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Bibliography
In referring to Ponge's works, I use these abbreviations, followed by the page number (see the Bibliography for publication details):

AC  L'Atelier contemporain

EPS  Entretiens de Francis Ponge avec Philippe Sollers

FAB  La Fabrique du Pré

Lyres

Méthodes

Pièces

PM  Pour un Malherbe

SAV  Le Savon

TP  Tome premier
I would like to express my gratitude to the many friends and colleagues at the University of Hull who have helped me during my research, and to everyone who has been prepared either to discuss my thesis, or to leave me in peace to write it. I am particularly indebted to my supervisor, Professor Chesters, whose encouragement during the preparation of this thesis has been invaluable. Thanks are also due to Ian Higgins for the help he has provided in finding materials, for his useful comments and for his general enthusiasm. Finally, and not least, many thanks to my husband and family who have shown extraordinary reserves of patience.
As a newcomer to Francis Ponge I fell immediately into the most common misconception concerning his work; that is, I had him solidly categorised as a 'poet of objects', entrapped in the *Parti pris des choses* with which his career as a writer was launched in 1942. Upon encountering the collection of portraits in *Lyres*, however, and especially in *L'Atelier contemporain*, it seemed possible to say that critical studies of Ponge's work were largely guilty of neglect, having concentrated for the most part on his prose poetry, his revolutionary and complex descriptions of humble objects, at the expense of his texts on people. This thesis sprang, therefore, from an interest in the problems of Ponge's work on people and from the belief that we can sharpen our focus on this writer, helping to build up a more accurate picture of his aims, achievements and diversity, by going outside the restrictive and all too common view of him as a poet of things.

Ponge's texts on people are dispersed throughout his work and, perhaps paradoxically, even appear in *Le Parti pris des choses* (*Le Gymnaste* (TP 72), *La Jeune Mère* (TP 73), *R.C. Seine No.* (TP 74-77), *Le Restaurant Lemeunier rue de la Chaussée-d'Antin* (TP 78-82)). They include tributes to particular individuals, descriptions of generic types, studies of social groups or human institutions, and even two ambitious but determined attempts to describe *l'Homme*, the species as a whole. Their tone varies from the restrained but intensely moving (see for example the memorial poems *Baptême funèbre* (*Lyres* 35-37) or *La Famille du sage* (*Lyres* 7)) through to the flippant (as in *Le Gymnaste*) and the satirical (*R.C. Seine No.* or *Le Restaurant Lemeunier*). Ponge also wrote extensively about
creative individuals and their work; Malherbe, Claudel, Jules Romains and Jean Paulhan are amongst the many writers to whom he devotes a text. Finally, the single most prolific group of Ponge's writings on people comprises his numerous portraits of contemporary painters and sculptors, written for various art reviews, monographs and exhibition catalogues from 1944 onwards. The earlier texts were first published in 1948 in *Le Peintre à l'étude,* then incorporated into the larger, comprehensive collection of Ponge's art writing, *L'Atelier contemporain,* published in 1977.

To deal in turn with all these categories of texts on people could lead to fragmentation and prove less satisfactory than entering into a detailed study of a single category, particularly since the problems inherent in Ponge's treatment of people 'overlap' and are applicable to all his writings which deal with human beings. It is, therefore, Ponge's essays on contemporary artists which are the subject of this thesis. These constitute the largest and most coherent, as well as the most important and complex group of the texts on people. Their interest lies partly in the fact that they deal not with generic objects, but with specific individuals, and as such are opposite to the poetry. As Ian Higgins puts it, "The position of the critical texts at this extreme makes them especially clearly exemplary". This branch of Ponge's work presents in addition a more interesting tension than his other texts on people since his studies of artists involve both the creative individual and the works, which are treated as functions of each other. They allow Ponge to pursue his fascination with all types of artistic creation and may be said to 'straddle' his poetic and his theoretical texts, since they possess features particular to each.

The art criticism plays a crucial role in Ponge's post-war output and yet, like the other works on people, it seems there have been few critics prepared to give these texts
their rightful place in the mainstream of Ponge's work. As Guy Lavorel so aptly comments, "On a délaissé à tort le Ponge critique d'art". Such neglect is doubtless due to the problematic status of these texts which break the archetypal model of Ponge as chosiste and are therefore considered as 'marginal'. It is, however, precisely their problematic status which makes them worthy of study.

Before approaching L'Atelier contemporain in detail, then, it is important to understand the problems surrounding the criticism. Some of these belong specifically to the critical function, but the first group of problems to be discussed are those which are common to all Ponge's texts on people, along with the myths which these have engendered. What are the reasons for so many enduring misconceptions concerning the nature and value of these texts?

Problems with people: "Une manie trop pétrifiante"

The earliest comments concerning Ponge's texts on people came with Sartre's seminal essay of 1944, 'L'Homme et les choses'. This first major study of Ponge's work contains critical observations which make it one of the most important essays to date, and which were instrumental in inaugurating a wider understanding and appreciation of the poet at the beginning of his career. It does, however, include some serious indictments which have had long-standing repercussions: namely the comments concerning Ponge's writings on people, which appear to have been as persuasive as they are damning. These are worth examining in some detail, not least because they can be seen with hindsight as inaccurate and partial judgements, and because, in his texts on people, Ponge is constantly at pains to battle against what he himself ironically refers to as his "manie trop pétrifiante". Here is, in brief, a summary of Sartre's criticisms and a defence of Ponge.
Sartre claims that Ponge's "intuition déshumanisante" pushes him to 'petrify' people and turn them into objects or machines at the expense of their full humanity. If the treatment of objects in *Le Parti pris des choses* is fresh and illuminating, expanding our existing, often stale and utilitarian conception of them, the treatment of people is a dull and reductive refusal of human complexity. "Le vice de la chose inanimée" and the intimate Pongean motivation "d'ensevelir tout ce qui vit, l'homme surtout, dans le suaire de la matière" result in a mass metamorphosis of everything he touches towards the stony ideal of the Pongean subject par excellence, 'Le Galet'. The outcome of any anthropomorphic comparisons, rather than elevating objects, "est surtout de dégrader l'humain" and psychological subtlety is stubbornly ignored: "Nulle part, en son oeuvre, il ne sera question de pensées"; "il y a déshumanisation, poussée jusqu'aux sentiments, de l'homme". In Sartrean terms, all is reduced to the unchangeable, static "en-soi". The principal characteristic of man as the "pour-soi", definable only as a future project, is blatantly set aside until the reader is unable to distinguish between the 'Gymnaste' and the 'Cageot' or the 'Cigarette'; "C'est que [Ponge] abaisse l'un pendant qu'il élève les autres". Thus, in the case of the 'Gymnaste', dehumanisation is achieved by suppressing the differentiation of organs, "nous imposant l'image de la bête la plus lisse, la moins différenciée", a sort of performing worm. Conversely, the 'Jeune Mère' undergoes a merciless dissection into irremediably separated belly, legs and so on, until "l'unité humaine s'est évanouie" into a mere heap of parts. Man's physical appearance must of necessity be treated differently from that of concrete objects because, as Sartre points out in a later essay on the treatment of man in art, it scintillates with a multitude of signs stemming from infinite inner complexity. Every gesture is there to be interpreted as an expression of the psyche; "Les signes se
prennent dans ses cheveux, brillent dans ses yeux, dansent entre ses lèvres, se perchent au bout de ses doigts; il parle avec tout son corps [...] s'il s'endort son sommeil est parole" and this intensely living organism is seen to be stifled in Ponge under the 'shroud' of inert matter.

It is not only the content of Ponge's texts on people which comes under fire. Sartre protests that the very style of Ponge's prose is inappropriate for dealing with human beings and contrary to the nature of human existence, to "le souple devenir de la vie". Since all human beings are, in Existentialist terms, continual projects with no fixed essence, it is inadequate to deal with them in a style which perpetually aims at the proverbial, "c'est à dire [À des] phrases lourdes de sens, déjà pétrifiées". The construction of Ponge's texts involves, says Sartre, the arbitrary juxtaposition of independent, self-sufficient paragraphs, in which the "solitude inorganique" of every phrase is a denial of *enchâinement*. The poem, then, like the limbs of the 'Jeune Mère', is ultimately fragmented; a series of building bricks, labouring towards unification and organisation into an organic whole, but unable to achieve this vital synthesis. Following Ponge's lapidary instinct, his dense, calculated phrases crystallise as we read them, language congealing like thickening cream, foreign to the fluid nature of human thought. Furthermore, the full stop repeatedly chops the text up, preventing us from following a development so the ultimate effect is "plutôt qu'une naissance, une sorte d'apparition figée", set lumpishly aside from the flow of life because incapable of dealing with its complex nuances and endless metamorphoses.

It is regrettable that Sartre's comments concerning Ponge's approach to people are necessarily based on a very limited and by now unrepresentative selection of texts - two rather weak and awkward social satires in which people are 'dehumanised' for satirical reasons ('R.C. Seine No.' and 'Le Restaurant Lemeunier'), the poems on the 'Gymnaste'
and the 'Jeune Mère', and certain texts later to be published in *Proèmes* and *La Rage de l'expression*. True, the texts dealing with humans are perhaps the least successful, and the most awkward elements of *Le Parti pris des choses* and it is easy to see why 'Le Gymnaste' or 'La Jeune Mère' should have been criticised by Sartre. It is not, however, so easy to see why this typecasting of Ponge as a writer who invariably reifies people should have enjoyed such a long life, nor why Sartre's interpretation should have remained so stubbornly authoritative. As Ian Higgins puts it, the fact that these early and condemnatory observations by Sartre have been taken as read by even recent critics means that "It is as if *Le Peintre à l'étude, Lyres, Le Nouveau Recueil* and *L'Atelier contemporain* had never been published".27

There is, as Robert Greene suggests, a "blind spot" at the centre of Sartre's essay.28 He fails to grasp, for example, that Ponge's poems are less "poèmes-objets" than "poèmes-laboratoires";29 he detects a quite inappropriate quality of stasis in the texts and treats them as primarily referential, so overlooking the fact that they spring from an interest in words more than an interest in things. He also (and this is important so far as Ponge's treatment of people is concerned) overlooks the fact that Ponge's turning to things is "a way of shortcircuiting any desire he might feel while writing to express an idea or an emotion".30

Sartre's generalisations, then, are only partial truths accounting for a mere portion of Ponge's genius. *L'Homme et les choses* clearly circumscribes Ponge within far narrower limits than he deserves, for his work is not confined to studies of easily graspable and definable concrete objects, he does not always speak in proverbial mode, nor does he refuse to explore human beings and their affairs in a sensitive manner. Ironically, whilst Sartre's comments are based on evidence in *Le Parti pris des choses*, from this first widely acclaimed collection onwards, Ponge has had a
combative policy towards problematic subjects, and an ever-developing experimental urge. Even *Le Parti pris des choses*, in fact, contains many subjects whose non-encompassability would seem to posit them as awkward. It is true that for Ponge any object, when considered in isolation, draws the author into a kind of literary black hole ("si je n'en considère qu'une, je disparaïs: elle m'annihile" (*Méthodes 13*)), and can be given expression only through analogy which draws out its differential qualities; that is, it may be described only as a set of relations or coordinates. In the case of archetypal Pongan objects (the orange or the snail) this is more readily achieved, whereas the sea, water, or the tableau of late Autumn offer the challenge of subjects we would imagine to be anathema given Ponge's distaste for amorphous subjects which can threaten the linguistic control towards which he strives. A rough count reveals fifteen 'Pongan' as against seventeen 'un-Pongan' subjects in *Le Parti pris des choses*.

It is also true that more complex, varied and subtle attempts to write about humans and human affairs, prior to as well as following Sartre's essay, could be quoted in such a way as to offset the majority of his criticisms. Poems written previously include, for example, 'La Famille du sage' (*Lyres 7*), 'Dimanche ou l'artiste' (*Lyres 11-13*), and others from *Pièces* or *Lyres*, full of unanswered questions and loose ends necessitated by a treatment of the human mind and emotions, testifying to a desire to include a degree of psychological complexity and working from the outside inwards. Such texts are quite different in tone, therefore, from the coldly analytical jottings of Ponge the behaviourist in, say, 'L'Adolescente' (*Pièces 11*) or 'Fabri ou le jeune ouvrier' (*Pièces 47*). There are the texts on specific individuals to consider as well (i.e. Claudel, Jules Romains, etc), and the mobile, sensitive portraiture of Ponge's artist friends - their behaviour, psychology, physical appearance, and creative work - begun just after
Sartre's essay was written. From the beginning Ponge has sought approaches which will not petrify his human subjects, and viewed in this light, Sartre's condemnation is over harsh.

In 1945, the poem 'Baptème Funèbre' (Lyres 35-37) replies with a minimum time lapse to Sartre's charges of inadequacy and insensitivity, displaying beyond doubt Ponge's acute awareness of the risk of petrifaction and experimenting with ways to counter it. In this epitaph on René Leynaud, a fellow poet and friend executed by the Germans, he deliberately takes upon himself the most delicate and demanding task possible in which petrifaction could make the difference between new birth and a second (textual) execution for Leynaud. 'Baptème Funèbre' is a marvellously complex expression not only of Ponge's love for Leynaud, not only of the atrocious circumstances of Leynaud's death, but also of the very struggle to overcome emotion and to write on such a subject. The position of the writer before this immense challenge is not hidden behind the poem, but is displayed within it, which is clearly not the case in 'Le Gymnaste' or 'La Jeune Mère'. Ian Higgins refers to Ponge's 'Baptème Funèbre' in an article on the poem as "an early attempt to come to terms with his inhibition", the final word correctly pointing out that Ponge does not gaily petrify, that he earnestly feels writing about people is worthwhile and important, but that he experiences a block in doing so. The title of Higgins's article, 'Against Petrifaction', sets the tone, whilst the essay shows how, although a riposte to Sartre was not Ponge's principal motivation, he clearly had certain criticisms in mind. These he picks up in direct reply by using the word "pétrifiante", typically making the most of its literal and figurative connotations, binding it tightly within several running themes in the poem, so that attention is drawn to it as a major textual nucleus and its explicit function as a reply to Sartre is less likely to pass
The same technique will recur in the essays on Giacometti, into which is woven another direct reference to the charge of petrifaction.

In the case of 'Le Gymnaste' and 'La Jeune Mère', we do indeed see Ponge's temporary submission to the full implications of his alleged "manie pétroifiante", but it is unfair to use these texts to suggest a desire to petrify; Ponge's reluctance to approach people is precisely due to the fear of petrifaction. The value of these texts is chiefly experimental, and Ponge is applying intentionally inappropriate textual methods to human beings. In regarding them as failures, Sartre is criticising Ponge for not having realised something he did not, in fact, set out to achieve. These are exercises in reification, intentionally reductive descriptions of the human body, for which Ponge has purposely selected not individuals but representatives of a type, whose body, engaged in a particular activity or state, invites a temporary, partial and purely external view of it as a machine. Avoiding the deep waters of psychological speculation, the descriptions are mechanistic and separatist, electing to deal only with one half - the physical half - of man's dual nature.

The point is that Ponge does not have to write about people in this way but chooses to do so in this case as a deliberately extreme act of mental hygiene. Man is a material being with "aucune curiosité, ni aucun amour de son corps, de ses parties. Au contraire il montre une assez étrange indifférence à leur égard" (TP 239). Ponge experiments with a temporary stressing of our 'objectness', as one physical species amongst others, knocking us off our self-constructed pedestal by over emphasis of the physical at the expense of the 'soul', the mind, and years of psychological probing in literature. This is simply one stage towards the Pongean man who has himself in the correct perspective, and a deliberate parti pris of the physical which makes nonsense of Sartre's scandalised "il y a

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deshumanisation poussée jusqu'aux sentiments de l'homme". Naturally the "sentiments" are the first thing to go. It is within the scheme of Le Parti pris des choses as the title suggests, to promote and celebrate the object. If one or two portrayals of the human being as object are introduced, these are in no way to be read as failed attempts to deal with the human being in all its complexity - an endeavour which would have thrown the collection out of balance. It is essential to view Le Parti pris des choses as a mere portion of the entire Pongean endeavour; with hindsight the sensitive reader understands the partial nature of these texts and does not, therefore, perceive of them as problematic on this score. He will also appreciate that if people are made to share the simple attraction of objects in this instance, it is in order to maintain tight linguistic control, and to avoid sacrificing Ponge's ambition to mirror the subjects of his poems as completely as possible by producing texts which are 'equivalent' to them, and which behave in a similar way. This important rhetorical feature is referred to by Ponge as "adéquation" and we will return to discuss its importance more fully in chapter one. Its function in 'Le Gymnaste' is the intentional generation of stylistic humour. The particular activity of this type is to entertain and amaze after a lengthy perfection of his body, by a final, brief performance of tight and faultless movements. His physical display is mechanical, over-prepared and lacking in spontaneity; the gymnast's behaviour may therefore be likened to Ponge's impersonal polish in poems of this period. The obviously parodic outcome of choosing to illustrate a rather humorous functioning of the body at the expense of the complicated and un-mechanical mind is Ponge's acknowledgement of the inadequacy of such an approach, through which man becomes marionnette. If the gymnast's exclusion of spontaneity in his performance is amusing because of its partiality then so is Ponge's text and for
the same reasons. It is surprising that Sartre did not read 'Le Gymnaste' as a criticism of itself!

