise this can we say it?

...

'This must be formulated better, must be resaid'.⁶¹⁶

The feeling of suffocation in this passage is two-fold. First, in the sense of words gathering but not being released, the poem gives the impression of language closing in on Ponge the more he tries to use words. The paradox of the need to release while at the same time breathe, and expression being the very act that causes this feeling of suffocation, is similar to a story told by Paul Auster in a poetic essay on speech called 'White Spaces'. The story is based on the arctic explorer Peter Freuchen, and stands as a useful and compelling metaphor for Ponge's experience of suffocation and paralysis. The story of Freuchen, as recalled by Auster, is that whilst in a blizzard the explorer built an igloo for what he believed would be a form of protection until the storm passed. This shelter, however, turns against him in the most terrifying and unexpected way, for his breath begins to freeze the walls until they begin to layer in towards him. In the way it is

⁶¹⁵ Ponge, *The Making of the Pré*, p. 155.

⁶¹⁶ Ponge, *The Making of the Pré*, p. 155.

retold by Auster according to his memory of the book, the terrifying message underpinning the story is that breath can cause death rather than life:

Freuchen began to notice that the walls of his little shelter were gradually closing in on him. Because of the particular weather conditions outside, his breath was literally freezing to the walls, and with each breath the walls became that much thicker, the igloo that much smaller, until eventually there was almost no room left for his body. It is surely a frightening thing, to imagine breathing yourself into a coffin of ice.⁶¹⁷

This story acts as a visual equivalent to Ponge's predicament in the above extract from Making of the Pré: Ponge is compelled to speak as Freuchen needs to breathe, but rather than bring a sense of life or relief, the words intensify a feeling of annihilation and entrapment.

Similarly, the second feeling of suffocation that emerges in the image of speech gathering in the throat, and needing to get out, is seen elsewhere in Ponge's life, about twenty years prior to the poem's composition, in his 'aesthetic sob' of 1945, which took him by as much surprise as his aphasiac experiences of 1918 and 1919. In almost perfect correspondence with the above section of The Making of The Pré, Ponge describes this outburst:

As we were coming down from the studio, Braque at Paulhan's request, opened the dining-room door on the ground floor. The room itself opens onto the living room, so that from the open door, opposite me as I stepped inside, I saw only this: a rather large painting, higher than it was wide, striped vertically by a rather broad black band, the pipe of a little cast-iron stove above a plate of fish, painted with several touches of bright colours, including some reds. No sooner had this canvas leaped to my eyes than I experienced what I have called elsewhere the aesthetic sob (that 'aesthetic' doesn't exactly please me now), well, call it a kind of spasm between the pharynx and the esophagus, and my eyes filled with tears.⁶¹⁸

⁶¹⁷ Paul Auster, 'White Spaces' 1978-1979, in Selected Poems, (London: Faber, 1998), p. 87.

⁶¹⁸ Ponge, Georges Braque, p. 53.

The fact that prior to this Ponge reflects on how he cannot remember what was said (as he admits, 'neither man was particularly garrulous, nor am I'), enhances the impression of a release after silence, which is explored in the poem. As he puts it: 'There was, if not a great deal said, at least a great deal considered, scrutinised, registered. Doubtless for me, the cup, after that hour, was full, for it then, several moments later, overflowed'.

In conjunction with his "This must be formulated better, must be resaid," Ponge's retraction of 'aesthetic' sob as a word is also a way of retracting it as an action, a thing in itself. Even in the naming of the emotion, he feels as if he is letting something physical down through language, and remains guarded and embarrassed throughout the telling. Indeed, the act of telling itself seems to carry with it the experience as strongly as if he were reliving the moment again:

Doubtless, they – Paulhan, at least – realized my condition. We immediately said goodbye. Even today I realize I cannot tell you any more about that house in the Rue du Douanier; I must move on to something else: let me tell you about the house at Varengueville.⁶¹⁹

However, no sooner does he begin this description, a few sentences later he says: 'There, I have said enough about that', and then proceeds to return to himself, in spite of himself. This rather awkward, defensive, and nervous chain of thought follows:

Because I am not in favor of the principle of non-contradiction, and because I need it (need to contradict myself) in order to proceed to what comes next, and what concludes these pages, I must go back (against too, all the conventions or 'proprieties') to my sob of 1945.

When I tried to explain it to myself, to explain to myself this kind of nervous collapse which is not at all customary with me, I reminded myself that we were then emerging, barely emerging from the ordeals of the Second World War, and that we had not at all emerged from what at the time were called restrictions. In short, we were still very underfed. Then I had never wept during action (there were other things to do): so that was inevitable, on the first good occasion, that I should do so, however briefly.⁶²⁰

⁶¹⁹ Ponge, *Georges Braque*, p. 53.

⁶²⁰ Ponge, *Georges Braque*, p. 54.

Ponge then hurries on to say that his reason is only 'an image: the image of a disturbance much older, and much deeper',⁶²¹ but it is too late for suppressed responses, as for the first time we witness here Ponge exposing a moment in his writing where he is trying to explain himself to himself, rather than to others.

It is the narrative of the enormous gap between Ponge's unforeseen experiences of aphasia in 1918 and 1919, through to his unexpected sob of 1945, and finally his endurance of suffocating silences amidst a compulsion to speak in The Making of the Meadow in the first half of the 1960s, that makes Ponge one of the most significant poets of the Twentieth-century in terms of revealing the unfathomable manifestations of the poet's spoken voice in relation to the reality of objects and the written word. The Making of the Meadow comprises the essential paradox of Ponge's relationship with language and the object, in the sense that it records the points where language is, and more importantly continues to be inadequate in the face of the object, but also for the first time publishes these inadequacies openly. Ponge's decision to expose the imperfections and nightmares of his voice alongside the more polished voice of the actual poem marks the first notable acknowledgment not only of his failures during his ambition to side with things and deflect his own voice, but a closure on the attempt to continue his scrutiny of what he perceived as silence in things and in himself.

⁶²¹ Ponge, Georges Braque, p. 54.

Conclusion

The work of Francis Ponge is one of paradox: it is the triumphant failure of a voice that hid behind hundreds of objects in order to resist becoming an object of study in itself. By the end of his writing career, however, Ponge is finally seen, the object swallowed in the act, and the opposite of siding with things reached. Ponge failed, it might be argued, in the best possible way – by displaying a resolute devotion to his ambition, but in the process eventually listening to the fact that the voice of the object was ultimately his own, for all its strange and awkward character.

This thesis, beginning with Ponge's unexpected silence in his oral exam, and tracking the repercussions of his experience of a form of aphasia and fear of silence throughout his life's work, ends with the poet as a figure of his own creation, and confronted by the voice he tried to resist. The disgust and rage that he had towards both World Wars, in terms of their impact on both the individual and collective voice, and his conscious turning to things of the natural and ordinary world was by no means a reassuring or uncomplicated solution to his attempt to create a language and poetry of objects, outside of a language of humans. Part of the reason for his failure, as we have seen, was based on the conflicts he experienced in Paris (at a time of general intense literary and artistic creativity) between privacy, anger and shyness on the one hand, and curiosity and exposure on the other. The manifestation of this conflict is mirrored in the change he experiences with his language between the early and late texts, where he moves from behind the object to becoming more conscious of his relationship with himself in terms of his verbal inadequacies. In this respect, his poetry stands as a diary of his experience of being increasingly watched as he emerges as a writer after his relative absence from the text and the literary scene during the First World War to his exposure

after the Second War as he forges relationships with the likes of Breton, Sartre, Paulhan, Picasso and Braque.

In comparison to those writers he knew in Paris, Ponge was not well known, but his contribution to Twentieth-century poetry is significant for its exploration and analysis of the role of speech in poetry, and the inevitable interdependence of the spoken and written word and process, in spite of their apparent differences. What we have seen in his work is a kind of poetic narrative of the relationship between the spoken and written word through the key phases of his life, built around the fundamental conflict between his resolve to absent himself from the text, and his increasing neurosis about retaining and achieving his aim to 'side with things'. Ironically, Ponge was forced to look more and more at his own words to check his verbal progress, which is complicated in various ways according to the challenge each object presents to his use of language. What is the most significant outcome of this narrative is his eventual and conscious incorporation of his drafts into his poems, as opposed to the incidental inclusion of his process in some of the early open texts. These longer prose poems, where he is really testing the boundaries of the form, stand as useful examples of the struggles and repetitions experienced during the writing process, and are an exciting and significant resource not only for students of Ponge, but for the practitioner of creative and critical writing.

To study Ponge's verbal and written conflicts and choices made during the creation of a poem, from a biographical, cultural, poetic and literary perspective, rather than a theoretical one, has led to my enriched understanding of the craft, as well as psychological traumas undergone through the process of creative writing. In terms of a wider perspective and still pertinent to the writing process, because Ponge is examined here as being closer in theme, style, approach and method to writers such as Eliot, Beckett and Sarraute, rather than to the post-structural theories of, for example, Derrida and Kristeva, Ponge is seen as a critical figure in the development of the shifting

boundaries between poetry and prose, the object poem within prose poetry and also the incorporation of spoken thought (bordering on monologue), and external observation within the text itself. In the thesis, I have sought to reveal and contextualise the results of Ponge's paradoxical interweaving of the voice of his biographical life with that of his poems. Only towards the end of his life does Ponge give the impression that he is aware of this paradox. In Soap, he declares that in this object he has found the perfect metaphor for speech:

I have chosen this subject because it was necessary to find that one – and perhaps the only one – which reassures me, which justifies speech – and even stammering, gibberish.⁶²²

Ponge's late acknowledgement of the object as a means of exposing imperfection in speech, and one that is also reassuring because or in spite of this exposure, is revealing of his early naïve denial of his voice, and of his reactionary distinctions between writing as clean and speech as impure. Paradoxically, and indeed ironically, the object Ponge has chosen here not only foams and babbles with use, but it also shrinks and gets rid of dirt and imperfection. If Ponge actually believed soap to be a perfect metaphor for his voice at this late stage in his life and writing, in some ways, then, we have come full circle, even slipped backwards. There is, however, one highly redemptive aspect to this metaphor: as the soap disappears through his use of it, we are ultimately left with the subject behind the object: Francis Ponge himself, in all his complex relationship with language and the art of the prose poem.

⁶²² Ponge, Soap, p.50.

Part Three: Prose Poems

Introduction

This Part marks the end of the critical component of the thesis and starts with a personal account of my discovery of Ponge, the prose poem and my specific interest in his neurosis around speech and objects. The most important link between Ponge's poems and my own is not so much based on form, but on the investigation of the correspondence between expression and objects based on trauma. In my case, this trauma stems from my mother's epilepsy and her death. Where my thesis explores Ponge's neuroses around expression, and the first sign of these anxieties in the silence of his oral exam, in this section I posit that my interest, and reason for the thesis stems from the impact of my mother's epilepsy on objects and the spoken word. Before reaching the crux of the chapter, however, below is a brief sketch of my discovery of Ponge and the prose poem.

I was first introduced to Ponge in 1993, when I was nineteen. My closest school friend had sent me a bilingual edition of the Robert Bly translation while she was in Canada. Years later I thought I had lost this edition, but rediscovered it when I was living with my uncle and aunt in a house in Sussex, the barn attached to the house full of my old furniture and boxed-up books. By the time I had organised a day in this barn to retrieve a dozen texts which I needed for a Creative Writing MA, I was twenty-five. When I was finally in possession of Ponge's poems again, mice had eaten one corner of the book and the pages were slightly yellow and cloth-like from damp.

When I discovered the prose poem consciously during my MA, I considered my discovery to be through Anne Carson, and continued to forget about Ponge. In addition to this I was told by some of my peers on the course that my poetry read like prose, so

why was I not on the prose course, less a question than a depreciation of my decision to write poetry. Divisions were harsh in those days, and so was my reply. After enjoying Anne Carson to the point of laughter, I sat down a year later and began to read Baudelaire, and knew immediately that I wanted to find out about the prose poem. Back then, in 1999, I considered the prose poem to be a rare form that had barely been written, let alone read about and researched. I was looking forward to being some kind of pioneer of the genre in England, which involved writing in a new style as well as form, and investigating its history and origins in France. I decided to apply to do a Ph.D on Baudelaire and the prose poem, and as a way into the form for my own writing, started to turn some of my lined poems into prose poems. Eventually my approach to subject matter began to change and I realised that where my lined poems were predominantly autobiographical and tended to use the pronoun 'I', the prose poem shifted my perspective from inside to outside. Baudelaire's prose poems, in the way they observed and commented on society through looking at objects and the role they played in the lives of children and adults, rich and poor, began to retrain my eye and approach to subject matter.

Whereas before I had focused on my mother's death and had become quite obsessive about exploring how death influenced my use of language, I began to step back and look at the scenes I had created from a distance. I began to see the objects in the room I had chosen to write about, rather than my own thoughts and emotional responses. In conjunction with moving towards concrete images, the 'I' changed to 'she'. A shift in pronoun of this kind may not appear radical, but it was significant. I was outside of the poem now, and able to see the situations I chose to write about far more clearly. Some readers of my work said my poems were becoming cold, and interpreted this objectivity as a usurper of the mystery and comparative warmth of my lined work. But I was enjoying the fact that I was hardening reality in my work through focussing

less directly on trying to understand death and my mother's illness and looking at the objects and the role of things that existed on a smaller and quieter level within these terrifying situations. I began to use things or objects as a way of shifting the responsibility of understanding, or coping with death and illness, away from myself. The impact of these painful and incomprehensible subjects could now fall on the objects that were around my mother, and our lives. The different roles of what were otherwise incidental things my family had bought and accumulated, were now significant and useful for language rather than for more practical or aesthetic purposes. My writing developed because I was learning from looking rather than feeling, and coupled with this was an urge to communicate, and be clear and paced, rather than writing through anger and confusion, and subconsciously addressing the poem to myself. An awareness of speech, partly through my exposure to the prose poem, which generally relies on the rhythms and tones of conversations, began to emerge in my work. The possibilities of opening poems with overheard snippets of speech was something that appealed to the fact that my poems were increasingly based on the idea of things that I had found, or re-discovered – that were not a direct part of me, but were nonetheless useful and to which I was becoming very attentive.