'La Jeune Mère', written in 1935 after the birth of Ponge's daughter, Armande, is even more exempt from Sartre's criticisms. The poem lends itself to different readings and is less brittle in tone, displaying tenderness and sensitivity through its choice of vocabulary and general mood. The isolation of the mother's limbs is not unfeeling carnage but an indication of her extreme physical awareness and her delicacy, as well as, perhaps, the uniqueness of her physical and psychological experience, from which Ponge, a male outsider, is naturally excluded and which he is incapable of tackling. The distance could imply a male wonderment at motherhood as an untouchable state; a study which is reverential rather than insensitive. It is possible and attractive to give 'La Jeune Mère' such a reading and relieve it of Sartre's criticisms with a single blow.

Finally, the appearance of the "grand rêve nécrologique" in Sartre's essay, along with words like "ensevelir" and "suaire" rather surprisingly exchange death for what is in fact the principal Pongean theme of birth. Sartre's authoritative judgement based on this slender selection of texts fails - perhaps inevitably - to take into account both the variety of existing texts and the possibility of progress and expansion in Ponge's approach to humans. Ironically, Sartre has petrified Ponge in the image of a petrifier.

We have examined Sartre's ideas concerning Ponge's textual approach to people; now what of Ponge's own comments? It may be true that these are also partially responsible for perpetuating the stereotyped image of a writer who rarely deals with people. Ponge's work is strewn with dismissive comments which manifest an abiding reluctance to write about man, "le sujet de millions de bibliothèques" (TP 243). His resolution in its most
categoric form is "surtout de ne pas décrire l'homme [...] L'on nous en rebat un peu trop les oreilles" (TP 232) - a declaration which belies the range and variety of his work. Other comments however show that this is not just a categorical rejection, but that Ponge was in fact aware of the dangers of petrifaction; that he did desire to write about people, but that the problems involved appeared insurmountable. The following quotations are representative of his typical misgivings: firstly, from 'Tentative orale' (1947):

Je sais qu'il y a des poètes qui parlent de leur femme (de grands poètes que j'aime), de leurs amours, de la patrie. Moi, ce qui me tient de cette façon au cœur, je ne peux guère en parler. 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 (Méthodes 252)

Therefore, and perhaps oddly, it is the very things Ponge loves best, the things which move him most, which he fears to express - as if expression could somehow be harmful to them. This explains the apparently bizarre reluctance with which Ponge opens his text on Henri Calet; "Si, malgré mon amitié pour Calet, j'accepte de parler de lui dès aujourd'hui..." (Lyres 47). It also explains how, in the case of the art criticism, Ponge's personal involvement with the artists concerned is at the same time a strong motivation, and an obstacle. The second quotation is from 'Introduction au Galet' (1933):

Les spectacles qui paraîtraient à d'autres les moins compliqués, comme par exemple simplement le visage d'un homme sur le point de parler, ou d'un homme qui dort, ou n'importe quelle manifestation d'activité chez un être vivant, me semblent encore de beaucoup trop difficiles et chargées de significations inédites (à découvrir, puis à relier dialectiquement) pour que je puisse songer à m'y atteler de longtemps (TP 198).
When Ponge does write about people, therefore, he does not approach the task without scruples. Such texts are often accompanied with statements of hesitancy, powerlessness and a feeling of inadequacy, if not dismissed altogether as too ambitious. Thus while Ponge attempted portraits of some of his military companions in Rouen, his desire to give a "peinture de la classe ouvrière rouannaise" was held to be out of the question from the start; "Je n'ai pas eu la prétention d'ébaucher même une telle peinture". Thus also the painful experience of inadequacy in writing about the assassination of René Leynaud ("FACE A UN TEL SUJET QUE PUIS-JE?") or the near aphasia in the 'Feuillet votif' written for Braque:

Pourquoi suis-je ici? Pourquoi moi encore? Braque vient de mourir, bien sûr...
Mort de Braque. Clôture du catalogue. Assomption de l'œuvre. Mais pourquoi moi ici?
Pourquoi m'être rendu à cette convocation, alors que je n'ai absolument rien à dire... (AC 246).

It is perhaps clearer in these texts on particular individuals than anywhere else that Ponge has a strong sense of responsibility, and that his writing represents above all a struggle with language - a crusade against its worst tendencies - and takes place under the constant threat of inarticulateness. It would seem that the second half of the equation which sums up Ponge's endeavour in his first collection of poems, "compte tenu des mots" (the whole reads "PARTI PRIS DES CHOSSES égale COMPTE TENU DES MOTS" (Méthodes 20)) can easily break down when the focus is human beings and their affaire. Clarity and control of language are permitted by the simple, attractive non-duality of objects. An orange, for example, has no psychological complexity, an advantage which allows Ponge to achieve a better grasp of the orange, of language, of his own relationship to these and to a succession of other objects used as vehicles in delineating the orange's "qualité différentielle" (Méthodes
43). If language is to be controlled, then reason and objectivity must prevail. The subjects Ponge elects for study must be approached coolly, analytically, and effusive emotion or lyricism must be resisted if he is to achieve the kind of close-knit, impregnable texts to which he aspires; texts whose multiple levels and connotations are subject to design, not to chance. 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.

Ponge's uniqueness is to have recognised that his humanity disqualifies rather than qualifies him to speak about the human species. Man beholds his own species with a combination of "respect et colère" (TP 238) and with boundless fascination, but he has difficulty in knowing himself or others, and in achieving objectivity or newness. Instead, he tends to resort to the pre-formed categories - the limited ways of describing himself and others - which have existed for centuries, and easily falls into the trap of essentialism. The conjunction of his utter complexity with the treacherous infidelity of his means of expression results all too often in a morass of clichés and imprecisions. As Ponge puts it,

des millions de sentiments, par exemple, aussi différents du petit catalogue de ceux qu'éprouvent actuellement les hommes les plus sensibles, sont à connaître, sont à éprouver. Mais non! L'homme se contentera longtemps encore d'être 'fier' ou 'humble', 'sincère' ou 'hypocrite', 'gai' ou 'triste', 'malade' ou 'bien portant', 'bon' ou 'méchant', 'propre' ou 'sale', 'durable' ou 'éphémère', etc., avec toutes les combinaisons possibles de ces pitoyables qualités (TP 197).

If Ponge refers to man as an uncongenial subject it is because "il vous attire [...] comme un aimant [...] il vous absorbe" (TP 242). It is important to avoid the stultification and sterility of what he calls the "manège"
of expression by stepping outside a human sphere of reference, and looking at man indirectly. Ponge's writing is full of references to the filth and suffocation of this "infime manège" (TP 196). A prime example of his disgust at the proliferation of uninformative clichés which can arise when man takes himself as a direct subject, is given in 'Le Cycle des saisons' (TP 53). In this extremely anti-lyrical vision of spring, the trees' annual form of self expression shows them to be incapable of anything but the most hackneyed, uninformative repetition. The same leaves proliferate year after year in a "vomissement de vert". Any hint of freshness implied by verdure is condemned beforehand as sour and pre-digested, and as fable referring to human expression, this is an extremely damning comment.

Ponge's whole poetic endeavour is based on the premiss that Narcissus must be dragged from the stream in an effort to counteract centuries of self-absorption. This involves the writing of texts with great relevance, but only indirect reference to mankind. It is Ponge's calculated choice of simple objects which breaks this introspective scrutiny and permits a fresher kind of self-expression. For Ponge, "La 'beauté' de la nature est dans son imagination, cette façon de pouvoir sortir l'homme de lui-même, du manège étroit" (TP 225). Hence his hope that 'Le Galet', for example, will help man to understand himself in a new way, to "accroître la quantité de ses qualités" (TP 197). If Ponge prefers to describe utilitarian or despised objects whose remarkable generally escapes our attention, "C'est pour vous mettre le nez dans votre caca" (TP 233). A procession of the basest objects usurps man on his former pedestal, each given its allotted time to speak or sing itself, hopefully engendering in the deposed monarch a "nouvelle prétention et modestie à se considérer comme un simple élément (animal comme un autre) dans le monde. Qu'il envisage donc le monde, la moindre chose" (AC 160). Shoring these fragments against the possibility of his ruin, in the same way that Picasso kept
fish or insects to remind him of the fact that man is merely one species amongst many, Ponge's man maintains a healthy balance. In philosophical terms, he is perilously perched over the abyss of absurdity: fixing his gaze on a pebble can, according to Ponge, safeguard against a toppling descent.

Of course there is ultimately no escaping from man. The humanism in these texts is low-key and oblique, but man is ever present, constantly implied. It is a myth that Ponge speaks only about objects and never refers to man - not only because a sizeable proportion of his output consists of writings about other people, but also because the poems, which are ostensibly about objects, are really about the relationship between three co-ordinates: man, language and objects. Man's place in the world, continual self-definition and problems of expression are obliquely told through the fable of each object, and attention is continually drawn to man by anthropomorphism and by the phrases which stress the act of the human mind, of human cognition, which has made the poem possible. The technique of speaking about more than one thing at once, of maintaining the ostensible, and several oblique subjects, is typical. Ponge is coming to man by the back door through these texts, working from the outside world inwards.

It is nevertheless characteristic of Ponge to wrestle with self-imposed limitations. However convincingly he may have outlined the narrow confines of his "parti pris des choses", his restive and ebullient temperament means that he is anything but a 'fixed' poet, confined to writing polished descriptions of objects which present, by comparison with people, only a minor challenge to language. His very motivation behind the texts on objects is, as he says in 'L'Oeillet', to "Relever le défi des choses au langage": "Pour moi c'est un besoin, un engagement, une colère, une affaire d'amour-propre et voilà tout" (TP 291). The way in which Ponge describes his initial attitude to the art
criticism in his 'Prière d'insérer pour Le Peintre à l'étude' is an equally clear indication of this typical desire to rise to a challenge:

fort peu enclin aux études, j'ai pourtant entrepris celles-ci, quand on me les proposa, d'autant plus soigneusement, curieusement, passion-nément même, que je sentais mieux mon incompétence, et la gageure (AC 151).

Writings on people, therefore, are certainly viewed by Ponge as hazardous enterprises and undertaken against all the odds, but they do exist in large numbers, and are particularly worthy of study precisely because they are texts in which he seeks to overcome some of his most deeply rooted inhibitions.

Problems with criticism

If Ponge makes the reader think twice about the nature of poetry and poets, he performs the same function in the domain of art criticism. All Ponge's writings are notorious for their resistance to classification. Are his texts on objects, for example, best defined as simple descriptions, poems, fables, or objective entries for some fabulous dictionary? One thing we can state with certainty is that Ponge proceeds in these works by a series of rejections: rejection of stultifying and outdated notions of poetry and poets, rejection of lyricism and of the flabby use of language this implies, rejection of what may typically be assumed to be 'poetic' subjects, rejection of the notion of poetic inspiration and so on. We may say, then, that the poetry is motivated by a catalogue of proscriptions. Similarly it is clear that Ponge's critical discourse does not blithely flow from his pen, but is in fact shaped and dictated by a host of serious taboos.
Criticism of any kind has its attendant problems, but *L'Atelier contemporain* shows that for Ponge in particular it is rife with them. The critical function is far from taken for granted and this volume of art criticism speaks about art criticism from the outset in a way which not only refers to it as problematic, but almost negates its validity. Ponge is hounded by so many doubts as to how his critical texts should function, so many areas into which he feels language should not intrude, that it is surprising his art writing is not cancelled out of existence. For example, according to Ponge the artists on whom he writes do not really need his texts; "ils peuvent bien s'en passer" (AC 151). In section II of his first text on Jean Fautrier (AC 15-20), he interrupts the discussion of Fautrier's *Otages* with a lengthy meditation on the *raison d'être* of art writing and visualises with some relief an imaginary gallery where muteness is de rigueur:

Des tableaux sont exposés dans une galerie. Le public ne vient pas, ou au contraire vient, regarde. Ça ne lui plaît pas, ou ça lui plaît, il achète. Les tableaux sont décrochés (des billets de mille sont empochés), puis accrochés chez les amateurs qui les regardent à loisir. Voilà, c'est tout (AC 17-18).

In *Le Peintre à l'étude*, Ponge describes his own achievements as clumsy and inept ("De quelques manières de voir plutôt que façons de penser cherchant façons de parler, n'y parvenant qu'assez mal" (AC 151)), and his art writing as a whole is typically punctuated with the expression of problems, often beginning on a distinctly shaky note. The first paragraphs on Fautrier, for example, are "drôles de textes" introduced by the confession that "je ne suis pas sûr des pages qui suivent" (AC 8), and the first text Ponge agrees to write on Braque finds him "bien embarrassé" (AC 58). It is clear that the most intense moments of communication with art and artists defy words and are a threat to controlled expression. In comparing the "expressivité symphonique" of Kermadec's painting with
certain Monteverdi recitatives, Ponge's text is cut short by an admission of inadequacy; "Ah! mon admiration pour de tels chefs-d'oeuvre est si vive que mon insuffisance à la dire va, de honte, me clore la bouche..." (AC 323). Such scruples also result in what Ponge uncharacteristically calls a "sanglot esthétique" in the case of Braque (AC 300) and in the case of Fautrier a "silence hyperbolique" (AC 262). Thus it is clear that while he views language as potentially dangerous and intrusive when applied to people, it presents even more of a risk when he is called upon to write about people and their creations. All this would suggest that Ponge is far from cut out to be a critic. In his 'Introduction au Galet', he in fact presents himself as being not only disinclined to spend any time writing about human activities, but also as totally incapable of fulfilling a critical function:

comment

pourrais-je décrire une scène, faire la critique d'un spectacle ou d'une oeuvre d'art? Je n'ai là-dessus aucune opinion, n'en pouvant même conquérir la moindre impression un peu juste, ou complète (TP 199).

Theorising, of course, has never attracted Ponge. At the time of his first critical pieces he confesses that "les idées ne sont pas mon fort. J'ai toujours été déçu par elles", and that a certain "écoeurment" is his reaction to abstractions: "les idées comme telles me paraissent ce dont je suis le moins capable, et elles ne m'intéressent guère" (Méthodes 9-10). Hence the first paragraph of an early essay on Braque makes it quite clear that we need not expect to encounter any such speculations:

Quitter la proie pour l'ombre, je n'en ferai pas ma prouesse, et ce n'est pas de gaité de cœur, certes non, que j'échangerais par exemple le plaisir que me donne l'oeuvre de Braque, contre celui, mêlé d'embêtement et d'ennui, d'échafauder à son propos quelque théorie (AC 70).
Nor need we expect verbal transpositions of the paintings and sculptures. The first reason for this is that, in Ponge's view, it is simply unnecessary. Criticism no longer has a duty to describe paintings for people who are not fortunate enough to visit the Salons. Mass reproduction has seen to that, and the glut of posters and postcards of major works of art provide images with which every amateur can easily become familiarised. We might say, then, that art criticism has been liberated from a representational obligation in the same way that the camera liberated art. As Ponge puts it in 'Braque-Japon', "lorsqu'on a la chance de pouvoir posséder ou regarder à loisir ces tableaux, aucune explication, aucune analyse n'est plus utile" (AC 123). The second reason is the more serious fear of betrayal. Good painting is not to be studied. It is defined by Ponge as "celle dont, essayant toujours de parler, on ne pourra jamais rien dire de satisfaisant" (AC 16). He therefore refuses to deal in detail with particular works of art, although these offer concrete objects, "une autre réalité, un autre monde extérieur" (Méthodes 11), and concrete objects are after all what Ponge usually writes about. Paintings and sculptures do not, however, lend themselves to Ponge's programme of providing a voice for mute objects. They are different in that they are, as Sollers puts it, "organismes signifiants" already having their own language (EPS 88). Michel Leiris in Au Verso des Images, has fears similar to those of Ponge; "si je dois [...] traduire en phrases ce qui m'a été transmis en un langage dont le propre est d'opérer bouche cousue et sur l'instant, je risque fort de m'égarer". Ponge thus liberates works of art from critical comment, respectfully veering away from individual paintings, and wishing to leave the reader/spectator in an unsullied encounter with them - a full experience of the choc they ideally provide.

A further problem is the obvious risk of displeasing the dedicatee. In most cases he was fortunate. Hélion, for
example, said of Ponge that "Il a écrit, je crois, le premier grand article de ma vie sur mon travail que les Cahiers d'Art publierent en 1949". With Giacometti, however, he was less fortunate, and the sculptor was initially disgruntled by Ponge's portrait of him. Braque too was doubtless problematic. Whereas Picasso, the showman of modern art, was more than prepared to expose his private life and have his paintings anatomised, Braque must have made Ponge's task more difficult by his insistence that the mystery of his painting be left intact and his own privacy respected. In addition, the painter frequently made derogatory comments directed at the purveyors of art criticism. "Il ne faut pas", he insists, "demander à l'artiste plus qu'il ne peut donner, ni au critique plus qu'il ne peut voir", and on the inadequacy of criticism comments that "Faute de pouvoir adapter un vocabulaire périmé le critique condamne". When Braque himself put pen to paper he confined himself to writing philosophical maxims, and even in the height of the Cubist period, it was not Braque but French painters like Gleizes and Metzinger who surrounded this new art with its written theories. Dubuffet is another awkward example, a seeker of anonymity who stressed the role of the artist's materials above that of the artist. The text Ponge writes for his lithographs is accordingly a cas limite in which the art of lithography is explored, but the name of Dubuffet does not even appear.

In spite of such problems, however, the very existence of L'Atelier contemporain confirms that there is an answer to Ponge's troubled question "Y a-t-il des mots pour la peinture?" (AC 17). If by "la peinture" we are designating the product, which is already a complete form of expression, the answer is negative since Ponge is aware that a work of art is always bigger than the critical apparatus which seeks to contain it. If, on the other hand, "la peinture" refers to the actual matter of paint, and to what goes on in
L'Atelier contemporain as opposed to what comes out of it, the answer is emphatically affirmative.

**An approach to Ponge’s criticism**

It is possible to say that while Ponge is the poet of objects, his other constant study is that of man, including himself, as a creative individual. The nature of the creative process and the proper function of the creator are issues he frequently approaches and illustrates in his own work, but nowhere are they treated with such sustained concentration as in the art criticism. To understand the reasons for Ponge’s increasing fascination with this subject it is important to situate the criticism in the historical period which gives it its flavour, to appreciate the motives behind Ponge’s decision to write about artists, and to place the art essays within the schema of his own developing poetics.

Ponge’s criticism not only begins towards the end of the war when the relationship between art and literature was particularly intense, but is in many senses forged by the experience of war. The texts on Jean Fautrier, Germaine Richier and Giacometti, for example, belong specifically to a troubled post-war climate, and although the essays of L'Atelier contemporain take us through to 1975, Ponge’s themes, the mood of his critical pieces and the general existential quest he conducts through his studies of creative figures show that his initial imperatives remain constant. The urgent questions about French art which Ponge proposes to explore in his introduction: “Qui sommes-nous? Où allons-nous? Que faisons-nous? Que se passe-t-il, en somme, dans l'atelier contemporain?” (AC VIII) are part and parcel of the general post-war process of re-assessment and re-building. As Germaine Viatte puts it in her essay on the post-war Zeitgeist in French art, “Painting becomes a new
womb-like space, visceral, organic, a network of emotions. Likewise, Ponge points to the end of the war as a tabula rasa, calling for a new beginning, a birth from the rubble.

The mood of Ponge's criticism is more clearly delineated if we compare it with the early modernist era in France, characterised by its blazoned freshness, energy and grand designs, and if we remember that Ponge had one foot in each century, that "il surplombe notre modernité" as Serge Koster puts it. The early Twentieth Century appears now as an exciting kaleidoscopic period, a pinnacle of literary and artistic adventure, with its irrepressible gaiety and confident belief in endless potential. In his works on Picasso and Braque, Ponge occasionally retraces this excitement, the "atmosphère de matin triomphal, qui sembla devoir être le siècle du pouvoir de l'homme", when "Jusqu'au moindre village parut reconstruit, pavoisé d'une lessive nouvelle." The energy of the period even withstood, as Ponge points out, the 1914-18 war, which "n'interrompit guère ce processus" (AC 104). His comment on subsequent developments makes the change and disillusionment clear: "Le siècle du pouvoir de l'homme devint celui de son désespoir. Chacun, depuis, ressent dans sa chair et son esprit que nous vivons un temps entre tous atroce, celui de la pire sauvagerie" (AC 105). The knowledge that "Tout fut près récemment de finir" (Méthodes 192) is ever present so that exhuberance and confidence in Ponge's criticism are noticeably dampened. A vast and shimmering panorama is replaced by microscopic scrutiny, by a preference for art which is modest in proportion, and which goes back to basics. Early modernist fervour gives way to hesitancy, and the essays are characterised above all by their pensive and tentative approach, their sense of the infinite complexity of everything and by that essential constituent of modernity, doubt. Above all the explosive urge to build and to conquer new territory has been turned on its head and replaced by
notions of a more cautious, meticulous type of creation better defined as re-building or repair. For Ponge the artist is the "réparateur" of a shattered world (Méthodes 200). Painters, like poets, "n'ont plus qu'une chose à faire, plus qu'une fonction à remplir. Ils doivent ouvrir un atelier; et y prendre en réparation le monde, le monde par fragments, comme il leur vient" (AC 106).

Another factor which ties Ponge's criticism to a delimited period is his choice of artists. Although he is eminently capable of writing on, say, Cézanne or Manet had he so wished, his critical output is devoted solely to contemporary artists, with the single exception of the text on Chardin and the still life which is, upon closer study, an individualistic up-dating of the painter's work to show how it is suitable for contemporary needs. It could also be suggested that the ravages of war are responsible for Ponge's patriotic approach in L'Atelier contemporain. His constant urge is to define the qualities specific to French art, to the national as well as the individual genius, and to lend stability or authenticity to the achievements of contemporary creators by placing them within a larger tradition. Finally, not only has Ponge's criticism a patriotic, and occasionally a political note, but its serious intentions are manifested by his sustained attention not only to the aesthetic, but in particular to what he sees as the ethical achievements of modern artists.

Ponge's motivation for the critical texts has several faces, and indeed certain aspects of his work suggest he might be predisposed to write about painters. Critics frequently describe Ponge as a visual poet, with paintings and painters as permanent intertexts and touchstones, informing his work in a vital way. Unlike Bonnefoy or Claude Simon, he does not noticeably rely on specific paintings in his poetry,41 yet for Sollers he is distinguished from other poets by the fact that "la peinture prend dans [ses] textes
une place tout à fait spécifique". Sollers sees two triangles in Ponge's work; one consisting of author, text and reader, the other of text, concrete world and paintings "qui deviennent, dans cette configuration, comme un relais ou une méditation, par rapport au système d'ensemble" (EPS 88). For J.-M. Dunoyer Ponge is "ce visuel à perpétuité",42 while for Sartre, Ponge's early poems are "soumis [...] à la vision" (EPS 89), exploring surfaces, light and form. Genette similarly refers to Ponge as "Un écrivain typiquement 'visuel' et d'esthétique toute picturale",43 which points to a correspondence in perception between painter and poet. For Hélian, Ponge's work is undertaken with the scrutiny appropriate to artists' sketches: "Il répétait des choses presque pareilles dans lesquelles la variation d'un angle ou d'un détail approchait la vérité d'une façon nouvelle". His texts give not only intellectual pleasure but "une manière de joie physique", aspiring as they do to the texte / objet.44 Ponge has a feel for the material nature of words, for the inks, papers and pens which can be used to expand the signifying potential of language, and relishes the concrete paraphenalia of his art as much as any painter or sculptor.

Friendship is another obvious motivation for these texts. In many cases it was the artists themselves who sought meetings with Ponge in the forties after their enthusiastic reception of Le Parti pris des choses, and personal attachments were forged through mutual admiration. The essays of L'Atelier contemporain are responses to requests from friends, artists who wanted to be treated by Ponge "À [sa] manière" (AC VII), and each is the result of a "parti pris réciproque" (AC VIII). The recueil is thus a series of couplings with a limited repertory of painters and sculptors whose interest in and for Ponge springs from certain fundamental similarities. Ponge does not pretend to cover the whole panorama of contemporary art. The essays represent his reaction to certain familiar individuals
rather than to artistic movements or schools, so he cannot be allied to one particular group, as was the case with, for example, Apollinaire and Cubism, or Breton and Surrealism. He returns faithfully to a restrained selection of favourite artists (Braque, Picasso, Fautrier, Kermadec, Hélion) rather than dispersing his interest, and prefers to follow a particular painter through all his periods, returning after a number of years to the same artist sometimes six or seven times. These essays become exemplary co-developments, journals of Ponge's personal responses over the years. They culminate in panoramic studies which are also, in several cases, touching epitaphs and expressions of personal loss.

A further motive springs from the fact that the critical essays, unlike the poetry and the other texts on people, are *textes de circonstance* and *textes de commande*. This suggests a practical interest which must not be overlooked, and Ponge casually refers to these pieces as "textes alimentaires"; "c'est qu'en général ces textes de commande sont des textes payés" (*EPS* 90). Despite the fact that this is the first incentive mentioned by Ponge when discussing his criticism with Sollers, it is probably the least important and there is a far greater urgency behind Ponge's art writing than the mere dictates of financial constraint. This urgency is described in the preface to *L'Atelier contemporain* as follows: "Les chocs émotifs ressentis au contact de cette espèce d'hommes, observés 'à l'œuvre', et dans leurs comportements quotidiens, tant éthiques qu'esthétiques, m'obligeaient-ils, de toute nécessité et d'urgence, à en obtenir, si je puis ainsi dire, raison" (*AC* VII–VIII). As Ponge states in 'My Creative Method' he feels compelled to sharpen his own contours not only by writing about the material world, but also by writing about (and often by reacting against) other works. This is part of Ponge's quest to avoid annihilation, and to re-affirm his own existence: "Il me faut exister. Il faut
une création de ma part à leur propos" (Méthodes 14). Thus the art criticism gives Ponge an opportunity which is absent from his other texts on people: an opportunity to place himself as a creator ("c'est devant l'oeuvre d'un autre, donc comme critique, que l'on s'est reconnu créateur" (TP 148).

Ponge, then, has an obvious personal urge to write about painters in whose creative endeavours he sees so many parallels to his own. It is noticeable that with the exception of the text on Malherbe he writes in a much less sustained and methodical way about literary figures, and that by comparison with his attention to painters his contact with contemporary writers leaves him less enthusiastic. Ponge's comments on writers remain dispersed throughout his work and are not considered sufficiently significant to have been published in a collection. His literary heroes range from the classical to the revolutionary: Malherbe, La Fontaine and Boileau rub shoulders on the shelves of his ideal library with Lautréamont and Mallarmé, but perhaps the only contemporary writer to have had as powerful an influence on Ponge as certain painters is Jean Paulhan. Although Ponge was 'adopted' and re-discovered by some of the most significant literary currents he never really belonged to them or rubbed shoulders with them for long but remained resolutely independent, and is thus a difficult figure to place or categorise within the larger panorama of Twentieth Century literature. He has stayed isolated, whilst providing, as Ian Higgins points out, a meeting point for "ideas and tendencies which are often seen as incompatible". The Absurd, Surrealism, Phenomenology, Existentialism and Structuralism all converge within Ponge's work and yet, as Claude Bonnefoy remarks, "Des auteurs ou des courants qui se réclament de lui [...] Ponge ne parle guère, même s'il les encourage en publiant dans leurs revues ou à leurs côtés". Artists are clearly more attractive figures for Ponge and
hold several advantages. It is contemporary painters Ponge cites amongst his masters and most profound influences, from Picasso's paternal authority and stunning example of virtuosity to Fautrier's "rage de l'expression" (AC 31) which is shared by Ponge, or Braque's major works which all represent a "palier" in the writer's ethical development (AC 247). Any personal acquaintance with literary figures was, furthermore, relatively disinterested, and pursued "pas du tout par des raisons d'atelier, pour faire comme eux, pour prendre, dans la technique littéraire, quelque chose d'eux, non". The artist's studio, on the contrary, has a profound fascination for Ponge. "Son attention critique le porte plutôt à regarder travailler les peintres qui, plus que l'écrivain, sont aux prises avec les choses (à représenter) et les matériaux (toile, papier, huile, couleur, pierre à graver, etc.) et qui savent, comme Pierre Charbonnier énoncer et faire fonctionner dans le tableau "l'absurde et ravissante question posée par le monde extérieur". Painters are likewise interested in writers because, as Ponge explains it, "nous, écrivains, nous sommes dans la même situation vis-à-vis du monde extérieur et du monde social que ces autres 'artistes'" (EPS 90).

Ponge, then, is clearly interested in what he stands to gain from the critical exercise:

Il est certain que se lier, dans la camaraderie, avec des hommes qui travaillent dans une technique qui n'est pas la vôtre, mais qui ont exactement la même situation, par rapport aux formes anciennes de pensée et à ce qu'on peut peut-être chercher à faire dans l'ordre de l'avenir, est quelque chose d'utile (EPS 92).

He prefers to liken his endeavours to those of plastic artists, and his view of their extreme usefulness is an elevated one. A painter is "plus efficace dans l'ordre de [...] la révolution culturelle [...] ou dans l'ordre de l'offensive intellectuelle [...] que n'importe quel
philosophe ou n'importe quel religieux ou n'importe quel [...] maître à penser ou maître de vie, comme disent les gens de l'Extrême-Orient" (EPS 93). Paintings are different from texts in that they are the visible signs of cultural advancement. Whereas the more sceptical may regard modern art and one's allegiance to it as a sort of culturally acceptable 'badge', Ponge sees the phenomenon in far more elevated terms. A modern painting for Ponge is a powerful, fascinating symbol and rallying point, "le drapeau de l'offensive intellectuelle" (EPS 91), a man like Picasso being a "porte-drapeau". Hélion says of Ponge that "Il avait une façon de considérer les choses d'aussi haut qu'il les anoblissait", and whereas he gives scant attention to contemporary writers, his portraiture of individual artists elevates them to the realms of myth. It is clear that New Criticism's determined extermination of the author has not been accompanied by the death of the artist, who remains a cult figure. His personality, far from being abandoned, is given as much attention in these essays as his works, the one being seen as a function of the other, and Ponge assumes that an interest in the painter's work suggests also an interest in the painter as a man. In an essay on abstract art E.H. Gombrich describes the birth of what he calls "the treasured legend of the modern movement" whose artists pursue "their lonely and perilous way in the face of public neglect and derision". Gombrich's talk of "shrines" and "martyrs", of an "almost religious abnegation" and of the "proud resistance to the temptations of success which made an artistic movement a moral force in society" has the same tone as the extremely personal testimonies in Ponge's essays. A moralistic judgement at the expense of an aesthetic one tends to predominate, and Emile Picq, for example, emerges as "notre héros" (AC 5), a text for Hélion is described as a "Fanfare" (AC 281), and a text on Picasso is written "À la Gloire [...] de Picasso" (AC 344).
Ponge's moral criteria are naturally a very personal set of standards. We could say that he invents the artists he writes about for the public, from his own perspective, dealing with them in his own rhetorical terms. They are judged and likened to his own ethical and aesthetic preoccupations, just as Breton, for example, treats individual painters in the light of their Surrealist commitment. The artists who are attractive and attracted to Ponge have very different energies, yet Ponge sees something of his own endeavour in all of them. They fall into two camps; those manifesting "La rage de l'expression" such as Fautrier, Picasso or Picq, and those who are calmer and more meditative, like Braque and Chardin. However, perhaps the most important portrait to emerge from L'Atelier contemporain is the delineation of traits belonging to the generic figure of the Artist. This is a figure at once humble and elevated. In whatever medium he may work, the artist is homo faber, a craftsman or artisan, concerned with fabrication. He is a mécanicien, a réparateur as well as a genius. In addition, he has in common with Ponge attributes proper to both the monk and the dandy. Kermadec combines elegance and a strict règle de vie; the extravagant Picasso embraced extreme poverty in his blue and pink periods, and Braque is devoted to meditation upon his art, barely leaving his studio. Ponge is also described by Gavronsky as having monastic tendencies, although he is "ce moine plutôt rabelaisien". All are dandies in the typically French sense of someone "QUI SE MANIFESTE PAR LE REFUS DE LA PERFECTION" (AC 182).

It is clear given this elevated view of artists that there is more to be learned from them than from other writers; "Si je ne perdis pas tout au jeu, j'aurai gagné quelque chose à reporter maintenant - plutôt que sur d'autres peintres [...] - sur plusieurs objets taciturnes qui ne vivent que dans l'attente de leur plus juste expression" (AC 151). Finally, it may be possible to add to
our list of motivations an element of rivalry. In a text of 1952 ("Le Monde muet est notre seule patrie") Ponge compares the respective achievements of painting and his own craft:

Les indices de l'ère nouvelle se trouvent surtout dans la peinture de l'école de Paris, depuis Cézanne, et dans la poésie française des années 70. Il semble seulement que la poésie soit un peu en retard maintenant sur la peinture parce qu'elle a donné moins d'œuvres construites, résonnant par leur seule forme (mais nous nous en occupons) (Méthodes 203).

This suggests an attempt not only to learn from the painter but to beat him at his own game.

La création en acte

If Ponge's art criticism occupies such an important place in his post-war work it is partly because his meetings with and writings on artists are interwoven with his most important developments of this period. Ponge's first contact with artists coincides with a period of expansion in his work, a greater fluidity and the breaking of old taboos. 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. His satisfaction with the closed texts and with what Paulhan called their "infaillibilité un peu courte" (TP 119) was short lived and his urge was rather, as he states in 1953, to "repartir dans la vie, dans le risque, dans la maladresse, dans la forêt épaisse des expressions maladroites" (Méthodes 230). Significantly, in 1943 Ponge had referred to the critical jottings contained in Proèmes as his "menstrues" or "saignées critiques" (TP 230),
products of a fallow period, and valuable principally as proof that he was still capable of becoming 'pregnant' with a work. The decision to publish this "fatras" (TP 119) was the first step towards his abandonment of finished texts in favour of preliminary note books, and his greater confidence in the value of these writings as intrinsically worthy of study.