My attentiveness is now governed by my determination to observe and record examples of the communication and relationship between objects and the spoken word – the way the spoken word is influenced by the presence of things in situations from my life and the lives of others, and how these ordinary things change through being acknowledged and expressed in poetry. I include nature in this study of things, and observe the way creatures from the natural world mirror or influence what I do with words. The ant, for example, of 'Little Sisyphus', in picking up stone, carrying it and dropping it from its mouth, mimics the movement of the writer using and dropping words from the mouth, and finally through the pen onto the page. I think, then speak

and then write. These things happen very closely together, but always in that order no matter how indistinct the lines between them.

My poems about nature and the close study of moments that occur in nature, as is the case with the ant, the bleeding frog, and the station butterflies, have all been written since reading Ponge. Where Baudelaire influenced my eye for close-ups of people, especially children, Ponge re-trained the way I look at nature, and instead of trying to write universally about the natural world, he gave me the confidence or the insight to observe and meditate on one thing or one moment, and that ideally, language emerges from stopping in front of the thing itself. Following the thoughts and words of the mind while it is scrutinising one thing is crucial to the containment and succinct nature of the prose poem. Unlike Ponge, I have not ventured from the block-like paragraph and brevity of the prose poem. Although I acknowledge that he developed the object poem in prose, and that his correspondences between poetry, prose, the object, and the process of his mind as it observes are all crucial to an understanding of the prose poem, my own definition is still forming, and is partly doing so against Ponge.

Our ambitions for the form are quite different, and I am less driven by discovering the innate quality of things and the mimetic density of the word relative to that thing, than I am by using situations from my past and my present and observing circumstances and moments through objects and the words that are spoken around those objects. The physicality of my work emerges through observing where the mouth makes, or is forced into, contact with things. Ponge is far more intellectual about language than I am. I invert his approach towards objects and language. Where he is interested in the roots of words, and the way that original name of the thing can re-inform, or refresh the object, I am interested in the first time that objects are used for what they were not intended, and how this new role for the object affects language. In other words, how we speak about the object after this new role, and how it influences our choice of words

based on the fact that the object is displaced from its original intention, and inadvertently given a new name. I am not talking about symbolism, but rather about physical acts, many of them violent, and at source all connected to my mother's illness and death.

My interest in Ponge's difficulty with speech, his turning to objects, and the way that they fragment and break apart his ability to speak about them fluently and adequately, causing the equivalent of stutters, and aphasia in his work, goes back to my mother's epilepsy. My conversations with her were constantly interrupted by her attacks, and so I was exposed to a disjointed, broken, fragmented and violent relationship with language from an early age. The aural experience of my mother's clattering throat, and then sudden silence, and the destruction she wrought on objects in the house as well as my confidence to express myself were deeply unsettling. With speech, I was afraid that if I said certain things I would cause one of her attacks, so I learnt to be conscious of what I said, and as a result my relationship with language veers from being incredibly controlled, edited, and disciplined to unhinged and unchecked. Throughout these stages, I am always self-conscious about my use of language. Ponge's move between the short, rather tightly controlled object poems to the lengthier more neurotic and hectic combination of his own language and what he hoped was the object's, and not his own, is an approach and change to which I can relate.

Many of my poems refer to images of the mouth, and most of these are disturbing. My investigation of the mouth and monsters in Ponge's poems has as much to do with the impact that my mother's attacks had on my relationship with speech, as it does my relationship with her epilepsy and the objects I associate with those attacks. For example, my poem 'Portraits' is about my memory of having to force a wooden spoon into her mouth so that she would not swallow or bite her tongue during an attack. In 'Via Negativa' I remember the wall against which her face fell, and the words and spit of the punk towering above her, telling her not to grovel. Instead of using direct speech

from the punk, however, I have displaced his hostility onto the flowers, their shaking heads a sign of disapproval and judgement. In the aftermath of a situation like this, the things that cannot see or speak like us seem to comment anyway. It is this kind of fusion between things and speech which I think gives my poems a haunting quality that is more powerful for not coming directly from myself or another person. Things move from silence into expression and play an active rather than passive role, and while during the situation things were done to objects and they were broken, or used in ways for which they were not made, in the poems they are asserted and used to tell the story from another point of view. They no longer break, nor fall, nor get lost, but instead show how what happened to them can happen to language. Objects not only contain memory, but through their role in memory, aid and influence the speech that tries to make sense of recollection.

Margiad Evans, a Twentieth-century Welsh writer, in her autobiography, A Ray of Darkness, gives an account of her late discovery at the age of forty-one that she was an epileptic, and writes the narrative of how this shaped her life and influenced her language. Something that Evans wrote in the book about her discovery of her first fit, and how she remembered or was able to make sense of and cope with some of the later attacks, has slotted into a gap between my study of Ponge and the roots of this study in my experience of my mother's illness. Evans calculated when she came round from the first attack, that she had had a fit not so much by knowing what an epileptic fit was, nor because she felt dizzy and sick, but because of the change in the objects around her. In her words:

It was the jug that roused me, for into it we always poured our can of afternoon's milk, and I remembered that I hadn't done it.
...The whole of my experience of my first fit is as vivid and exact as this.
I got up from the floor noticing how the matting was wrunkled [sic] though the light of the single burner lamp was not bright except on the page where I had written my poem and the low ceiling.

Searching the room... I saw now that my tea-cup had been upset all over the page obliterating part of the poem... I could not remember drinking the tea, but only making it and filling the cup...The chair I'd been sitting in to write was overturned and lying on its side.

...Going over the room I told myself what had happened. I had fallen just as I was lifting the cup to drink...I had no memory of it. It had seemed as I have told – one moment filling the tea-pot and glancing at the clock, the next waking and still looking at the clock an hour later.⁶²³

The fact that 'during the examination of the room [she] did not speak...nor make any noise' is an equally potent image in relation to the fact that the objects in effect are speaking for her and telling her story.⁶²⁴ Language in this situation comes from looking at objects, and listening to how they tell her narrative. As she says towards the end of the book:

I have described four fits. Each one was remembered by me through some image. And this image in each case was a domestic tool. One was a blue-banded milk jug, another a coal bucket, another a coffee-percolator, and the last I described, the fit in hospital by a spoon swaddled in a bandage.... So the only homely and comfortable remembrances of these fits were the images they left of usual things embedded in their horror.⁶²⁵

It is in this way that I remember my mother's attacks: through observing the things around the attack and the way they changed through their role in her temporary absence. In my memory, while she is not there – or not my mother, but as I described her once, 'a monster' – the things are there, continuing to exist, and becoming animated through her strange and violent effect on them. This said, although at times the sounds of her attacks and the crash of objects are interrelated, the stutter of the sounds from her mouth, the replacement of words with noise and not meaning, was far more alienating, harrowing and difficult to comprehend and be near than the objects that fell from shelves and sometimes shattered around her.

⁶²³ Margiad Evans, *A Ray of Darkness* (London: John Calder, 1978), pp. 80-81.

⁶²⁴ Evans, *A Ray of Darkness*, p. 83.

⁶²⁵ Evans, *A Ray of Darkness*, pp. 168-169.

Now, years later, and placed in the context of a poet who experienced language and objects in a similar way, I can substitute the nightmare and the monster with the confidence that language has become a way of entering the past without being heard, seen or hurt. I would not say that I see language as a protective shell in the way that Ponge did, but that at least attempting to see things from the object's point of view, rather than your own, creates a distance and unusual perspective that helps develop your use of language, and makes you look at things in a different way. If I step back as far as I can, out of all these routes towards Ponge, my experience of him and poetry is as simple as that: a shift in perspective, and progress in my use of language, and the ambition that rather than shift radically again, what I have learnt from Ponge so far will just continue.

The Narrative of the Collection

Organising the collection thematically (without breaking it visually with subheadings) has made me realise that the narrative of the whole tells the story of the layout of my thesis, in that it begins with the hypothesis that the reason for my interest in the prose poem, objects and speech was based on a traumatic experience of language, in Ponge's case his own unexpected silence, in mine, the violent interruptions of my mother's epilepsy and then the void wrought by her death. The collection begins biographically, recounting situations where I felt estranged from my mother, partly due to her illness, and continues with the effect of death on objects, or rather death and illness seen through the object. 'Unghosting the Stone' is an example of attempting to come to terms with death through displacing the object – the necklace that never left her neck until after she died – and being able to physically distance myself from it and her without fear, guilt or a re-death.

My attempt at displacement is registered in the next selection of poems beginning with 'What Death Said', the theme of which constitutes the main part of the collection:

the prose poem and its impact on my writing. The transition between the use of 'I' and 'she' is manifest in the way that while on the one hand working in a new form – with a fresh and more physical approach to language – leads to an increasingly self-conscious use of language, I also try to relocate that self-consciousness onto objects. So, these poems observe an awareness of language, particularly spoken, and the feelings of confusion, suffocation, violence, anxiety, and determination shaped by this intense level of consciousness around words in relation to the tangible and supposedly explicable.

With Jean Piaget's theory in mind, of the child sucking on objects as the first stage of its acquisition of knowledge and perception of the world, the next section from 'The Clock' to 'Kierkegaard's Chairs' looks at children and the role of objects and language. Again, with my mother's epilepsy in the background, my observations are less centred around objects in the mouth as a positive form of discovery than a strange and upsetting one which, as in the case of the condition, pica, can be dangerous and perverted.

The haiku, 'Weather Quartet', which interrupts the prose poem cycle, is an acknowledgement of the prose poem's affinity to the focus and concision of the Japanese form, which Robert Bly mentions in What Have I Ever Lost By Dying?⁶²⁶ The poem also leads the collection away from people towards nature, and transposes my interest in speech and objects onto the natural kingdom by way of observing its relationship with speech and the concrete world in comparison to mine. The acts of devouring, absorbing, destroying and carrying were all ways in which I could explore the physical aspects of language through nature.

Finally, as I have written a prose poem called 'The Prose Poem', in the early stages of the collection, so at the end I move from nature to the object via 'An Object Poem' followed by five fairly straightforward poems about objects. The linking poem

⁶²⁶ See Robert Bly, What Have I Ever Lost By Dying, p. 80 'The nearest relative of the thing poem is not the essay or the short story but the haiku'.)

between speech, objects and my own perception of their fusion is 'Fossilized' which observes speech as visible, as much as it is an aural and physical act. With this in mind, I thought about entitling the collection, 'Visible Speech', but decided that in terms of observing language through things that do not speak a human or comprehensible language, such as objects, animals, illness, and to a large extent death, 'Speaking Without Tongues' was far more apposite a name.

Speaking Without Tongues

Church Falls

The roof quotes Gothic, then Romanesque. The floor understands neither, its aisle stone tongue cracked and splintered, each flag its own fit. The ground looks starved. Rugs are cast like bones; the dips and folds make flesh or skeleton of the faces that pattern the cloth. Each look is of a tight or a loose order according to the flow of the weave. Smoke contorts above the fabric, then cuts out and sinks into the design. Incense fills the unstitched gaps. Stutters from the organ mark the air. The minister opens his mouth as if to yawn, falls away from the lectern; static returns in his voice.

A marble falls from the pocket of a boy and tells us where the rug ends and the stone begins; he lifts another to his smile and swallows it, tugs at his mother's sleeve. Tugs again.

Defying Gravity

They are being called inside, politely yet patiently, by a young, tired looking woman who stands on the doorstep, one hand on the door-frame, the other rising towards her hair. The girl crouches, her green jumper arched smooth over her back, her palms moving, shifting flowers over the pavement, and the boy stands with his arms above his head, grinning, his tee-shirt riding over his belly, petals stopped across his hair. The sky has come into bloom and they are catching the pieces that fall. The woman shouts, steps forward – the blossom rises, spins around the children as they move in awkward twists, like pine trees thrashing in snow. Shadows stretch like elastic from their feet – they are keeping the whiteness in the air, shouting at it to fly until they are covered, until they are satisfied by its magic, until it has browned; has bruised from their kicks and hands; torn from their open mouths. The woman shouts again, is crossing the road, squinting, resisting laughter, pulling the shadows behind, like dogs at her heels, raising her arms and spreading out her hands, trying to keep the lightness in the air.

Via Negativa

My mother was not Christ, but she was spat at. My father was not Christ, but he didn't always know this. The two of them met in a garden, but they were not Adam and Eve. And when my mother fell pregnant, this was considered a miracle, and when she fell pregnant again, this was nothing short of Blake's sunflower vision. But we are none of these things. When my mother had an epileptic attack, she looked like a monster. Of course, she was not possessed, but as children we didn't always know this. What she was, was spat at. Someone we didn't know, who was tall, and more needle than skin, more threadbare than whole, and more cruel than anyone we'd read, turned his mouth to her as she fitted on the pavement, emptied his tongue, and told her to get up. Beside her, flowers shook their heads behind a newly built wall. She'd made the bricks bleed on her way down, and narrowly missed the plaque that named them the city's best roses.

Hatching

They would land in the middle of the plate, sometimes of top of the peas, spiders which had lost their grip on the light-shade and fallen. She grew up comparing the glue of a web to a cheap envelope. Her mother, at such dinners, would go red in the face and curse their life; the sound was of flies repeating themselves on a window-pane. The daughter would sit quietly, and ask for each fly to be caught. *Be careful what you bloody well ask for*, her mother said once, and shot the girl a look that landed in her stomach. She had no recollection of speaking aloud, but from that moment started to bite her lip whenever she had these thoughts. Teeth-marks formed on her mouth during the time of the spiders, and more flies, and their eggs, on the tongue of the mother.

The Sandman

Jim was his name, a bright chase of red hair fidgiting around his eyes and over his shoulders. Most of his features were awkward as though he'd fallen and let too many people put him together again, but his eyes were proud, clear and changing, the colours catching you out according to where he was; one minute the skin of lime, the next the fruit. When the mother had left, he listened carefully to the children as they repeated her words. There was no television in the house, but there were games in the cupboard and books in every room. Jim adapted quickly to playing; made sure to include both the boy and the girl equally, laughing and clapping as the boy leapt over chairs, arms outstretched, in flight across the living room floor in his pyjamas, and teasing the girl as she begged her brother to calm down and be quiet. When he began to settle, she unfolded her knees and arms from her chest, got up from her chair, and said she had a game, a trick she wanted to show. The girl had mastered this act alone, but in front of them she kept making mistakes and falling down, so Jim made her practise – head on a cushion on the floor by the wall, palms flat on the carpet either side of her reddening cheeks, she would kick her legs in the air and he would seize her ankles. The backs of her calves against the wall, her feet nearly touching the shelves above, he would let go, clap and watch. When she had perfected the wall, he set the cushion in the centre of the room, and placed her there like a vase. Moving his hands gently from her legs, fingers outstretched, he tiptoed backwards through the air, a green eye on the delicate line cast from her toes to the ceiling, the skin glowing from the hanging light, the nightdress gathered about her neck and face, in still white folds over her eyes and bated breath.