Ponge's art criticism in particular allows us to see the full extent of his devotion to what we might call la création en acte and to his prolonged meditation on forms of human communication which acquaintance with artists allows him to continue and intensify. Fascination with the workings of a different medium injects Ponge's own writing with a new liberty. Thus when Ponge's lengthy notebooks for 'La Figue Sèche', as a previously published poem, appear in print along with L'Atelier contemporain in 1977, they are comparable in form and emphasis: both are composed of exploratory paragraphs which reveal the process of creation; both provide a view behind the scenes and open up the studio rather than the gallery for public viewing. The originality of Ponge's approach to art criticism lies in its almost total confinement to the struggle for expression which takes place in the studio, sacrificing any comment on the finished work of art in favour of a more intimate exploration of the processes behind it. Interest is steadfastly deflected from the exhibition hall to the studio, from the finished work to the materials and the acts which went into its creation. These are texts, therefore, in which Ponge is concerned less with concrete objects than with individuals and with human activity.

The difficulties of dealing with people and with the critical function are, then, overcome in a variety of ways, and against all the odds Ponge may be justly called a first class essayist on art. The problems and solutions are different for each individual artist and each text,
depending on its intended audience and the circumstances of its appearance. The collection of essays which emerges despite Ponge's inhibitions provides a fascinating series of personal portraits of artists at work, a sustained investigation into the properties of various media (including language), and a critical look at society and the artist's role within it.

I have chosen to deal with the summits of Ponge's criticism, at the risk of sacrificing his essays on lesser known artists (Picq, Debré, Kosice, Sekiguchi, Faniel, Springer, etc.). Firstly the lyrical studies of Fautrier "l'enragé", involving the immediate repercussions of war and occupation, and the moral and aesthetic problems with which artists were faced during this period. This is followed by a study of Ponge's curiously idiosyncratic and unorthodox response to Giacometti's statues of dwindled humanity. The third focus is Ponge's penetrating essays on the still life genre, including the works of both Chardin and Braque, in which his views on the moral function of art reach their height. The opening chapter prepares for these with a detailed introduction to the problems of Ponge's critical discourse.
NOTES

1. *Le Parti pris des choses*, Gallimard, Collection Métamorphoses 13 (Paris, 1942). References here will be to *Tome premier* into which the poems were incorporated in 1965. Ponge had begun writing poems in 1914 and in 1925 was working on a novel (*Arnold et Léatrice*) and a dramatic work (*Tigrane et Priscilla*), neither of which was published. His texts of the twenties and thirties were often social or political comment or satire, and were published for the most part in *Nouvelle revue française* ('Trois satires' (no.117, June 1923); 'À la gloire d'un ami' (no.132, August 1925); 'La Famille du sage' (no.156, September 1926); 'Notes d'un poème' (no.158, November 1926); 'Végétation' (no.231, December 1932); 'Le Tronc d'arbre' (no.242, November 1933)), and in *Le Mouton Blanc* ('Esquisse d'une parabole' (1re série, no.3, November-December 1922); 'Fragments métatechniques' (1re série, no.4, January 1923); 'Qualité de Jules Romains' (2e série, no.1, September-October 1923); 'Escalandre suivi de cinq autres poèmes' (2e série, no.2, November 1923)). Texts also appeared in *Le Disque Vert* ('Deux petits exercices' (December 1923); 'Trois petits écrits' (4e série, no.2, March 1925); 'Le Sérieux Défait' (no. spécial, 1925), in *Mesures* ('Le Cageot' (no.1, January 1935); 'Sapates' (no.2, April 1936)) and in a small number of other reviews. In 1926 Ponge's *Douze petits écrits* was published (*Editions de la Nouvelle revue française*), but it had sold not more than around a dozen copies by 1939. It was therefore truly Ponge's collection of poems on objects which revealed him as a new voice.

2. These are 'Notes premières de l'Homme', first published in *Les Temps modernes* in October 1945 (references will be to the text in *Prèmes* (*Tome premier*, pp.235-48)), and 'L'Homme à grands traits', first published in *Synthèses* in September 1951 (references will be to the text in *Méthodes*, pp.181-89).

3. 'Baptème funèbre' was written after the Liberation for inclusion in a commemorative volume of René Leynaud's poetic works selected by Ponge (*Poésies posthumes*, Gallimard (Paris, 1947)). Ponge's poem, which does not ultimately appear in the above volume, is dedicated to Leynaud, a friend and fellow poet who was executed by the Germans. 'La Famille du sage' was written after the death of Ponge's father, Armand Ponge, in 1923.

4. *Pour un Malherbe*, Gallimard (Paris, 1965); 'Prose de profundis à la gloire de Claudel' (Lyres, pp.25-32); 'Qualité de Jules Romains' (Lyres, p.117); 'Pour un notice (sur Jean Paulhan)' (Lyres, pp.52-56). *Pour un Malherbe* is undoubtedly the most fascinating of the texts on other writers. Compiled between 1951 and 1957, this is an idiosyncratic, complex, somewhat controversial study, and is Ponge's longest series of notes on an individual.

5. This collection was published by *Editions de la Nouvelle revue française* (Paris, 1948) then reprinted in *Tome premier* (pp.419-519).
6. *L'Atelier contemporain*, Gallimard (Paris, 1977). This contains most of Ponge's writings on artists up to 1975, although there are some minor pieces not included. There were also several essays written after publication of the recueil, but these are in general less accomplished and somewhat reiterative. The art essays outside *L'Atelier contemporain* which have been consulted for this thesis are listed in the Bibliography.


8. The art criticism received several reviews on publication in 1977 and often has what can only be referred to as token mentions in articles or books. For the exceptions to this rule and for all the studies of Ponge's art criticism consulted here, see the section headed 'Critical Works on Ponge's Art Criticism' in the Bibliography.


10. J.-P. Sartre, 'L'Homme et les choses', in *Situations I*, Gallimard (Paris, 1947), pp.298-357. This essay and the criticisms of Ponge contained within it are given further discussion in the chapter on Giacometti.

11. 'Baptême funèbre', *Lyres*, pp.35-37 (p.36).


15. Ibid, p.345.


29. Greene, p.69.

30. Greene, p.70.


32. The notion of fear is evoked, as well as that of turning someone into stone. In addition, Higgins shows how the calcareous underground waters running through Leynaud's native region (the Ardèche) are used as a metaphor for the poet's underlying emotion. This emotion threatens to 'petrify' him creatively, although the "dynamic play of dialectical relationships" in the poem means that the result of his emotion is anything but petrified ('Against Petrification', pp.821-22). It might be added that the free-flowing outpour of such emotion would be more likely to 'petrify' Leynaud than anything else, since it would naturally tend towards cliché.


34. Michel Leiris, 'Ce que m'ont dit les peintures de Francis Bacon', in *Au Verso des images*, Fata Morgana (Montpellier, 1980), p.9.


38. 'Matière et mémoire' (*L'Atelier contemporain*, pp.43-53). 'Matière et mémoire ou les lithographies à l'école' was initially published in 1945 by Fernand Mourlot with 34 lithographs by Jean Dubuffet.


41. The one notable exception is 'Notes prises pour un oiseau' (*Tome Premier*, pp.271-88), Ponge's earliest text of *La Rage de l'expression*.
Written in 1938 the notes originated from a painting of two birds laying eggs in a basket by the Polish artist Eugeniusz Ebisch. In an interview of 1976, Ponge discusses the texts of *La Rage de l'expression* thus: "Le premier, chronologiquement, c'est 'Notes prises pour un oiseau'. C'est fait à partir d'une peinture d'Ebisch, deux poulettes comme ça dans une corbeille en train de pondre, qui ont été à l'origine de ce texte, du premier texte de *La Rage de l'expression*, avant la guerre, avant la décision prise ensuite de poursuivre dans cette direction de textes ouverts et tout sur la table" (Cahiers critiques de la littérature, no.2 (December 1976), 4-32 (p.13)). It may not be far fetched to suggest that what attracted Ponge was not so much the image of the birds per se, but the productive activity in which they were engaged. The notion of laying eggs, of giving birth, could well have some connection with the display of process in the text.


44. Jean Hélion, 'La Découverte de Francis Ponge', p.263.


49. *Entretiens de Francis Ponge avec Philippe Sollers*, p.92. Ponge is referring here to his contact with the Surrealists in particular. In 1930 he frequented André Breton's group, and signed the manifesto announcing the review *Le Surréalisme au service de la révolution*. His 'Plus que raisons' appeared in the review's first number in the autumn of 1930, and it is clear that Ponge had in common with the Surrealists a desire for violent change and violent opposition ("j'étais au moins aussi violent et désagréable avec mes contemporains qu'étaient les Surréalistes, bien sûr" ('Entretien avec Francis Ponge', Cahiers critiques de la littérature, no.2 (December 1976), 4-32 (p.24)). He did not, however, subscribe so wholeheartedly to the Surrealist reliance on the subconscious or on Freudian theories; in the matter of creation, Ponge has steadfastly maintained his view that reason is the most exquisite sense of all.
For Ponge's contact with other literary figures, see Louis Dahlin, 'Entretien avec Francis Ponge: ses rapports avec Camus, Sartre et d'autres', French Review, 54, no.2 (December 1980), 271-81.


51. Jean Hélion, 'La Découverte de Francis Ponge', p.262.


54. See for example the experimental work of 1947, 'Tentative orale' (Méthodes, pp.233-68) which Ponge delivered in Paris and in Bruxelles, and Ponge's compilation of war time notebooks (1938-1944) contained in La Rage de l'expression (Tome premier, pp.255-415).

This chapter, beginning our examination of what Serge Gavronsky refers to as "le rapport complexe et à la fois stimulant de Francis Ponge et de sa perception de l'autre", will attempt to assess Ponge's critical discourse, to place it with respect to his poetic texts and to see how some of the features of the latter are carried over into the criticism. What effect do they have in this new context of informative essays which are written about people and for people? A major centre of interest will be the fluctuating view we receive of the critical essay as alternately transitive or opaque, as mirror or window, as a text preoccupied with foregrounding its own medium and mechanisms, yet whose raison d'être is to provide the reader with information concerning those of the artist.

Critics fall into two camps on the question of whether a useful distinction can be made between Ponge's criticism and his poetic texts: those who stress the dissimilarity of the art essays, and those who perceive of them as bearing little difference to the poems. According to Gavronsky, Ponge's critical observations are "nearly at one with [his] own writings". Gavronsky claims that there is little distinction between a critical and a creative discourse, since "It is language and the way that the medium is used and applied which counts and not the special function it plays, as a poem, or as an essay on art". Thus it is difficult to distinguish between these essays and Proèmes or La Fabrique du Pré as far as their "linguistic-rhetorical stance" is concerned. Marcel Spada also points to similarities. For him the critical texts "ne sont pas fondamentalement différents de ceux du 'Parti pris'. Toute l'œuvre développe une poétique qui est aussi un art de
vivre." Bonnefoy too dismisses the differences; "Tout Ponge est à lire dans chacun de ses textes.

For Jean-Marie Dunoyer, convergence ceases with the notion of the pretext. Unlike the pine wood or the meadow, plastic art is not simply an opportunity for Ponge to "mettre à nu les rouages de son activité mentale, devenue une fin en soi". We must not think of these essays as being self-indulgent or as having only subjective value; "Si Ponge édifie son propre monument et en exhibe les infrastructures, il n'en demeure pas moins, on pourrait dire par surcroît, un interprète objectif (encore l'objet) de l'art contemporain". In contrast, Serge Gavronsky's criticism is based around another notion to be examined in this chapter, that of 'autoportrature'; seizing the other merely as an opportunity to define the self. The expected centre of interest is likewise deflected for Ian Higgins, who points to a "strong difference" between Ponge's criticism and poetry, but comments in his study of Ponge's work on Braque that "for all Ponge's obvious and sometimes moving admiration for Braque, the texts are above all interesting and useful for the light they shed on Ponge, because they express his reactions to an expression, and not to a thing ostensibly defined outside the text." Ponge's own assertion that painters as subjects are little different from objects ("Vous me dites qu'on ne rencontre pas une crevette comme on rencontre un peintre, eh bien si pourquoi pas, si parfaitement") indicates that he will attempt to maintain as many of his poetic practices as possible in the critical discourse. However, his nonchalant suggestion that one can write about an artist as one can write about a shrimp is belied by his texts, which may struggle to do so (occasionally he does in fact refer to the artist's work as a 'pretext') but which must equally provide compromises. In L'Atelier contemporain he does acknowledge that artists and their creations are not treated exactly like the object-pretext, but at least "à ma manière" (AC VII), a statement
which requires examination, particularly given Ponge’s avowed difficulties and increased responsibilities in writing about people.

Here is Ponge’s approach to an archetypal Pongean object, the fig: “Une figue, c’est donc un objet du monde extérieur qui produit des émotions, des sensations et des associations d’idées que l’on poursuit avec la volonté de les exprimer même si ces associations sont particulièrement subjectives, partiales, et tout à fait personnelles et arbitraires. Comme c’est mon bon plaisir de les mettre à jour, de les écrire, c’est quelque chose qui me permettra de modifier mon idée de la figue, mon idée du langage”. Ponge instinctively veers away from any readily accessible information and has an urge to express new and unfamiliar qualities in objects; “je veux dire celles qui ne sont pas encore dites” (Méthodes 277). A painter, however, cannot be equated with Ponge’s insignificant, derisory and neglected objects whose image is clouded by familiarity. Does our perspective of him need renewing in the same way, and quite as urgently, given that, unlike the object, he is eminently capable of self-renewal through self-expression? In the case of objects, Ponge’s typical procedure is to liberate them from all the habitual classifications which define them as tools linked to man, and to rid them of their traditional significance. Such a work of renovation, of destruction / creation does not need to be effected in the case of painters, who have no ostensive, ‘stale’ definition outside the text. Consequently, to treat a painter in the way outlined for the fig introduces several problems. For example, whereas we can relate all of Ponge’s comments on the fig back to our own experience of figs, and hence revel in their combination of novelty and appropriateness, we may have no prior knowledge of Ponge’s chosen artists. How far can Ponge legitimately give free rein to his “bon plaisir”, his subjectivity, his “associations [...] personnelles et
arbitraires" in such texts? Above all, how much freedom ought he to exercise in modifying his idea of language?

The language / object dichotomy which has left critics of Ponge sitting on one or the other side of the fence is particularly pertinent here. Is Ponge principally a phenomenologist, or a poet of poetry, using the object as a pretext? Is it the object or the word which is the signifié in his work? The blurring, of course, occurs because objects and language are so tightly interwoven and interdependent for Ponge, and because in his work the thing is language, and language a thing. For J.-P. Richard, selection appears inevitable; the reader "se choisit alors sa hiérarchie. Il arrête son attention, et son intention de possession, de jouissance, sur l'un des pôles du rapport sémantique". 11 Susan Cauley Selvin, however, attempts to remind critics of Ponge's "double conscience qui ne lâche jamais ni l'objet concret ni les mots qui le désignent", and of the fact that the delicate balance implied by $PPC=CTM$, is an equation, not a provision of two alternative readings. 12 It must be admitted, however, that Riffaterre's reading of Ponge's prose as writing which proclaims its descriptive intent then goes on to manifest "un défi à la référentialité", 13 is particularly convincing, especially with reference to certain passages of the art criticism. For Riffaterre, the "compte tenu des mots" is in fact a corrective to the "parti pris des choses", a view which does account for some of the more problematic sections of Ponge's essays. Riffaterre continues, "plus le texte se dit tourné vers le réel, plus le scandale éclate de la dérivation à partir des mots"; 14 thence "les illusions que se fait le lecteur, qui s'imagine qu'il va toucher des choses", 15 and the frustrating nature of the obstructive text which "est là justement pour le bloquer, et restreindre sa liberté". 16

Surely, then, in the essays on artists, the reader will be tempted to embrace not Riffaterre's option, but that of Richard who complains that "l'on se résigne mal à ne
savourer que des signes, ou des objets en train de se muer en signes [...] Ponge me séduit plus ainsi comme poète de l'univers sensible [...] que comme poète du langage ou fabuliste indirect de la nomination. Il serait, me semble-t-il, dommage que le lilas, la rose ou le magnolia devinssent seulement pour nous des fleurs de rhétorique". Some of the procedures - particularly those which privilege language and highlight the act of expression - can make the art criticism appear, at first sight, confusing, audacious, and singularly inappropriate for the special function the text is called upon to fulfil. Thus while it is true that the criticism, varying in form, style aim and perspective, employs many of Ponge's typical poetic approaches and is therefore representative of the variety of his other works on several scores, it is also true that the subject and special function of these critical pieces - a constant problem to Ponge - sets them apart from his other work. These new constraints generate texts in which Ponge is caught between different types of discourse.

Ponge and the implied reader

The question I wish to explore firstly is Ponge's awareness of, and toying with, the expectations of his readership in the art criticism. In the Prolegomena it was seen how Ponge's role as an art critic was confessedly problematic. He frequently insists at various junctures in the texts that he is uncertain of how to begin, how to continue, and what kind of work it would be appropriate to produce. Ponge's fear of petrifaction has already been examined and I would like to suggest that a second reason for his hesitancy is his reader awareness, prevalent in the poetic texts, but producing a special relationship in the art criticism for a number of reasons. One of the recurring features which dictates the development of his idiosyncratic
critical texts is his dialogue with the reader, who is manipulated according to Ponge’s own notions of readerly requirements. The critical texts are demanding as they necessitate a variety of reading stances on the part of the consumer, and add to the classical couple plaire and instruire (Ponge hopes that the reader of his texts will "en tirer à la fois une jouissance et une leçon" (TP 126)) other more specifically contemporary functions such as choquer, taquiner, dérouter. Their ultimate function is less to anatomise a painter’s work or to provide biographical data than to re-educate and prepare the reader, producing an inquisitive frame of mind which will be ripe for his private encounter with the works of art in question.

Firstly, a glance at reader awareness in the poetry. On one occasion, Ponge outlines how he intends to woo the reader by providing in his texts the startlingly new, but in a startlingly simple mode:

C'est de plain-pied que je voudrais qu'on entre dans ce que j'écris. Qu'on s'y trouve à l'aise. Qu'on y trouve tout simple. Qu'on y circule aisément, comme dans une révélation, soit, mais aussi simple que l'habitude. Qu'on y bénéficie du climat de l'évidence: de sa lumière, température, de son harmonie.

...Et cependant que tout y soit neuf, inouï: uniment éclairé, un nouveau matin.
Beaucoup de paroles simples n'ont pas été dites encore.
Le plus simple n'a pas été dit (Méthodes 67-8).

Such talk promises comfort, coherence and readability, features which, in any written form, are generally supplied by a framework of strategic areas which guide and smooth the way for the reader and maintain his desire to read. Privileged moments or stages of the text (the title, the preface, the digression, the conclusion, the signature) awaken and then fulfil our expectations so that in what we may call an accessible text, we proceed without being over conscious of the hand which leads us, and are permitted to
enjoy the confirmation of our assumptions. Most of us begin reading according to previously learned models of genre, a concept which is equally useful to the producer of the text, and to the consumer in his encounter with it. In Philippe Hamon's definition, it is "un horizon d'attente thématique et formel institutionnalisé, et l'on pourrait envisager de classer les genres selon leur manière de distribuer et d'expliciter un certain nombre de signaux démarcatifs à des endroits prédéterminés". Such signals are largely phatic; it is simply a question of recognising them, and hence feeling at home in the textual model. One of the principal characteristics of contemporary texts, however, is the deliberate blurring of such transitional points (the disturbing overlap between speech, thought and narrative in Robbe-Grillet's novels is a good example of how the reader's expectations of a genre are flouted). For Ponge too the genre is something to work against rather than with; our habitual reading rituals are to be disrupted, and the notion of a pre-established format is to be spurned, even if the texts appear to promise one.

Serge Koster makes the point that any reader can feel at home in the Pongean text, but on one condition; Ponge is "Lisible par tous, pour tous, pour peu qu'on consente à aimer la langue maternelle à d'autres fins que purement utilitaires". The majority of Ponge's comments about his own poetic texts are, likewise, evidence that the reader has an especially demanding role to play. From his earliest writings it is clear that Ponge's motivation lies in his own complex relationship with words - a relationship by turns painful, frustrating, or exhilarating - in which language is always approached with suspicion. Ponge, then, embodies above all a common crisis of faith in language, a fixture now firmly lodged in French intellectual life. Even the less hermetic texts of his poetic corpus constitute investigations into the knotty mechanisms of language itself, whose function typically becomes non-literal and
self-referential in an effort to dispel the mythical model of one *signifiant* to one *signifié*, and of language as the unquestionable repository of some Truth or Reality which lies outside it. The dynamics between word and thought are more complex than this, the latter often being subservient to the former, and the title of a Pongean work is therefore, according to Philippe Bonnefis, not so much a theme for an exercise in thoughtful description as the reader might expect, but rather "un piège aux mots".20

Ponge often refers to his poetry as descriptions which are no longer simply mimetically based, but are elaborate verbal artifacts. An early text on Baudelaire's variants illustrates his enthusiastic urge for semantic density, outlining a programme which, if realised, would throw the average reader into turmoil: "il faut écrire de façon que chacun des mots de la phrase puisse être imprimé successivement en italiques sans ridicule [...] il faut que tous les mots aient cette qualité, ce potentiel du mot en italique".21 According to Robert Greene, "Ponge exemplifies with stunning force and clarity a view of poetry or writing that would have us linger forever at just that juncture of experience where words beget nothing but other words, and where the poem exists primarily in its relationship to other texts".22 Ponge's election of simple objects is a device which enables him to maintain maximum control of his language and to avoid any temptation to give voice to ideas or emotions. This implies a policy of non-involvement as far as the poem's ostensible subject is concerned, but of intense, and sometimes rapturous involvement as far as the poem's other, principal subject is concerned, that is, language itself. It is significant that one of Ponge's few lyrical outbursts is occasioned not by any 'poetic' subject but by the raw material of expression:

O draperies des mots, assemblages de l'art littéraire, à massifs, à pluriels, parterres de voyelles colorées, décors des lignes, ombres de la muette, boucles superbes
If Ponge's texts contain a message, therefore, it is a constantly reiterated message concerning his own and our production of reality through words. The Pongean poem or notebook is written in such a way that the reader is forced to re-create it, and to participate in its original production, becoming increasingly aware of the mechanisms of language. In this sense the reader's self alone structures the text, as he replaces the author. Without the reader, any text - even a private journal - does not properly exist; as Riffaterre points out, "L'état le plus parfait, la version achevée, n'est plus le texte mais le travail complémentaire (la pratique comparative) que fait le lecteur sur ce texte, allant de la lettre à l'association d'idées, de l'explicite à l'implicite, du noir sur blanc à la présupposition." If Ponge's fig is a "grenier à tracasseries pour les dents" (Pièces 181), and his oyster "opiniâtrement clos" (TP 48), then the poem on the oyster, and the "figue de paroles", have the same characteristics; the fig and oyster must be, respectively, chewed over, and opened. Ponge's writing requires, as Claudine Giordan remarks, "la remise en fonctionnement du texte-objet par le lecteur souvent interpellé". As Ponge himself puts it, "C'est seulement [...] le lecteur qui fait le livre, lui-même, en le lisant; et il lui est demandé un acte" (EPS 192). Object, language, author and reader are engaged together in a complex act of mutual re-definition; "puisque tu me lis, cher lecteur, donc je suis; puisque tu nous lis (mon livre et moi), cher lecteur, donc nous sommes (Toi, lui et moi)" (PM 203). Writing and reading therefore become ends in themselves rather than means, and Ponge's references to his texts from the objet to the ludic Objeu stress that they are activity centred.
Ponge's habitual mode of writing, then, requires a new notion of the concomitant activity of reading. Ponge himself says he reads "Mot à mot, signe après signe. Il faut dire que j'ai été correcteur pour gagner un peu d'argent et que j'ai donc été obligé de lire signe après signe, mot après mot. Je crois que c'est vraiment la seule façon de lire, de vraiment lire chaque mot, chaque espace entre les mots". For Ponge, it is necessary "que l'on soit à un moment où les gens sont exercés à donner plus à l'œuvre d'art qu'ils en reçoivent" (AC 147). Hence, in similar vein, he congratulates Charbonnier for leaving space for the 'reader'. Tailoring his introduction to be 'équivalent' to Charbonnier, Ponge suggests, "D'abord il ne faut pas que j'y sois trop présent [...] il faut faire sa place au lecteur, au spectateur. Il ne faut pas qu'un tableau soit trop plein. Il faut qu'on puisse y prendre place; en quelque façon, qu'il vous comporte" (AC 114). This encourages the reader to assume his role as écrivain, not to submit to the text but to participate, to become involved in what Hawkes calls "the dangerous, exhilarating activity of creating our world now, together with the author as we go along." Given the peculiar position into which this type of text plunges the reader, Ponge makes the most of the psychological dynamics of reading by what Alan Waite refers to as his "superbly refined sense of the ways in which language both constrains and leaves free its reader". The irony here is that the average reader's notion of freedom (literal and naively referential language) is what Ponge would define as constraint. Waite suggests that in the poetic texts the reader will set out expecting a poetic context (metaphor, symbol, phonetic play, semantic density, attention to the textual substance) but will soon be obliged to abandon this expectation and 'tune in to another frequency', so to speak, since Ponge's poetry slips between models and often reads like an objective, neutral excerpt from a dictionary. Leading us from the literary to the
literal and back again, such texts remain "in a limbo of unresolved ambivalences", frustrating our attempts to integrate each detail into an intelligible whole, and to feel we are correctly following the trail of cues the author has left for us. The many levels and varying tones of the poem constitute, for Riffaterre, the manifest humour of the Pongean text, which "dicte au lecteur une pratique associative qui lui fait faire une sorte de gymnastique du langage, qui lui fait repasser, comme on repasse une leçon, divers sens d'un même mot". Since a constant theme is language itself and our attempts to draw coherent meaning from it, this very confusion and conflict between registers is an important part of the poem's pattern and meaning.

The poem, on occasions, may be a relatively simple invitation to keep a minimum of two levels alive at once. A text like 'Les Mûres' will thus be fairly unproblematic for the reader as it simply begins and ends by using a description of blackberries and blackberrying for a metaphorical account of the poem's words, presentation and composition. Nothing could be clearer than the two levels of understanding spelled out to the reader in the first paragraph:

Aux buissons typographiques constitués par le poème sur une route qui ne mène hors des choses ni à l'esprit, certains fruits sont formés d'une agglomération de sphères qu'une goutte d'encre remplit (TP 41).

Successive paragraphs do not disrupt this initial model. Nevertheless, dramatisation of the act of reading in Le Parti pris des choses is usually subtle and is part and parcel of the "infaillibilité un peu courte" Paulhan detected in the poems (TP 119). There are concealed and playful guides as to how we should read and what we should think of the poem, jokes which serve at the same time a descriptive function. 'La Bougie', for example, closes with comments on its own unyielding nature:
Cependant la bougie, par le vacillement des clartés sur le livre au brusque dégagement des fumées originales encourage le lecteur, - puis s'incline sur son assiette et se noie dans son aliment (TP 44)

whilst 'Pluie' remarks upon the inevitable delight occasioned by the sheer virtuosity of its own textual machine: "le brillant appareil s'évapore: il a plu" (TP 36). The features outlined to aid our response in 'La Fin de l'Automne' are the poem's unorthodox nature, its hygienic function, and its deceptive surface slightness: "Voilà ce qui s'appelle un beau nettoyage, et qui ne respecte pas les conventions! Habillé comme nu, trempé jusqu'aux os" (TP 38). Thus, in the closed texts, clues as to their complex functioning are usually present only in the hermetic guise of description.

It is true that, to help the reader, we may not have to venture outside the poems to find an explanatory manifesto. Open addresses become more frequent with the notebooks, most of which, like La Figue, contain a degree of 'comment' and 'pourquoi'. In Nioque de l'avant printemps, for example, the use of the trees as a metaphor for writing and reading is spelled out in terms of pruning:

Ainsi, souvent, quand on taille dans
(pratique des amputations sur) le lan
gage (une phrase), certains des mots qui
restent prennent ce caractère (des troncs
ou branches de poiriers): il semble alors
que la plume soit repassée sur eux, se
les soit confirmés.

En tous cas, le regard du lecteur doit,
lui, à son tour, de toute nécessité, repasser souvent sur ces mots, à cause du côté abscons du texte: trop concis, aheureté. Ces mots, ces parties de texte,
genfient intérieurement, reprennent force
mais paraissent nouveaux, chantournés. Ils
se confirment. Ils sont confirmés (Nioque 56-7).

Here language and the object are shown to be mutually illuminating and mutually dependent, and the reader's
activity is spelled out. The last lines of 'La Cruche' are similarly helpful: "tout ce que je viens de dire de la cruche, ne pourrait-on le dire, aussi bien, des paroles?" (Pièces 96). This kind of guidance is in sharp contrast to Ponge's occasional comments which cast doubt on the textual competence of the average reader. Of 'Les Mûres', for example, he comments that "Vue la disproportion des pépins à la pulpe les ciseaux les apprécient peu, si peu de chose au fond leur reste quand du bec à l'anus ils en sont traversés" (TP 41). The idea thus expressed is that the bird, having a small textual appetite, cannot recognise the supreme value of the graine / mot. Similarly in Ponge's extremely brief piece on night fishing, we are the "Pauvres pêcheurs" of the title, trying to fish meaning out of the poem - a task for which we are poorly equipped ("A court de haleurs"), and on closer inspection our nets remain empty:

"Pauvres pêcheurs!"
Voici l'extrait déclaré aux lanternes:
"Demie de poissons éteints par sursauts dans le sable, et trois quarts de retour des crabes vers la mer (TP 39).

In the poetry, then, reading cues are freer to remain subliminal, and it may be left to the perceptive and diligent reader to detect them. In the art criticism Ponge is necessarily more openly concerned with supplying a frame of reference for the reader, with programming his activity, and with monitoring the way he makes sense of the texts. Here essays often come with their own more explicit built in mode d'emploi. Procedures of announcing, organising, highlighting, are often obtrusively foregrounded and the very process of reading is dramatised at different stages in the collection, the tone being set by the introductory 'Au Lecteur'. On occasions the reader may in fact be confused by a surfeit of apparently unnecessary information about the act of reading.
The extra constraint for Ponge in this instance may be defined by the term 'reader-resistance'. It is a problem he predicts, and which springs largely from his two contradictory urges; firstly, as he states in a text on Braque, to provide the reader with ideas which "pourraient être utiles" (AC 58), and secondly to avoid the pitfalls involved in writing about people. As Ian Higgins puts it, "the tendency to apparent incompletion and to reflection on the expression itself seems to me to be a way of avoiding the danger of petrifying the person in an identity". Because of such taboos, these texts are necessarily oblique. Whereas in the poetry successive paragraphs provide fresh attempts to encapsulate the object concerned in an appropriate formula, it may appear that each paragraph of the critical texts is an excuse for a fresh evasion - a deliberate refusal to provide direct information. The artist and his works are frequently left off the textual scene as specific referents, in paragraphs which signify indirectly.

Readers of Ponge are habitually forced to question some of their most fundamental assumptions; not least, here, by Ponge's whole calling into question of the raison d'être of art criticism itself (illustrated as a problematic genre), and of what goes on at an exhibition. Ponge is sensitive to, and questions the communicative conventions of the informative prose which generally constitutes art criticism. Here as in the poetry, he attempts to disrupt stock responses. Of course, the painters themselves desire "Qu'il y ait une sorte d'imposition à la pensée par des mots à propos de leur peinture", and that "l'amateur soit frappé de ce que l'on puisse penser et dire tant de choses à propos du peintre en question, car à l'amateur cela semble une garantie" (AC 16). It is suggested, however, that good painting is sufficiently communicative in its own semiotic field, and that "on aurait tort de rien dire à son sujet", that "elle ridiculise d'avance toute tentative d'explication", and consequently, "il faut se borner à
s'exclamer: comme c'est joli ou beau, ou agréable à avoir près de soi" (AC 16), singularly unenlightening comments to encounter in an introductory preface. Ponge's vision of a silent gallery has already been mentioned, but he accepts that public opinion in the art market rests as much on the ideas disseminated concerning a painting as upon the visual pleasure procured. As Michel Butor puts it, "Notre vision n'est jamais pure vision"; 31 every painting generates a verbal halo and our understanding of works of art has considerable verbal dependence. The amateur art lover needs words; he is afraid of being duped, unfashionable, ignorant or 'wrong' about paintings and their significance. To frame them with words appears, therefore, inevitable but insuperably problematic.

Ponge is aware from the outset that certain specific demands should be catered for in a series of textes de commande, often paid for in advance and destined to provide illuminating information for people visiting exhibitions or reading monographs about artists. We may say that their function is utilitarian (always a potential danger for a poet, as many a poet-laureate has proved) and that as their very raison d'être is to offer a service to the reader himself, with his desire for directly relevant information and explanatory theories about art, not about literature. Ponge's own personal interests should perhaps be subdued to cater for the reader's expectations; whereas a reading of the poetic texts is the reader's choice, these texts are, we might say, inflicted upon him.

It is safe enough to assume that the reader will begin reading according to previously encountered, often traditional models of art criticism, and of literal, informative texts; texts which keep the extra-textual referent clearly before him and demand no shift in reading posture. That is, he will expect a text to make sense and to make sense rapidly. He will not anticipate any encounter with linguistic disruption, and he will expect the text to
impose an authoritative structure or meaning on a portion of the world. He may not be an avid student of Ponge and may have no desire to be one. His natural urge will be to move beyond the signifiers to the signifieds they imply. The reader will have in mind, as with the poetry, a genre, a notion of the type of information the text will supply, and a rough idea of its format (chronological study of biography; discussion of specific works and explanation of their significance). As in the poetic texts the reader here fights to maintain a fixed model or reading posture, which Ponge makes it impossible for him to do for long, as the textual 'code' is frequently changed and reading is interrupted. Instead he will be cornered into testing the model which is applicable to one section of the text, on other sections, where he may be obliged to abandon it temporarily and adopt a new one. Just as the prose poems gain part of their meaning by refusing what is traditionally considered poetic (including the shape of the poem itself, the chosen 'unpoetic' subject, the objective, scientific mode of discourse generally adopted), the criticism also 'means', partly by its escape from the type of discourse habit has lead us to expect to accompany works of art. If we class as 'poetic' language whose devices foreground the act of expression itself, involve ambiguity and rule breaking, and, after Erlich, poetry as "organised violence committed on ordinary speech", it is clear that to a great extent, Ponge's art criticism is poetic in nature. He allows the critical texts to perpetuate the tentative, fragmentary style of much of his poetry, and to turn inwards metapoetically upon themselves. He includes variants and quotations from Littre, and often deliberately rejects linearity. André Brincourt, comparing L'Ecrit Beaubourg, Comment une Figue de paroles et pourquoi, and L'Atelier contemporain comments that these longer texts are no more "soumis aux lois de la continuité" than the poems; "l'oeuvre de Francis Ponge est par nature fragmentaire. Elle échappe à
toute narration pour s'affirmer dans l'ordre de la 'saisie' et de 'l'échange'\textsuperscript{33}. The function of his writing is therefore slightly compromised, straddled between the transitive and the intransitive. He must be, in Barthesian terms, by turns écrivain and scripteur, oscillating between the contiguous mode of prose, and the metaphoric mode of poetry.