Babysitting

Anna holds her arms up high while I undress her. In the bathroom she crashes the toothbrush around her teeth, foams at the mouth while I stand in the doorway looking past her head to the form that towers in the mirror. At her bedside, she introduces me to her doll, stabbing a finger at its old cloth body as it lies face down, slung between a pillow and a sleeping cat. I tuck her between the sheets, the black hump of the cat uncurls, moves down the bed and wilts over her legs; she won't be able to feel them later she warns me, and she needs them during her sleep, to outrun the dog who turns the corners of walls, where she is always waiting. I perch on the bed with a book. There are no dogs in here I tell her, only a ship that sails white against the horizon, and carries people over the blue waves into the path of the sun, which melts orange into the sea, and makes the salt turn sweet. Anna brings her knees up to her chest and pulls an old piece of rag through her fingers; her eyes close, but her hand stays awake, coiled around the rag that rests near her neck. I read on through the changes in her breathing, stop when her voice starts to separate from sleep; she is counting aloud, her voice ticking through sequence: one to ten, one to twenty, one to thirty, the numbers building and rebuilding in the dark. When she falls quiet, I hear the rain stuttering at the window, the growth of a laugh around a corner, and someone outside coughing, blowing shapes across the walls.

There are no dogs out there, a voice says,
only a white ship heading for the sun
and shrinking
down inside the water like sugar.

Cloud Food

Childhood was scruffy. A wintered out coat with the promise of a hood, money inching up the walls of a china pot, views of untidy sea-shores. In the house, we grew amidst yellowing spines, and dog-eared covers, a curious collision of titles and names – the outlandish and the refined as worn out as each other – all leaning towards the floor, your hurried and sloping eye for shelving. This unconditional and indiscriminate love for life in print became the strange ways of our meals. Nights of tatty lettuce, wrung dry over the sink in your hands, jagged vegetables in curries, landing bruised on the plates, airborne and cold. Next door, you'd lie on your stomach by the fire, book in one hand, fork in the other. Raining noise into the house, we interrupted you chapter by chapter, wrecked the turning pages, and learnt to loathe the sound of you reading; inviting words we didn't understand into your head, walking into other people's homes, laughing at things we never saw, being privy to conversations we couldn't hear. Worst of all was the thought of you travelling alone, long before the coppers had lifted the lid off the china pot, and told us we could all go.

The Unmended

The road is covered in ghost. It is a substance unlike web or dust, but closer to an externalised thought – an old thought pulled out from sleep, shaken and spread across the stone. The land begins to shift in tremors. Underneath the beat of metal and wind, blasts of memory rise and fall. A hood of a coat. The cracked face of a watch. The ticking wheel of a bicycle. The stream of traffic, frozen. The air drained of noise, filled back up to the brim with wailing. Blood has stopped inside her hood to dry, dreaming red and slow from her hair. The outline of her body shivers in and out of view. She tries to hibernate from memory; random things emerge her. She is tired of ghosting this way. With no lines to learn. Just a rude awakening from the eves, to re-cross a winter born road on her bicycle. To play out the same cue, the final act before the curtain. The same person in the audience, unable to clap, unable to leave, shouting, encore, encore.

What Death Said

Here the wind is too subtle, too unseen. Even the dew on the grass is safe, the ant's straight line over the slate and the slack wire line from tree to wall – even this is static, stock-still in the air. She waits for change, a sneeze or a sigh, some shift in the view. She does not trust or know nature like this – inanimacy, she says, breeds tension like death, and nowhere, not even the night on a lost road could make her feel so alert for the surprise that comes when death opens your eyes at her and says: *you have known me before I have known you.*

The Astrayed

*My husband died a year ago
and there are these gaps in our conversations.*

The woman was looking for a book, but could not remember the name, as it was spoken, as it was given to her over a year ago. She could hear his voice but the words were vague. Like driving on a mountain road in deep mist, she said, hoping the stone didn't stray from beneath you; guessing at the corners, the occasional glimpse of headlights, from dip to dip. Worst of all are the unexpected shapes, the sheep that spring from the sides of a road in fog, where the heart has stopped and strange lights draw in, near and far, like thunder. Turning from the counter, she looks behind her and traces the shelves of books in silence. Her neck strains from left to right, a slow side to side deliberation, until something passes through her, bends her head to the floor, and drops her hand to her side. The leather bag on her shoulder slips the length of an arm, and empties around her feet.

*My husband died a year ago.
There are these gaps in conversations.*

The world sits upon her shoulders, whispers her another set of changes and ways of telling on the past. She hears out the settling of a coin. Her face is lined, wet, and gleaming. The skin begins to flicker to the beat of a faulty light.

Unghosting the Stone

When she died, the silver chain was moved from one neck to another. The mother's skin, now bare as well as cold, while the daughter's acquired a new heat and a strange pulse. The amber stone that pulled the chain into a V, warm again, jumping every so often against the uneven tremors of her chest. As the years passed, guilt grew less heavy around her neck, until one day she could remove the chain, place it in a box with other things, without thinking that her mother had just re-died, or even, that she had just killed her. All she had done, she reasoned, was to put her away, in a box that was safe, and unlikely to open on its own whenever she dreamt, spoke or thought about it.

Portraits

Her death taught me language; I reward her in words. To the scratched music of her epilepsy I set the drills of upturned roads to sentences and crack ink across the pages. What splits into the white is not writing, not speech, but pieces of voice, littering the home, like smashed china.

*

His sickness taught me calm. In the smoke from his pipe, and the wavering turn of his hand through the air as he conducted to the radio, I remember how the mouth sounds when closed over an object. A muffled bite shut of teeth on wood, followed by heaves, sighs and rushes of breath.

*

My father's pipe offered a kind of twin to the wooden spoon we could never prise into my mother's mouth. And the soar of his smoke and hand told me that the noises I cannot spell were a part of something quiet; a calm to an unstitched song that fell apart in front of me and broke again inside.

On the Inside of My Father's Garden

*And the unseen eyebeam crossed, for the roses
Had the look of flowers that are looked at.*⁶²⁷

He bends to their heads in the ground; their faces under his shadow are midnight blue. 'Look at that dear, just look at that. In the grass. Tiny. What are they dear? No-one ever looks dear, ever does.' His shadow has caused a wind. Each petal twitches as if in smoulder. His body leans slightly closer towards the earth and he catches himself, just before the light vanishes altogether. The tremors of flowers are perceptible. The laughter of earth, sly.

⁶²⁷ T.S. Eliot 'Burnt Norton', in *Four Quartets* (London: Faber, 1959) p.14.

The Prose Poem

That night, she got down on her hands and knees and tried to illustrate what she meant by the prose poem. The analogy she used was a wolf encircling its prey, keeping its eyes fixed on its victim, but viewing it from different angles as it moved around its still body. The room they were in, of course, had to change. Take away the walls and put oaks in their place. Switch lamps for a twilit wood. Lose the chairs, books, rugs, photos, table by the bay window, and the bay window itself. Strip the living room of all this, and replace the objects with smell. Sweet, dank musk with a quick sting of freshly drawn sap, perhaps after the rain has fallen through the leaves and meandered along the branches, down the bark, its rhythm slowing over the scars and ruptures, before it melds with the earth at the roots. Above all, lose the feeling of being watched on the floor, thinning your trousers, feeling your skin bleed at the joints, your eyes dry out from unblinking.