In Barthes' ideal schema of reading, 'comfortable' texts induce mere pleasure, whereas readerly bliss or ecstasy are associated with disorientation. A text which refuses to gratify our preconceived assumptions and which forces us to question our relationship with language turns us from a simple reader into an ecstatic écrivain and demands a creative response. For Riffaterre too, the unorthodox nature of Ponge's prose is seen in positive terms, the amusing incongruity of word play, for example, being "le moyen de contrôler l'attention du lecteur".\textsuperscript{34} Brincourt, on the other hand, manifests irritation at the demands made on the reader by "celui qui se dit moins poète que cuisinier"; "A nous si l'esprit ou le cœur nous en dit d'en ramasser les morceaux".\textsuperscript{35} Likewise Ponge, far from taking Barthesian bliss for granted, predicts on occasions that irritation rather than rapture may well be the reader's response. In his 'Texte sur Picasso', deliberately composed as a collage which juxtaposes paragraphs from various sources and dates to avoid "la monotone temporelle" of a text written at one sitting, Ponge hopes his readers will not be "dégoûtés au point d'en quitter, avec imprécations, la lecture" (AC 332).

Thus the critical writings often predict the reader's response to the text at a given moment, and a series of addresses - sometimes accommodating and frankly explanatory, sometimes impish and deliberately ludic or obtuse - accompany him through the collection. A certain textual development may be forbidden, then accomplished; others promised, and left unfulfilled. Conciliatory and challenging
passages may be juxtaposed; the reader may be provisionally frustrated by the text's opacity, but he may also come upon the palliative oasis of an anecdotal paragraph or two — Braque described at home in his atelier; Picasso leading Ponge out of a Pigalle café to cure the poet's headache — related in transparent, naive prose. The variety of approaches keeps the reader alert, and we will see that what Ponge is performing is an act of preparation: preparation of a mind which, after the reading of his introductory texts, will be as interested in the problems of written language as in the language of space, form and colour. The reader, like the writer, must become suspicious of language. He must be encouraged to share the author's belief that it is imperative to write against language and about it as well as with it, and to this end he must be urged to pursue his journey through paragraphs of varying pace and épaisseur.

Having established this, I would like to move on to look more closely at how Ponge's constant awareness of both the reader's activity and the reader / writer relationship dictates the development of his critical texts. Marcel Spada, quoting Alfred Jarry, describes the quest for meaning in Ponge as a sophisticated and meticulously designed treasure hunt: "Tous les sens qu'y trouvera le lecteur sont prévus, et jamais il ne les trouvera tous, et l'auteur lui en peut indiquer, colin-maillard cérébral, d'inattendus, postérieurs et contradictoires."36 Thus the reader may be lead by the hand, or by the nose. He may also be abandoned to his own devices. Ponge's writing here, in essays which are necessarily more directly manipulative than his poems, provides references to the activity of the reader or spectator which link it to the notion of physical movement — to a journey or ride. This depends in turn on the movement of the artist. In Ponge's criticism, artists vibrate, fly or dance. Hélio is a parachutist (AC 92) and Fautrier lives in a state of "bouillonnement perpétuel" (AC 264). The required balance between control and disorientation on the part of
the reader or spectator is clear in, for example, Ponge's response to Charbonnier's paintings. This is described in terms of a boat ride; "Il faut que j'aie l'impression [...] Non qu'il[s] m'emmène(nt), mais seulement qu'il[s] m'embarque(nt)"; "Ils bougent d'abord assez fort quand j'y mets le pied. Certes. J'aime cela. J'aime sentir le risque - sentir que je ne suis pas sur la terre ferme, sur le sol de tous les jours, mais sur je ne sais quel drôle d'élément, mouvant, profond" (AC 81). The balance is again referred to in Ponge's response to a collection of Braque's lithographs which the text describes on two levels. Firstly, coming straight to the point, Ponge describes this as the complete catalogue of Braque's lithographic work. Secondly he describes it as "une sorte très précieuse de vulgate", juxtaposing the two levels, as the opening line of his text suggests, "Par goût à la fois du plain-pied et des ascenseurs très rapides" (AC 237). Reading, of course, is all about movement; movement of the eyes, the mind and the pages, and in Ponge this paradigm can be broken up into two groups: more sedate, horizontal forms of movement such as walking, which have the reader in control of his activity, and movement which impishly divests him of control.

The journey through the text

'Au Lecteur' is, self-evidently, the first direct address to the reader, and Ponge's introduction to his introductions. Equally self-evident is the fact that it was the last text of L'Atelier contemporain to be written. As such it suggests guidelines for the reader's approach to this collection of "machines verbales" (AC VIII) whilst introducing some of the recurring metaphors which give coherence to our journey through the recueil. The function of these metaphors here is twofold: to present language as a
concrete environment, and to outline the reader's activity within it. The first point we may make is that this text is deceptive since it appears to promise us an easy ride. Ponge speaks with consideration and clarity to the reader, who is metaphorically said to be 'visiting' his exhibition of texts. The act of reading is referred to as walking, the paragraphs and pages representing the steps and doors we encounter in Ponge's textual gallery (subsequent texts will add terms such as *couloir* and *antichambre* to this architectural paradigm). Reading is therefore described in terms of a linear journey, or what we might call the 'ladder model' where each succeeding rung is abandoned for another, where progress is steady and predictable, and the notion of physically approaching a goal signifies the gradual act of appropriating the text's meaning. Here is the opening paragraph of 'Au Lecteur', illustrating beyond doubt that Ponge's main concern is to enter into immediate and direct contact with the reader:

Toi qui viens de quitter ta conduite intérieure, laisse-moi, pour un instant, te précéder, cher lecteur: quelques degrés d'accès à la porte de chez moi vont suffire (AC VII).

This establishes a familiarity of tone, with the *tutoiement* and the notion of being led encouraging our anticipation of approachability and comfort. The idea of embarking on a physical journey is introduced (it is interesting that the verb *conduire* will later generate a deliberately knotty passage of 'Braque ou un méditatif à l'oeuvre' where the difficult activity of reading is described via the metaphor of backing-out of a tight parking space and hitting the open road (AC 283)), along with the idea of the collection's physical nature as 'architecture', or as it is dubbed by Mary Ann Caws, "architexture". Ponge's second paragraph acknowledges the reader's expectations, but goes on to set a number of uncompromising ground rules:
Bien que l'évocation de plusieurs ateliers fameux t'y soit promise et que la raison principale de ta visite, la voilà, tu ne vas pénétrer pourtant, ici, que dans l'un des miens et n'y trouveras exposé que ce genre seulement d'objets dont je suis capable: une collection, cette fois assez nombreuse, d'écrits [...] (AC VII).

The unique nature of this particular edifice, then, is that it is constructed solely of corridors and antechambers, one leading on to the next, and permanently denying direct access beyond the threshold which separates the preamble and the supposed aim of the journey. Arrival in the painter's atelier will be constantly deferred; the corridors, paths and doors, which by definition lead to something beyond themselves and are of little intrinsic interest, are a somewhat misleading metaphor since they imply a purely transitive text. Just as Ponge's earlier text, 'Les Plaisirs de la porte' describes with relish the process of handling "l'un de ces hauts obstacles d'une pièce" (TP 49), so the reader will be expected to linger on the threshold of the artist's studio, and not to approach Ponge's text / door as purely functional. The self-effacing parting shot of 'Au Lecteur', "Mais j'entends que tu viens de refermer derrière moi cette porte: voilà qui est bien" (AC IX), is not to be taken at face value since however many doors the reader closes or opens, he still remains ambling with Ponge in his studio. Ponge's nonchalant suggestion that the reader is now free is in fact false, as his activity will continue to be closely monitored, predicted, mimicked or dictated by the author and ever vigilant guide.

In Ponge's first text on Braque, 'Braque le réconciliateur' (AC 58-69), it becomes evident how the reader is to be drawn into a creative and analytical stance, since various textual approaches are posited and their validity discussed with him. This testing of reading models occupies the first two and a half pages of the essay. It begins with Ponge's dutiful statement that he wants to write about Braque and to be useful to the reader, but that he
does not know how to sift through all the ideas he has. His initial conclusion is that he would be best advised to say what only he is capable of saying; that is to give a "compte rendu de mon idée globale intime de Braque, pour si archange ou puérile qu'elle puisse paraître: une sorte de poème à ma façon" (AC 58). This is in fact what he fully intends to do, but not without firstly predicting the average reader's response; "Mais en ce lieu? Comme introduction à un recueil de reproductions? Non sans doute". His pages, he continues, are doors to be turned on their hinges so the reader can reach the exhibits as soon as possible; they must not become "semblables à quelque rideau tiré sur le spectacle, - épaisse de mes propres couleurs" (AC 59). His next statement is that the reader will therefore not find what he in fact immediately does find, a poetic exploration of Braque as a word. Ironically, this poetic section is framed with another refusal, presuming the reader is not yet seduced by the importance of this critical approach. As a way of asserting its value Ponge has strategically placed, hard on its heels, a contrastive, slightly parodic paragraph containing that sort of easy to come by, single level catalogue of informative facts we could find in any ordinary book about the artist:

Et ne doute pas, pourtant, que cela puisse te paraître aussi sérieux un jour, aussi précis et indiscutable, et objectif ni plus ni moins que par exemple ceci (qui semble plutôt l'annuler, c'est pourquoi j'estime utile de le préférer à la suite): que Braque, eh bien, est né en 1882, - à Argenteuil, - puis a vécu au Havre jusqu'à vingt ans, - époque à laquelle il vint à Paris s'adonner, c'est comme je vous le dis, à la peinture, - et après une brève période fauve puis cézannienne, - a fait en 1908 la connaissance de Picasso, - avec lequel il fonda l'école cubiste, - puis vint la période des papiers collés... etc., et qu'enfin Braque habite actuellement telle rue, tel numéro, mais ne reçoit jamais, je vous en préviens, que sur rendez-vous..." (AC 59-60)

This is a paragraph which induces a barely disguised boredom in its author, and which is brusquely interrupted with an impatient refusal, followed at last by a definite decision
about what to do in this text, made problematic largely by its reader:

Non! Au lecteur qui se présente ici il faut seulement qu'après l'avoir ainsi dans mon antichambre plusieurs fois fait tourner sur lui-même, je le lance à cheval sur mes moutons dans le couloir dialectique au fond duquel s'ouvre ma porte sur Braque, pour l'y laisser enfin tête à tête avec les reproductions (AC 60).

This is a parti pris of individuality, and the reading model we will be obliged to follow in Ponge's antichamber has become not linear and smooth, but circular, jerky and disorientating. The notion of manipulation comes to the fore, apparently with the aim of confusing the lecteur / toupie. It is like the game of blind man's buff: begin the text by making the reader uncertain of how to advance, and have him question his initial expectations; push him into the text / corridor where he will be forced to remain astride of several elements in a complex investigation which often refers only tangentially to Braque, and finally allow him to pass through Ponge's door onto Braque, when he will be left alone to consider the paintings. This is a direct refusal to take a back seat and it hints at the skipping between a circular and linear reading model which we find in the majority of Ponge's critical works. The animal imagery is another multi-purpose, humorous reference to the position of the reader, drawing attention to his efforts to retain control of the text's shifts and multiple implications through the image of riding a horse ("je le lance à cheval"). As has been suggested, reading and riding may be divided between examples which emphasise the reader's control and those which stress his lack of control. The horse in this case performs both functions. The text is no longer an inanimate corridor, but a living creature with a frisky mind of its own. The reader is a novice attempting to gain control in the saddle, and the verb "lancer" suggests he has been abruptly thrust into an unfamiliar environment.
To be "à cheval" is to have one's legs astride, à califourchon, just as the reader must spread his attention between the various focuses of this text, while figuratively, être à cheval sur quelque chose signifies the keenness of a strict mental grip on something, and is a metaphor for the reader's increased act of concentration at this moment. But what is the reader to concentrate on? On Ponge's sheep, of course, a perpetuation of the animal imagery relying on the old saying revenons à nos moutons, where moutons has become synonymous with sujet. The moutons which immediately and bathetically supplant the horse and exchange the notion of speed for that of slowness, are Ponge's chevaux de bataille, the subjects to which he persistently returns, that is, words themselves.

The reader is rarely envisaged in such a ridiculous posture as this, putting an incommensurate amount of effort into sheep-back riding, and in fact, if we compare the act of riding a spirited horse to that of mounting a sheep we will see that what Ponge is pointing to here is that a sheep moves slowly and laboriously, whilst the reader's urge is to travel at the speed of a horse and get straight to the goal - the goal of direct information - without ruminating overmuch on the way. As Barthes suggests, however, when he uses the metaphors of eating, drug taking, flying, and a combination of these to describe readerly approaches to Sollers, ruminating is what reading is all about. Peter Collier remarks of Barthes' studies of reading models that "the text is felt to be as ambiant and symbiotic as the food that we eat or the air that we breathe, yet experienced not in a utilitarian fashion, but rather for the voluptuous pleasure of feeling its very texture." Of course, Ponge's sheep metaphor is also a joke at the resistant reader's expense, referring to his unavoidable slowness in coming to terms with his textual environment at this particular point.

Ponge clearly recognises, then, that his introductions themselves require introduction. Through this kind of toying
with readerly expectations (which, incidentally, often occurs in the first paragraphs of the critical essays) it is made obvious that the ladder model will be untenable, at least for some sections of Ponge's texts, and that the acts of writing and reading are not as self-evident as we would have it. The text is an organic whole, constantly sending us back to previous sections for elucidation, and ambushing information obliquely rather than referring to it openly.

There are, then, sections of text in which focus on the reader takes the place of focus on the painter, and Ponge traces the reader reading. Just as eye movements are guided by a painter's compositional devices, so Ponge guides our eyes, and 'paces' our reading. We are forced to watch ourselves, to read about ourselves reading in the mirror of the text. We are the "Lecteur, qui commencez à lire" (AC 318), immediately established in the textual interchange, and engaged in a physical as much as an intellectual activity ("qui suit du regard ces lignes" (AC 284)). The opening paragraphs of 'Braque ou un méditatif à l'oeuvre' - an exceptionally quirky beginning for a critical essay - are a good example. The text commences with a direct address containing imperative reading instructions:

Braquez à fond, pour vous dégager du crâne (en arrière, d'abord; puis, en sens inverse, vers l'avant) et vous voici, déjà, tranquillement, en route, dans la lecture d'une toute autre chose qu'une rangée de voitures à l'arrêt.
Belle et brave raison à laquelle on s'attaque, c'est bien à toi, pourtant, que j'ai dû recourir.
Braque eut raison. Braver les apparences et quelques convenances par la même occasion, c'est le plus sûr moyen de trouver le bon sens (AC 283).

The reader has firstly to wonder, before he can pursue the text in a smoother manner, what on earth a row of parked cars has to do with a row of words on a page, and why his act of reading should be foregrounded in such a way. These three perplexing yet immediately compelling paragraphs provide a dense and complex introduction to a number of
important features of the work, and to how Ponge holds them together, offering important clues as to the way the remainder of the text will function. The first word involves the kind of audacious play on Braque's name which will shortly be discussed. By using this verb in its imperative form as a direct address, the reader is immediately implied in the act of studious contemplation shared by writer and painter alike, this desired approach to the text being cleverly guaranteed by the text's very nature. Reading is once again described as physical movement, the text imitating both the movement of our eyes, and of our minds. This time, the movement is that of a car leaving its parking space with the car's initial jogs and ensuing smoothness suggesting how our minds come to terms with the sentence, navigating through the obstacles of the text and forced at once to decelerate. The direction "en arrière" which occurs at the end of the first line happens just as we are inevitably bound to move our eyes to the beginning of the second line (i.e. backwards and to the left) or even, given the unorthodox mode of address, back to the beginning itself. The second line is also directly mimetic of the position of our eyes on the line, with "d'abord; puis, en sens inverse, vers l'avant", and the paragraph also ends quite fittingly with "À l'arrêt." It is one of Ponge's texts whose form and content tally perfectly; a text which does what it says, and in this case constrains the reader to do likewise. The eyes, then, cannot move speedily from left to right providing a rapid absorption of ideas. The linear model is once again refused, since the text refers us backwards as much as forwards, holding us up as we attempt to become acclimatised to this new environment, and encouraging us to linger on individual words.