Falling Out of the Wood

She spells it out carefully, burns it inside her head and tries to forget it. She agrees with herself that it was a dirty word, that it is important not to share it with anyone, not even herself anymore. In the mirror, she watches her face. Under her eyes the black of the word's ashes. She waits for them to fall down onto her tongue, at which point she'll empty out her head like a grate. Moving away from the glass and out of the door, she'll throw them in the direction of the wood. Once in the wind, they'll stick to the trees, grow irretrievable from the pine. Back inside she'll drown her mouth with water, swill out its soul and be able to start again. 'I'm clean', she'll say when she returns. 'A dirty word fell into me, and when I killed it I fell out of the wood, pure as pine.' 'Bullshit', they'll say. 'Absolute nonsense.' That's exactly how it all starts she'll fling back, turning to look behind her at the tap, tap, tap of wooden hands.

The Pale Glass Wall

The knife cuts the air and the room begins to seep. Objects gasp from the change. Breath, sky, space are gutted; she tries to stuff herself into the void, but someone holds her wrists and keeps her from disappearing. Cries outside the glass trouble the water around the fish. They try to let go of themselves, their trail of secretions complicating their movement, looping and shaking behind them like a closely watched signature. Outside the glass house, lights interchange until they cancel each other out. Her skin blinks on and off without rhythm. The darkness soon rubs her out; what isn't there pulses in the black. The blade continues to punctuate the atmosphere, unsure of its own ending.

Sometime Aphasia

Words kept vanishing or tripping on her tongue, as though she was going blind in the mouth. Inside her head, they were there, sitting up in chairs, lounging on sofas, talking and eating at tables, satisfying whatever it was that they wanted. But when she opened her mouth, they scattered in all directions, the room in which they were, wrecked beyond repair and recognition. The few that remain undamaged, were either lost, or slipping from her apology towards death. A blind Alice, she thought, whose mouth stumbled about things, too small, too large, or too strange, and whose sighs and yawns of despair match storms as they shred open land. Just when silence seemed the only answer, she removed her tongue and replaced it with a pen. Over time, she forgot to watch them, but they were there, day-dreaming in chairs, lounging on sofas, swinging from lights, splitting from laughter, satisfying whatever it was that she wanted.

The Lesson

She has learnt to deflect ignorance, hold her own upon her heels, fix her eyes on the other and say: yes, I know, I know about that too. When the wind hurtles the leaves, upsets her hair and spills the strands over her face, she keeps her arms folded across her chest, waits for the weather to stop talking first. Shiftless. Resolute. A lighthouse unnerved by the thrash and climb of the sea at its walls. There is nothing to correct in her. When she was young she learnt that language was scaffold, that reason was upheld by a bolt around each word. Now she is older, she has learnt not to question structure – the consequences of flinching when birds attack, dark, mistaken, and unspellable.

The Estranged

She stopped using her breath when she spoke. Words skittered from her mouth like pebbles. She considered the stone's last fall, how it would sink through the cold and gather darkness in the loom of its sleep, sit blind, mute and deaf until the fortune of a kick, a shift under the river-bed. She shivered. She would slow down. Take her language from a wooden boat, moving the soft edge of a lake; the grass, the wood, and water always touching. Others would step into her conversations with a sure foot, certain that everything around her anchored words was as it was, as it was supposed to be: in a boat, on a lake lit by the moon; a bright clear unruffled eye, under the steady tongue of the wind.

Bridgesong

Those who stand, time their bow before the bridge with the confidence peculiar to habit. The others, cupping their wine, dip or arch their necks in response, as the punt floats through, slips into the arch of the old stone bridge. In the cool of its shadow, a shout, a glint of wine, the strike of glass. The tunnel begins to shake. Questions bleed over lyrics; answers are thrown back for effect. They speak not to each other, but each to himself; listening to the way its age, damp from lack of light, the occasional cast of water, can change the human voice mid-song or conversation. Halfway through the dark, they stop quiet in its mouth and hear the dank hum of stone. Once out of silhouette, under the lowering evening sky, each figure comes to life, their features less clear this side of Clare, as the sun folds onto its reflection, leaves dusk in tiny drops over their glasses, and lights the inside of the boat as lamps bring life to a village. Black swans in the boat's wake and wine in the blood of the driver, the patterns of the water begin to change, the evening river growing a language of its own, surface at first but deepened with circles as the punt begins to spin. One by one the passengers pick out a ripple, a phrase from the worried tide, to wear upon their face and read each other anew.

The Seasoned Listener

The audience are in winter; it is visible in their backs, in the hills they make that lower into the wind and wait for snow. They are stopped from the cold and the hunger bred by silence. They are tightly mooded, curled up in a half listen, the eyes turned inwards and the face down, the floor of the room cast back at them, dimming the skin with shadows. The author stands before them, opens his book, removes his hand from the blanketing of the pages, leans his head towards the print, peers over the view and opens his mouth. His story leaves him, with the apologetic gait of a new boy at school. The small crowd remain unmoved; the breath reserved, a small bare mist that comes and goes. The author moves towards the centre of the page. Men seen from the road play chess outside their doors; the game is balanced on a tilting table that follows the slant of the street; a light shout ensues from the slow slide of a chess piece. Over the page crickets set off their songs like laughter in the dark. Waves bruise the shore. The sky turns and reflects black over the sea. The air freezes. He leaves it there. Rises to show he has finished, and looks out from his book. Stretched before him is the ocean. The audience are gone. The room is pitch black and steel wintered. Something like an echo sounds itself out near his toes. He watches himself listening. Listens to himself watching

Speaking without Tongues

Their conversation rustles in the manner of Edwardian skirts; the talk of the passengers around them clicks like the tap of heels. The sound of sign is of clouds snagging on trees, of a line cast over a river, the distant race of water heading across the stones, the catch of a glug as the stream falls between rocks. Shadows animate the train windows; they puppet the textures of silence, flightways of hands catch and knit words mid-air. Rings pick out the light like eyes. Outside, the mammoth breath of cows, the push of crows against the sky, the windblown climb of bough and leaf, the itch and sweep of rain and grass, etch out their talk till dark.

By night, their conversation twins in the glass.

The Speaking Cloth

As she hid her mouth behind her hand, she recalled the woman with the scarf. Someone close to her, who shared her house and once her bed, had told her she was ugly; that her borrowed teeth unsettled conversations, that her mouth was without scaffold, her face inarticulate, her skin the paper of creased up thoughts. So one day, as the sun rose and bled between the curtains in a clean gash of light, she took a scarf and wound it around her neck and over her mouth. At the sound of his leaving, she appeared and spoke through the scarf, the front of the material puffing in and out according to the thoughts she'd had that day. Among the folded, the unread and the paper-thin, she would lift the far corners of the fabric with the idled muscles of her mouth. With her hands, adjust the knot of cotton flowers behind her head; the cloth animating the roses in the breeze. Before his return, she opens her mouth and lets the view speak into her. As her throat fills with the wind and the flowers, she hears the sun, ticking carefully over her head.

The Clock

The head of the man in front of me clatters with rage. Above him a china plate clock on the wall, the hands of which haven't yet moved from summer to winter. 'Get the cake' he says. The woman doesn't answer, but tilts her face towards the ceiling to finish her glass. A small white round object tight with icing and coloured by letters appears. It is lit with six candles, and hovers above the palms of the waitress, her mouth half open as everyone starts to sing, her voice the unsure body of a child's first dive. When the song is over the boy leaps onto his seat and grimaces over the orange flames. It is his birthday and he is going to take his time blowing out his age. He is not talking, but cackling, flinging his neck back and widening his eyes until their glow dims in the vanishing light. At the last puff, he picks up the knife and slices the cake under a small cloud of smoke. Everyone gets a letter. The man in front of me gets his own initial. With his left hand, he forks it, brings it to his mouth, and swallows it whole. His head stops shaking as he focuses on the wine; the way it chases the lump in his throat. In a minute, a thought will leave his mouth by accident.

The Swallow Myth

Just before she entered the woods, she stopped and spent some time standing on the road-side worrying into the core of her apple, uneasy at the sight of leaves. Behind her, a crow skittered onto the branch of a tree – its polished eye, deadpan, seasonless, her own, bursting with life as she tried to fathom the tricks of a single leaf. When she walked through the gate, across the path between the trees, the pip of the apple moved down inside her throat. She felt the eyes of Elms, Willows and Oaks begin to watch her, as though they could see inside, knew how she would grow and what she would look like weighed down by fruit or cones. She heard the chatter and slur of green tongues telling her of limbs blistering into knots, the scars from birds, the bruises from falls, the rotting of colours, the blitz of weather, the onslaught of seasons, and the unsettling blindness of underground, treading the dark like water.

Daniel's Pica

Some bring stone rather than potato to the mouth. Others weigh the stomach down as far as the hips with metal. For those that choose dirt over food, the world needs to be white, clear of things, safe. Mattresses indestructible and flooring laminate, the skin of bears impenetrable. And when a child with pica is broken, plasters must be kept in their box while the blood is left to dry in the air. This is Daniel's pica. Inconsistent, his mouth is always being watched; is suspect in stillness or in motion. Sand, pebbles, stones, cigarette ends, pen tops, the ends of plastic razors, string, sellotape. This list has gone beyond his tongue. As an adult, I wonder what he remembers: the taste of these objects, the action of ripping open his bear with his tiny limbs, his teeth staining from wounds, or the sensation of his young throat disappearing in a cloud of fibre?

Unannounced Visitors

The sob spoke first – entered the room in a newborn’s howl – followed by water from her left eye. Yes, she thinks she was relieved; like giving birth through the mouth, she laughed. But then something worked its way back inside her: a magician, who plucks a small boy from the audience, stages him in the centre, draws objects with his hands from behind the boy’s ear, and then opens his mouth to find a ball, the size of an egg. When this is removed and placed on a table, another appears. She continues to watch as lump after lump travels up the child, opens his mouth, and stops him from speaking.

Kierkegaard's Chairs

When Kierkegaard was eight, his father made his son eavesdrop on the conversations of his dinner guests, then sit in each of their chairs after they had left. Nicknamed 'the fork', at home, because that was the object he named when asked what he'd like to be, the seated boy would be tested. The father wanted to hear each of the guest's arguments and thoughts through the mouth of his son, as though the boy was not just one man, but as many as ten. Almost word for word, 'the fork' recounted what these men had said, men who were among the finest thinkers in the city. The tale is chilling somehow. Not least because his father at the same age, raised his fists to the desolate sky of Jutland Heath, and cursed God for his suffering and fate. Not least because Kierkegaard means 'graveyard'. Not least because of the son sitting in each of those chairs, their backs straight and high, rising behind him like headstones, while the words of others poured from his mouth, his father at the head of the table, testing his son like God. Not least because when asked why he wanted to be a fork, Kierkegaard answered: "Well, then I could spear anything I wanted on the dinner table". And if he was chased? Well then, he responded: "Then I'll spear you".

Weather Quartet

Winter is a low-lit ending of a leaf.

Spring turns outwards, a pale-skinned face from a hood.

Summer is water hissing down a baked wall.

Autumn blushes from all its falling hair.

Each year,

they speak over one another.

Station Butterflies

Kicked up from the tracks by wind from a passing train, butterflies flicker the air. In multiple shavings of suede, they burst above the station, race towards and away from each other, in the manner of moths grown wise to a candle. Leaves tremble at their passing; sometimes they swap characters, but mainly settle on mimicry. In between the trees, the sky is textured in forty shades of fawn, bark, and autumn. I thought they were dying out, she says to herself. Underneath their swallow dives, weightless and hard to predict, her heart thunders into her feet. Another train moves towards them, slows in sight of the platform. A butterfly glints before the driver's window. She watches the sun explode on the glass, the man's face blanch, and catches the insect's wings as light scales a fish, hooked, upturned and thrashing between the sky and a river.

Indoor Skies

He dipped a finger into the champagne glass and rubbed the drink into his mother's lips. Taking a freesia from the vase beside her head his wife placed the open petals under her nose, the flower covering her mouth, the colour moving in small shivers as she tried to talk. The youngest in the room, the grandchild, pushed a balloon towards her, the father gently brought it back. Birthday cards were opened and balanced upon her, winged, and tilting along the length of her body; in turns they were picked up and read aloud, hovered and resettled over the blanket. Near her head, a farmhouse, the courtyard detailed in feathers, uneven walls turning red from the roses. Below her shoulder, a car the colour of elm leaves, gliding country lanes between the hedgerows. On her stomach, a figure in white, the face shadowed in parasol. By her knees, a yellow corn field, under the wind, in song, and at her feet, orange poppies on a bank, laughing at something the river had said.

Hunger

She moves in over the land, picks a pebble from her last tide-line and swallows it whole. The earth stirs in grains. Wood baked light from a fire is siphoned from a shallow pit. High on the sand-bank, a boat, abandoned – in a constant state of drying out, the blue paint splintering in the wind – begins to expand. The blue unfurls over the body, lifts off the wood in little hands. They beg towards the ocean. Stones change colour with the slide of each wave; nothing dries before the next onslaught. The colours have a sound, of breath held in anticipation. Gulls puncture the air. Trees on the cliff begin to wrench up their roots – the branches tighten over the nests and the birds begin to shriek as the leaves fasten their wings. Sap glues over the bones and the birds begin to slow their fight. Below the land is disappearing; the beach pulled towards the sea like a rug heavy with objects. The effect is of a child's magic board; written on, pulled, then gone; written on, pulled, then gone.

The Herd

Crossing between fields, they curl mist, and break the morning over their coats. Drops suspended between hairs glint then die in the low winter sun. The ground softens from their tread; under the weight the mud sings, and fur clots from the catch of notes. When they stop, the sound thickens in the air; between them softly blown speech moves with a graceful chaos. In stillness, words hammock among them, billowing from one face to another. The cobwebs of attics grow in the space of things; the incidental sew of chair, garment, and book. The mist floats like an after-phrase between the leathery muzzles of cows. Thoughts are adrift. The punctuation of a spider, a fly, is random and rare in the winter of meadows and lofts. Conversations like these, suspended in shrouds, are not about a subject, a heart, a focus. They are about themselves, and perhaps the borders at the edges that support them.