These paragraphs play on contrasting notions; a conformist and unproductive stasis on the one hand, and on the other, an exhilarating liberation. These notions apply to Braque, to Ponge, hopefully to the reader's activity, and
also to the individual word in Ponge. This is the beginning of a prolonged meditation on language; its use, misuse, potential and drawbacks, and it is typical of Ponge to represent words as concrete entities (one of the themes of this text will in fact be the danger of putting all the emphasis on the abstract nature of words at the expense of their materiality). The parked car is a potentially mobile element reduced to fixity, the status words on a page can all too easily be assumed to have. Ponge's words are not 'parked', not static, but like cars on the open road, they form a busy, interweaving pattern. In the final section, this lesson is acknowledged; to treat words in this way is necessary in order to find the right direction ("le bon sens"). It is implied that this is a common sense procedure rather than a sophisticated one, and "sens" is used to signify both meaning and direction, an essential pun for the idea of recuperating meaning on the textual journey.

The brief text which follows shows that Ponge is not always ready to consider his reader's needs. It provides a caz limite of a non linear reading model, and refuses point blank to adopt an informative stance. Its title is typically literal and self-referential, highlighting the medium and the nature of the text itself in preference to its ostensible subject.

INSCRIPTIONS EN ROND
SUR DES ASSIETTES

I

Vos yeux baissées sur moi
Vos yeux casseurs d'assiettes
Faîtes-en donc plutôt profiter vos voisins.

II

Tu peux me tourner en tous sens.
Tu peux aussi me briser.
Ce que je signifie est clair:
Voici les limites dans lesquelles s'accomplit le rite
Auquel une fois encore tu acceptas d'être convié.

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Inscriptions en rond sur des assiettes (AC 152) takes the form of a conundrum, using an object which is particularly attractive for Ponge. The plate in its capacity as a small, unremarkable domestic object which is frequently overlooked although frequently used is, like 'La cruche', an ideal opportunity to talk about language, "un objet médiocre, un simple intermédiaire" (Pièces 94). Unlike many of the subjects within L'Atelier contemporain it lends itself to a brief text, "bouclé à double tour", and it also satisfies Ponge's taste for cleaned objects, for objects serving to clean, (the lessiveuse (Pièces 72-6); the verre d'eau (Méthodes 115-74)) or for those which are used daily, but must remain clean to be usable. It fits in with the paradigm of what we might call 'oral hygiene' in Ponge, the search for the mot propre being conducted through a series of carefully elected objects / pretexts with important moral connotations.

This text relies on the common paradigm of conviviality within L'Atelier contemporain, of host and guest, and on a favourite metaphor of food and eating - particularly appropriate here since this was written, in 1951 for an exhibition of decorated plates. Confusingly, however, this information is not included anywhere within the collection, hence reinforcing the impression that the text is about itself and about the reader's attempt to digest it, which it dramatises. Rather than using his text as an opportunity to describe the plates on show, the plates are seized upon as an opportunity to describe the text and its resistance to interpretation. What Ponge produces, then, is a mini fable about the two faces of language, the significat and the signifié, highlighting only the former and openly frustrating the reader's attempt to make the text yield information about the plates on exhibition. Rather than doing this it is equivalent to, or imitative of the plates in a rather complex way, but one which allows Ponge to make
his point. Reading as well as eating is described as a ritual, with Ponge as host and his readers as guests, the plate / page placed before them. But when they get there the table is bare. What I mean by this is that a plate is inseparable from the idea of food; so much so, in fact, that the French assiette also refers to what is put on the plate, as does the English term 'dish'. A plate without food is deprived of what is commonly considered its raison d'être. Its new function in this exhibition is strictly non-utilitarian; it has become interesting in its own right, not simply as a 'support'. Since food is absent, we have been invited to partake in a ritual which involves only the bare surface of the plate, and likewise the text continually casts the reader back to its own surface. If, in linguistic terms, we refer to the plate as signifiant and agree that the signifié of a plate is food, the position of the plate in this instance is directly comparable to Ponge's use of words in the text, which stubbornly refuse to signify anything beyond themselves. Stanza one announces that no information will be yielded about the plates, and stanza two, with almost insolent familiarity, again defies this attempt, suggesting or predicting that a new approach is being tried by the reader and denying it to him. This reading is reinforced by the fact that the second part of the text was inscribed around a plate made for Ponge by the gallery owner, Christofle, in a spiral from the outer edge to the centre. Thus the image of deciphering a language or a code is transposed in terms of handling a plate. The reader must literally go round in circles - a physical effort which parallels his frustrated intellectual activity. A circular model is therefore established, as opposed to the linear one through which Ponge promised to guide us with the images of corridors and doors in 'Au Lecteur'. This text invites the reader to make sense of it, yet the very mimesis of that attempt is the text's only subject, and it remains mockingly opaque. The words "casseurs", "sens", "brisier", "tourner", 

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"signifie", concern the attempt to conquer unyielding codes and derive from them information, while another group, "clair", "limites", and "rond" (also meaning frank or straightforward) simultaneously proclaim the text's simplicity. Closure signals, those clues which tell us that a poem is coming to an end, are insistently strong and abrupt here. The last two lines tell us from the start with "Voici les limites", and "s'accompli" that they are shutting up shop and will not yield us any more clues or information. The attempt to find meaning is over almost as soon as it is begun, and the past historic of "acceptas" also places the act of reading firmly in the past.

If reading is a convivial activity then Ponge is a singularly poor host in this instance. The verb "convier", however, does not only mean to invite a guest, a "convive", to share your food, but also to push someone, with insistence, to do something. Effort on the part of the reader can be a guarantee of important new developments in rhetoric, as in the language of painting; Emile Picq's works are praised by Ponge precisely because "ils vous forcent à un drôle de gymnastique", and because Picq's tendency is to "abuser de [...] vous et de moi qui regardons ses œuvres" (AC 6). Ponge's abuse of the reader in this little casse-tête, however, is only permitted because of the text's subject, and the final suggestion that each return to a Pongean text restricts us to a similar non-transitive mode is in fact inaccurate. Ponge's statements about paintings indicate, as we have seen, that they do not require comment, that they "ridiculise(nt) d'avance toute tentative d'explication" and that "il faut se borner à s'exclamer; comme c'est joli ou beau, ou agréable à avoir près de soi" (AC 16), but his approach in the critical essays is a good deal more complex than this suggests and they are rarely so resolutely hermetic. Of plates, however, the above statements could be said to hold good and this permits Ponge
to resort to language which is purposely as simple and opaque as such every-day objects.

"Inscriptions en rond sur des assiettes" poses a problem for the reader because it is hermetic and ingeniously woven, but in general the form of Ponge's critical pieces is disorientating for a different reason. At an extreme from the closed texts of *Le Parti pris des choses*, these are for the most part journals or notebooks (although none but *'Joca Seria'* (AC 153-90) are truly complete records of creation). Many of Ponge's titles make deliberate reference to a lack of polish, often incorporating the term 'note' ("Quelques notes sur Eugène de Kermadec", 'Note hâtive à l'éloge d'Ebiche', 'Nouvelles notes sur Fautrier, crayonnées hâtivement depuis sa mort'), and on one occasion referring to a deliberate lack of completion ("Ce petit plâtre inachevé à la gloire de Fenosa en avril 1965"). The texts contain repetitions and variants, an approach which Ponge justifies in *Le savon* by reference to music; "ces répétitions, ces reprises de capo, ces variations sur un même thème, ces compositions en forme de fugue, que vous admettez fort bien en musique, que vous admettez et dont vous jouissez - pourquoi nous seraient-elles, en matière de littérature, interdites?". The critical text, like the poetic text, is to be experienced as an act, refusing to "tricher avec le mouvement de l'esprit" (*SAV* 12) and the journey is to be preferred to the conclusion.

Gradually, several new forms of text have emerged in Ponge - not properly referred to as genres, since they typically refer less to a product than to a mode of production. Ponge reinvents old rhetorical terms to designate new kinds of textual practice and little by little, from *Prèmes* onwards, such terms boldly affirm the legitimate joy of écriture en acte which is manifest throughout *L'Atelier contemporain*. The *Prême*, for instance, traditionally a term referring to what precedes the work of art proper, is a "saignée critique", yet with Ponge's
decision to "publier ce fatras" (TP 119) it begins, tentatively, to affirm its own value as not so much secondary, but as a new combination of "prose" and "poème". The Eugénie, defined in 'Le Cheval' (Pièces 129-32) as "une chose venue presque complètement dans le moment", is a comprehensive account which may be "grossier, charnel, sensual" but which is written "sans vergogne". This records Ponge's acceptance of spontaneity and impropriety, and reaffirms the decision to follow his own "goût". A most important term is the Nomon (described in Le Savon), designating the non-separation of the text and the criticism of that text, and emerging out of the crisis of rhetoric as a symptom of the floating notion of 'genre' (genre being a stable selection of possible and accepted forms). Ponge describes this as a mascarade or masked dance, "ensuite un défi porté par des masques", and through Littré, the Nomon can be seen to be linked to notions of game, of trickery and concealment, or of exaggerated statement and gesture. It is a kind of masque; less the elaborate, elegant and orderly entertainment which was the origin of the masque than the impropriety of the antimasque, involving humour and unruliness in the dance. The disguise is flouted and the text unmasks its mechanisms. According to Ponge, "L'on devrait pouvoir nommer encore ainsi, par extension, toute oeuvre d'art comportant sa propre caricature, ou dans laquelle l'auteur ridiculiserait son moyen d'expression. La Valse de Ravel est un momon. Ce genre est particulier aux époques où la rhétorique est perdue, se cherche" (SAV 41). Thus the texts deliberately show that they are struggling towards self-definition in a dandyism of calculated imperfection.

The Objeu (defined by Ponge in 'Le Soleil placé en abîme' (Pièces 133-65)) proclaims the text's existence as a concrete object, a machine, the notion of the 'jeu', suggesting at once the smooth functioning of well-oiled machinery and the playful nature of Ponge's texts. The Objeu
triumphantly metamorphoses into the Objoie (defined in Le Savon, pp.126-28), an almost visceral pleasure derived from "la vérité comme [...] orgasme" as the text manages to "se signifier elle même". Both Objeu and Objoie celebrate the perfect interlocking and interplay of all textual elements which Ponge calls fonctionnement, and a love of this for its rich plurality of meaning; "La vérité, ce n'est pas la conclusion d'un système, la vérité c'est cela" (Méthodes 257). Meaning is therefore spatialised in the Pongean text, inviting a non linear reading.

This brings into question the notion of closure, a feature associated with the polish a reader still customarily expects, particularly in an informative essay. Here he will be looking for a retrospective synthesis; the final elucidation of the text's whole meaning by the author. The brief bibelots which constitute one of Ponge's chosen poetic modes are often exaggeratedly and ostentatiously closed, telling us that they are closing, and even what we should be thinking about them whilst they close (i.e. the 'Il a plu' of 'Pluie' (TP 36)), knotting the text at both ends so that it may remain mimetic of the small object it describes. These endings to what are, however, predominantly verbal exercises, remain arbitrary. Often uncertain of how to end, Ponge introduces a deus ex machina, with a touch of humour (i.e. the "brisons-la" of 'Le Pain' (TP 51)); "le jeu se termine toujours par une fuite, une dérobade de l'écrivain que Ponge enveloppe d'ailleurs de je ne sais quelle gauze d'ironie. Ce qui est dit suffit pour faire exemple. Continuer, pense l'auteur, serait présomptueux". Likewise, in the critical texts Ponge dismisses the traditional idea of the conclusion as a privileged moment and signs off with a series of throw-away gestures. The reader is left waiting for something which his previous reading habits have generally instructed him to expect, and his notion of conclusions has to be abandoned. These are open texts which privilege fonctionnement and which
therefore deny a linear reading gradually approaching a final 'truth'. Closure in the critical texts is nothing special and is more of an interruption than closure proper. Thus Ponge ends a text on Picasso with an abrupt and arbitrary statement; "Lecteur, tu viens d'entendre, comme tu l'auras pu, cette Toccata, variations et fugue sans fin à la gloire et sur le nom de Picasso, à laquelle j'ai dû couper court le 7 août 1973, à 15 heures, pour les besoins de sa publication" (AC 344). Thus he often deliberately underprivileged what is generally assumed to be a textual summit by banality of comment; "Mais c'en est trop sans doute. Assez peut-être pour que l'on ait saisi ce que je voulais dire... A savoir que j'aime l'art d'Emile Picq" (AC 7).

These are, in fact, more openings than closures. Commonly expressing a desire to begin a new piece rather than to perfect the last one, they are forward-looking to the extent of allowing the present text to fray into silence: "Rentrons travailler" (AC 250); "(Continuons un autre jour en ce sens... )" (AC 150); or, with a hint of impatience; "Braque est, visiblement, l'un de ces réconciliateurs provisoires. Que peut-on lui demander de mieux? Et qu'on nous laisse à notre laboratoire" (AC 69). Hence there is no arrival, only a series of departures, and we are thrust back to the complex textual journey to look for our own conclusions. Two features of this journey particularly worthy of consideration here are Ponge's heavy reliance on the painter's name to generate the text, and the procedure of adéquation as carried over into the art writing.
Naming or describing?

The beginning of any text is problematic for Ponge. He has before him an isolated subject which is potentially annihilating and which must be scrutinised, penetrated and dissected. It must be taken from a multiplicity of viewpoints and compared with many other objects until it becomes permeable. Description of all objects, and even more so of people, is accompanied at the outset by a feeling of malaise and powerlessness, described by Richard as "une fascination qui se résout en une paralysie, en un mutisme".43 This stalemate may be broken in several ways, one of which is the use of analogy which has already been discussed. Basic to all Ponge's writing is the notion that while several objects may be mutually defined at once, no one may ever be defined in isolation. Nothing is knowable in itself, but only in its relationship with other objects, through which its "qualité différentielle" (Méthodes 43) rather than its points of overlap will emerge. A second method of setting the text in motion is by turning to the most readily available information on an object, that is, its name. This provides the poem's title so that the isolated noun is removed from habitual usage and becomes the poem's subject and most dominant guide, the fil d'Ariane which allows Ponge to control his labyrinth of impressions and guide his text forward. As Philippe Sollers comments, Ponge's texts are not simply one dimensional descriptions of objects; they also involve "l'inscription du mot qui les signe, qui les couvre comme titre et qui se démultiplie incessamment à travers le texte lui-même" (EPS 107). Thus the difficult task of, for example, opening the stubborn oyster is achieved in part by using its name as a key. 'L'Huitre' is saturated in permutations of this elementary unit, whose shape, sounds and associations determine the presence of other words ("je suis déterminé par le mot
'huitre' (EPS 111)). According to Riffaterre, this reliance on a single word or phrase is more important in Ponge than the descriptive function, which is secondary; "Une prose de Ponge n'est jamais autre chose que l'expansion textuelle d'un mot-noyau. Les caractères formels et sémantiques du texte sont dérivés de ce mot directement ou indirectement". Direct derivation is more visible, as in 'L'Huitre' with its accumulation of words combining, as Ponge comments, "accent circonflexe, sur voyelle (ou diphtongue), t, r, e" (EPS 111). Indirect derivation on the contrary is a concealed and ludic key to the genesis of the text which is, as Riffaterre defines it, "l'expansion d'une phrase matrice elle-même générée par le mot-noyau".

The poem also has a corrective function based on the notion that an object is usually masked by the opacity of its name, and that this name must be transformed into a fresh and appropriate sign. The emotion Ponge experiences before objects "nous les fait à la fois re-connaître comme semblables à leur nom et connaître (avec surprise) c.a.d. découvrir comme différents de leur nom" (FAB 22). This could, of course, lead to deliberate omission of the noun ("Il faut que le nom ne soit pas utile. Remplacer le nom" (Méthodes 36)), and such experiments are indeed contemplated by Ponge as the following passage from 'My Creative Method' illustrates:

voilà une autre façon de tenter la chose:
la considérer comme non nommée, non nom-
mable, et la décrire ex nihilo si bien qu'on la
reconnaîsse. Mais qu'on la reconnaîsse seulement
à la fin: que son nom soit un peu comme le
dernier mot du texte et n'apparaisse qu'alors
(Méthodes 36).

In general, however, Ponge's approach to objects involves an "attention redoublée à leur nom [...] afin de le rapprocher à nouveau de la chose, conçue dans son épaisseur et sa
différence véritables: celles qui la caractérisaient quand
elle fut nommée pour la première fois, celles qui provoquèrent le besoin, le désir de la nommer" (FAB 22)

The analogies chosen to help the poet grasp the "qualité différentielle" of the object under scrutiny may equally be dictated by phonetic similarity to the object's name. Hence the surprising appearance of the "escarbilles" at the beginning of 'Escargots' ("Au contraire des escarbilles qui sont les hôtes des cendres chaudes, les escargots aiment la terre humide" (TP 57)), of the "éponge" at the beginning of 'L'Orange' ("Comme dans l'éponge il y a dans l'orange une aspiration à reprendre contenance après avoir subi l'épreuve de l'expression" (TP 46)), and of the "cage" and "cachot" in 'Le Cageot' ("A mi-chemin de la cage au cachot la langue française a cageot, simple caissette à claire-voie vouée au transport de ces fruits qui de la moindre suffocation font à coup sûr une maladie" (TP 43)), where the "escarbilles", "éponge", "cage", and "cachot" are selected not simply for metaphoric purposes, for the texture of the sponge or the quality of the cage, but because of the similarity of the words themselves to the object / word which is the poem's pretext. Another example of such contrivance is the similarity of the words 'lézard' and 'se lézarder'. The latter provides the hole from which the lizard emerges as the text begins (Pièces 84). This makes it clear that from the outset the poet may allow his texts to be dictated by words rather than by concepts, although naturally the concepts involved are in general thematically convenient.