Rumination

The throat closes at the smell: damp neglect in an old wooden room, hoarding unkempt letters, and the mildew of dropped thoughts. By the scuttle of mice and spiders a new-fangled script lives inside the attic. In scratches, bites and shrouds, nature edits its library of ghosted hands; puts pay to skin, recollection and thought in a single hover over a line. The ink of a noun, a comma, a question, fade below the need of an animal; in manners like these, conversations change, and slip backwards into the paper. Elsewhere, by the windowless parts of the room, corners of suitcases and open drawers become warm and murky nests, the endless chatter of shreds oblivious to the lengthening shadows. At night, and when the moon is hidden behind clouds, their work is swallowed whole; in the mouths of the black unlit cases and drawers, there is a possibility that the original language is still there, bright and polished, the scent of blue ink still fresh from the nib. Then the door opens, the throat closes at the smell, and what is not seen, is heard, outside at first, then in.

Little Sisyphus

The earth parts above its head and light pours through the hole like rain. Until now, the dark had been its roof. Then broken by a crown that could thread the eye of a needle, this smooth patch of mud is undone; unlevelled from below. In one burst, this lowly penny-sized plot of land is given character; from a single shove, a hill is formed; the effect barely more than a pin's journey through a wall, the plaster behind the paint opened into, the silt falling, moving and settling either side of the wound. Outside, the weight of sun and rock barely felt upon its back, the ant starts to build with the earth. In the journeys between one boulder of soil and the next, paths are being formed. The ant returns again and again to the same hill through crevices, drying lakes and a particularly windblown stretch. Soon the land starts to behave like a place; a setting without a name, where the ant goes about its business, deafening the world below as it works between the light and the dark, carrying the rocks to the top of the hill, grappling its mouth around the earth's crust, speaking all day in stone.

Dropping the sounds like bombs

and starting again.

Blood Cycle

In the shadow of a cat, the frog bends his face to my palm as to water, and prints a piece of red, the colour of a human cut, on my skin. I have never seen a frog bleed. I have never felt a frog's blood. Until now, I have never thought of blood being small. This is only one side of the frog's morning. On the other, its eye has turned blue, the shade drifting between the interior of a shell and the dying iris of an old woman. Around its slow beating heart, grass rises high and forms a briar like forest. The cat prowls its margins, and waits for movement again. I am in the middle of nature; a garden umpire refusing the hunter with one hand, urging the hunted to safety with the other. The frog moves once, and stops. In its wake, grass shivers, falls, bleeds.

An Object Poem

We do not write about the object – we write about the shadow it casts or the reflection it throws back at us. We talk about the setting, the human dramas that crowd outside it. We try to know them all. The language. The disasters. We write about the wind that moves, throws, or breaks it, but ignore that so low to the ground, something like a stone can remain unnerved by the unhinged run of a hurricane, and that stillness of a tiny thing without so much of a flinch when nothing else stands a chance, is worth a thought at least. The words can follow later, in a mere handful, and that is something. Something at least, on which to build, or not, as importantly

The Silent Trade

Objects are going missing in the house. The light, the long and thin, the cylindrical, the manageable, the stuff that sits easily in the palm, that's held between the fingers without strain, is being homed again. In the shade of a table, a chair, a rug, a gap in the wall, the used and the humble are reconfiguring. Clusters of mute and unlikely sets, tirelessly lost and found; dismantled and assembled again. In hiding, they listen to the dreams of the furniture; eavesdrop on the schemes of the wood. Upstairs the rugs whisper in plots. In the dining room, they hear of the old oak table, its double-edge; a land of exile and safety. Their world is determined; reliant on a forgetful God.

'I, Poppy'

They've dug up the red from the mud, and replaced the heads with white. Flipped onto the bank-side of the grass, their scarlet ears fold and bruise black at the edges. While they wait, they turn over as if in sleep, their pillar-box skin rusting and shivering in the grass, one ear juddering to the inconstancy of the wind. Gathered up by the gardener their features are torn, the chase of the ground, the journey towards the flower-pit, seen through holes in the petals; red-framed eyes recording the hectic charge of his boot. On the heap, one more piece of damaged colour attempts something like breath. On forgetting, it stops with the rest, de-named against the wanton twists of landscape.

Plasticity

The street is kinked and faceless, an untended canvas beneath the weather's pass. Random stains of clouds migrate like cows overhead. Sooted throws from trees and lamps stretch and die before they meet. The wind solidifies in shadow, falls into cracks and gasps, reappears from the tyres of a car, and slides unfettered from the weight. A turn in the breeze shakes things above the stones. A plastic cup is lifted skyward and kicked into submission. After the rain stops, the cup, split and doubled over, drags itself into the kerb, and rests in a cushion of mud. The approaching sun slips into the city, separates the shadowed from the lit, halts over an object, yawns fire, and watches it melt.

Fossilized

Skin explodes across the mouth and seals it shut. Another piece follows, taut pale and pink, stretched white like a spider's abdomen. Sugary air splits from the shell and dies among the tatters. She peels the mess from her skin, stuffs it back inside. The teeth and tongue set to work again, defiantly forming a room of sweet oxygen through which she can speak. The voice bombs pink at the mouth, swells and snaps the end of her sentence. As time goes on her tongue grows tired, the matter hardens in the circularity of her movement, and loses its taste. The tension in her jaw tutors her language anew and the words grow arthritic, breaking early outside of her. Finally, the room grows cold, indifferent to her breath. She is left with a petrified mould, casting back the curt indents of her bite, the chaotic overlaps of language; a vestige of something trying to become told.

The Briquette

Once lit, these borrowed, packed cuts of land, ease themselves away in smoke; return themselves to the earth in powder. Somewhere between the black side of conker, and the bourbon shade of soil, these tightly stitched fibres of mud are unsewn from the ground, and thrown among the twigs and logs of an untried hearth. At the quick scuff of a match, they become the fire's thrive; its thundering swallow, the aching bass line of the cottage's warmth. Outside, the tongue of the chimney conducts them back into the world again: escapees, cast-outs, ex-objects, re-named and unheld, they disappear mid-sentence, the sky their paper now.

Appendix A

Below is an extract of an email from Anna Reckin who teaches Creative Writing in the UK and in America. I met her at a Creative Writing conference and she kindly responded to my questions on Ponge and translation and the prose poem in general. 11th March 2006.

'You asked about my experience of translating Ponge. 'Le Ministre' is the fourth one I've tried, so far as I remember (others include 'The Crate', the one about rain and one about a granary). Those I worked on in graduate school and I've never tried to get them published. In fact, working on these, with the professor I mentioned, nearly turned me off poetry translation altogether. At one point I came across a really good article on translation, I think by Jon Silkin, along the lines of 'Remember, it isn't your poem!', with which I absolutely identified. One frustration for me was that I wanted to make Ponge's prose poems more lyrical and flowing than they really are. I remember my teacher telling me I was missing the strong sense of logic and argument that's there in the French, and of course he was right. And yes, there was an issue too, even back then, with the awkwardness you mention, which I wanted to smooth out. It may have been partly that I was then still pretty naïve about the language of poetry, assuming that it is always somehow 'natural-sounding', and (especially since I'd worked for many years as an editor), I thought it was part of my job as translator to make the translation very fluent and seamless – even more so than the original, if need be'.

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