The world of painters is no less a world of co-ordinates than the natural world. Each figure is situated, in part, by reference to other creative figures past and present, producing a web of comparisons which also situates the writer. Ponge compares Fautrier with Picasso and Racine, places Ebiche by comparison with Bonnard, Soutine, Modigliani and Kisling, and urges us to arrive at a better understanding of Jean Hélion's work by contrasting it with
that of Léger. This kind of comparative panorama may be familiar and attractive to the reader, but it is obviously a potential danger and a *pis aller* for Ponge, as his apologetic address to Charbonnier illustrates: "J'ai pu, cher Pierre, en d'autres occasions, tenter de définir votre peinture *ex nihilo*, comme elle le mérite. Il me faut, aujourd'hui, me borner à dire, pour aller vite, que vous devez être situé, *grosso modo*, entre le meilleur Chirico et Seurat" (AC 191). Ponge also expresses irritation at a section of an essay on Braque which is riddled with the names of famous painters: "Mais trève de noms propres! Assez de ces tripotages suspects, de ce tricotage d'hypothèses, de ces erreurs de justice en chaine, dont chaque chaînon est un médaillon à Majuscule! Assez trafiqué dans cette partie du dictionnaire où une chatte ne retrouverait pas ses petits" (AC 308). Whilst it is legitimate to mention other objects in the poems on objects, the aleatory nature of stringing together a list of painter's names is unsatisfactory for Ponge. In fact the painter's names themselves are unsatisfactory intruders in the Pongean text, and his unconventional use of them requires examination since surprisingly Ponge devotes more attention to Picasso's and Braque's name, for example, than he does to specific paintings or to a discussion of Cubism. Painters, like objects, may be introduced into the text as a group of letters with a particular sound and shape. The proper noun, as much as the name of an object, can serve as the somewhat arbitrary beginning of the act of writing, giving the "machine verbale" its initial impetus and allowing Ponge to open up a textual space for himself. Rather than beginning the critical texts with an idea, then, he often starts with language itself which gives him cues for the text's growth.

'Braque ou un méditatif à l'oeuvre' (AC 283-317) is a good example of this technique, beginning as it does with paragraphs of play on Braque's name, using the opening imperative "Braquez" to involve the reader as well as the
writer and painter in the act of meditation which the text offers and describes. Carefully contrived punning on the shapes and sounds of the painter's name suffuses the text's opening, even visually, with the echo of the capital B at the start of the first three paragraphs ("Braquez", "Belle", "Braver"), making it especially obtrusive. Hence the content of this first section appears to have grown out of the words rather than vice versa, and concrete associations, usually ignored or considered as only minimal contributions to our understanding, are temporarily permitted to dominate in order that they should not be overlooked. Similarly, 'Braque le Réconciliateur' (AC 58-69) provides a poetic exploration of Braque as a word. Here, Braque is placed between Bach and Baroque, allowed to evoke the common adjective Braque (meaning 'barmy'), and the faithful, earnest nature of the pointer dog, as well as, through an anagram, reminding Ponge of the boats (Barques), significantly turned upside down on the Normandy sea shores of Braque's paintings. The B of his name is like the curve of a favourite leitmotif, the violin or guitar, while the Q with its handle is an irresistible reminder of a kitchen pot, a ladle or a hand mirror, domestic objects which have all been present in, and which typify the humble inhabitants of, Braque's interiors. The 'Fanfare pour Jean Hélon' is also based around a verb suggested by the painter's name; héler (to hail a boat or a taxi, or to call a person). The first paragraph is thus deliberately contrived so that Ponge can employ the imperfect first person plural form of the verb, and incorporate the ideas of the boat, and the act of calling out:

Puisque enfin notre nef capitale hisse en grand pavoia une production au sujet de laquelle depuis plus de vingt ans nous la héliions,
Et puisqu'on nous invite, monté à son bord, à y convoquer à l'aide de notre porte-voix, le nombreux public que nous lui souhaitons" (AC 281).
Of course, it is appropriate that the "porte-voix" as opposed to the 'porte-plumes' should be mentioned, and that the text should be brash in its metaphors, given the large scale of Hélion's works, and their character as celebrations of modern life.

This, then, is a particularly unorthodox way of telling us something about a painter, although as Saussure's research on the generative power of concealed theme-words in Saturnian verse shows, it is not new to rely on the phonic constituents of the proper noun in this way, but rather a long lost habit. It is a custom of the Latin masters which Ponge re-adopts, and it is worth lingering for a moment on its early use. A possible origin for this procedure is stated to be the ritual repetition of a sacred name in a hymn, with "l'idée religieuse qu'une invocation, une prière, un hymne, n'avait d'effet qu'à condition de mélérer les syllabes du nom divin au texte." Thus Saussure detects the saturation of part of Lucretius's De rerum Natura with Aphrodite's name. Starobinski concludes that "Tout se passe donc comme si le poète avait voulu, dans l'acte même de la composition, démontrer une fécondité, une puissance productive, dont le nom d'Aphrodite serait la source." This kind of tribute is possible in Ponge (it is in fact used to begin the celebratory 'Texte sur Picasso' (AC 324-44)), but another important effect is that of replacing the notion of creation with the notion of production; "il n'y a pas, à proprement parler, de "création", mais un déploiement, dans la multiplicité, d'une énergie toute entière déjà présente au sein de la Monadé antécédente." Obedience to the dictates of language therefore comes to the fore, with words placed above thought as the origin of expression.

What confused Saussure in his research and lead him to abandon it, was the determination to elect either conscious deliberation or chance, law or accident, as the origin of this procedure. The sheer multiplicity of examples defied
theory, especially since no law is mentioned in any De re metrica, since they were to be found quite as commonly in even the most trivial and un-literary letters of the time, and since a confidant of Saussure easily found examples at random in Baudelaire, Chateaubriand and Valéry. Starobinski's conclusion is that a more fluid grasp of the phenomenon is necessary; "Pourquoi ne verrait-on pas dans l'anagramme un aspect du processus de la parole, - processus ni purement fortuit ni pleinement conscient?" Ponge's behaviour on this score takes account of both the accidental and the intentional. He is aware of the partially subconscious interaction we have with language (in the case of the poem on the oyster, some features generated by the word "huitre" came to light only retrospectively), but in many texts, and particularly in the criticism, reliance on words is fully acknowledged as a textual procedure. Here blatant reiteration of a rich nucleus-word, is employed at the expense of the smooth development of the text, and at the risk of sacrificing meaning. As Riffaterre points out, a chosen word may appear "incompréhensible et gratuit au niveau de la langue", and the choice of words may appear "singulier et immotivé", thus constituting a subversion of "l'unite de ton requise en littérature traditionnelle." Unlike Saussure's version of the Latin readers, who "savaient discerner la parole sub-posée, et ceci même lorsqu'un poème comporte une pluralité de mots-thèmes", Ponge's reader will be less well trained, besides which, unlike the name of a familiar god or hero, many of the names belonging to Ponge's chosen artists are virtually unknown. But Ponge's difference is to proclaim that he is using the key word whilst he is using it, and to show he is aware of the element of contrivance presented by this ludic use of language.

The resort to Picasso's name as a generative force behind Ponge's 'Texte sur Picasso' is one of the best examples wherein such a procedure is ostentatiously
declared. Even more than in the case of Braque, it is clear that this text grows out of the painter's name; "L'entente dans le cervelet des trois syllabes colorées fut immédiate; instantanément l'élan fut permis, le train des signes lancé" (AC 325). Here the notion of Picasso's name (particularly the capital P) as visually mimetic of a flagstaff with a flag billowed by the wind (the curve of the P), and Ponge's notion of modern painting as "le drapeau de l'offensive intellectuelle" come together. To begin the text with the word PICASSO in large characters is to plant him firmly in his correct place as the "conquérant, l'envahisseur victorieux", dominating the contemporary creative scene. "Voilà aussi pourquoi, au début de ce texte, j'ai dû planter ce nom et d'abord sa majuscule initiale comme, au bout d'une pique, une oriflamme" (AC 324). Picasso is also intimately linked to France, his name "magiquement tricolore" by its three syllables; "ces trois syllabes pures, se disant des syllabes comportant une voyelle seulement, ces voyelles colorées ici de valeurs (i,a,o) diversifiées aussi franchement que possible." Starobinski compares the theme word with the subject of a fugue "quand il est traité en imitation par augmentation", hence demanding a spatialised reading, with a new tempo, in which "l'on sort du temps de la "consécutivité" propre au langage habituel". Ponge is aware of this, and at the end of his text on Picasso, he reentitles it "Toccata, variations et fugue à la gloire et sur le nom de Picasso".

In the case of 'Prose sur le nom de Vulliamy' (AC 78-9), Ponge again comes out of the closet and promises such play as the subject and purpose of his text, which announces itself as a little virtuoso language-based piece - especially since, apart from the word "ami" which is used in the text, the name "Vulliamy" appears singularly unpromising for such treatment. This is taken by Ponge as a challenge to faire feu de tout bois and coerce this empty signifier into meaning. It is a cas limite of his manipulation of proper
nouns, tenaciously basing every development on this unyielding name; "Par goût de la volubilité alliée à de l'ironie nous ne te lâcherons plus, notre Vulliamy". It leads to unashamed and extravagant contrivance to achieve saturation:

Que notre pour des raisons diverses Vulliamy veuille tels mots ici que de notre plume lâches, quels mettrai-je sinon que dans l'œil du mille j'ai rarement vu mettre le doigt, maître Gérard, comme tu l'y a mis (AC 78).

Double 'l's, 'i', the subjunctive of 'vouloir', repetition of the sound [l i a m i], bully the sentence into a pattern of jolting echoes, at the clear expense of fluidity and habitual logic. Normal language goes through a series of tortuous transformations to become appropriate to Vulliamy, to accommodate his particular talents:

Voilà donc, ou plutôt vullia un ami (vullia mis ici, c'est, s'il est lu hardiment, plus que juste, et si clair même que je l'aime ainsi) [...] en préférant d'abord qu'il ne nous émerveille, je m'étonnerais fort qu'il ne nous ymar- vuille.

Violence et vaillance encore lui refuserons-nous au profit (qui n'en est pas loin) d'une vulliance, que pour ce qu'elle en diffère je leur préfère.

De la voyance enfin à ta vulliance s'il n'est qu'un pas qu'un poète tout seul puisse faire franchir, puisque Francis du moins fit qu'à la fin tu l'oses, vulliament à ton tour franchis-le, mon ami (AC 78-79).

Ponge himself, using the verb "franchir" and relating it to his own name, appropriately as a poet who overcomes the barriers and taboos of language, signs the text at the end, with a lesson in boldness for the painter.87

Play on a painter's name is not always so ostentatious. It may remain hidden, a subliminal key to the text's artifice, but no less responsible for dictating the formation, development and coherence of the whole. A propos of Ponge's poetry, Michael Riffaterre speaks of the kind of "surdétermination", wherein some of the more contrived and apparently inexplicable elements in the poem's development
may lead us to search for intertexts. Such a key may be a common and familiar phrase, a lieu commun or a literary quotation, the whole poem depending on this "refoulement d'un mot cléf de l'intertexte" which "se traduit par une compensation". In the case of the little known Lyonnais painter Emile Picq, Ponge's first portrait of an artist at work (AC 5-7), the key to the text is in the unspoken ramifications of the painter's name. Here the implications of Picq's name direct the text, but in a cryptographic way, since in contrast to the text on Vulliamy Ponge does not once make specific mention of the coincidence between the artist's provocative character and his name. Terms such as piqué, piquant, and more particularly the verb piquer are never used by Ponge although they appear to inform and underlie every paragraph. The model for the description of Picq can be found in Ponge's 'La Guêpe' (TP 259-70). Begun in 1939 and completed in 1943, a year before the text on Picq, 'La Guêpe' is an intertext which links the wasp and the painter by the verb piquer, and illustrates many parallels in behaviour between painter and insect: "petite cuisine volante [...] ont une activité intime, généralement assez mystérieuse" (TP 263); "Elles bondissent parfois comme si elles ne pouvaient maîtriser leur moteur" (TP 268); "la guêpe vibre à chaque instant [...] Elle semble vivre dans un état de crise continue qui la rend dangereuse. Une sorte de frénésie ou de forcémétrie - qui la rend aussi brillante, bourdonnante, musicale qu'une corde fort tendue, fort vibrante et dès lors brûlante ou piquante, ce qui rend son contact dangereux" (TP 261); "Et si ça touche, ça pique [...] un contact électrique, une vibration vénimeuse" (TP 262). The text on Picq opens with a similar sense of urgency; "Il faut à Lyon considérer Picq". Yet the artist is illustrated as a pest, a thorn in the lion's side: "Lyon [...] l'ayant plusieurs fois fait prisonnier ou mis à la porte [...] des écoles ou collèges [...] de plusieurs autres institutions: académies, hôpitaux, établissements divers".
Like the wasp, however, Picq "n'a jamais recherché le scandale. Il s'est contenté de vivre selon sa pente" (AC 5). Like Nijinsky, who "frémissait incessamment", Picq 'hums' like a hypersensitive car, or like the wasp's wings. (Such images can be compared with the "plein contentement" (AC 68) afforded by Braque, Ponge's prime model of the creator. Braque's engine has achieved its correct régime, "celui où il ne vibre plus" (AC 74)). Picq's creative act is energetic and abrupt ("il se jette sur le papier") his desire and energy are all consuming ("il dessine à défaut de paraître sur le théâtre - ou de s'envoler - ou de se perdre dans l'éternel amour...") and his activity is extreme ("Comme il a toujours plutôt danse que marché, dès sa jeunesse brûlant ses vaisseaux, brûlant les planches - il a toujours écrit, brûlant les lieux communs, brûlant l'orthographe - toujours dessiné de même et colorié ses dessins" (AC 7)). Picq is thus the very incarnation of energy, sharing with Fautrier, Picasso, Kermadec and Ponge the "Rage de l'expression". His forms of movement - plunging with rapidity, vibrating, flying, dancing - are favourably compared to walking and the pace and extremity of his life are applauded; "A travers plaisirs et douleurs, triomphes personnels, cerceaux enflammés, extases, fièvres, rechutes diverses". Like the wasp his activity is food related. He moves rapidly around the popular restaurant kept by his parents and creates in an atelier referred to as an "arrière cuisine". "Il se jette sur le papier" (AC 5) as one attacks a plate of food, and compares the creative impulse to hunger, the paper to an empty plate, the pen an implement for impaling objects, a "fourchette" (again the verb piquer comes into play). His works are to be consumed by a hungry public, and by critics who are also hungry "malgré leur petite bouche". Hunger, however, is to be exacerbated by Picq rather than satisfied. Eating accounts for pleasure procured from art, but not for effort expended, so the metaphor breaks down; "(mais l'on n'entre pas dans une exposition, je suppose, comme dans une
pâtisserie)..." (AC 6). 'Piquer', then, can also account for public reaction to Picq's work, and Ponge's last comment is also a deliberately irksome jibe. In the same way, Ponge ends his notes on the wasp by drawing attention to the *adéquation* at work in them; his approach has been mimetic of the wasp, making an unwelcome irruption into literature, and he anticipates the annoyance of critics. His notes are deliberately discontinuous, staccato, zigzagging, troublesome and spirited. This text has a "piquant sans profondeur, mais non sans danger" (TP 270), and carries its fairly innocuous but unmistakeable venom in its tail end.

Picq's name, then, is so thoroughly appropriate in all its ramifications that Ponge does not dwell on it. This is akin to his response in the poem on the mimosa (TP 305-24). Ponge discovers he can do little to bind the word any closer to the flower it signifies: "Peut-être ce qui rend si difficile mon travail, est-ce que le nom du mimosa est déjà parfait. Connaissant et l'arbuste et le nom du mimosa, il devient difficile de trouver mieux pour définir la chose que ce nom même" (TP 309); "Il semble qu'il lui soit parfaitement appliqué, que la chose ici ait déjà touché des deux épaules..." (TP 310). Similarly, 'La Cruche' is a perfect vessel for the vessel it designates; "Pas d'autre mot qui sonne comme cruche. Grâce à cet U qui s'ouvre en son milieu, cruche est plus creux que creux et l'est à sa façon" (Pièces 94). Other words require modification; "Le mot OISEAU: il contient toutes les voyelles. Très bien, j'approuve. Mais, à la place de l's, comme seule consonne, j'aurais préféré l'L de l'aile: OILEAU, ou le V du brèchet, le V des ailes déployées [...]" (TP 273). The proper name, however, requires total recuperation. There was a time when the proper name signified; it told us something about the man, the place he lived, or his trade. At present, it is a particular challenge, as it is arbitrary, empty; it does not mean, or means only very loosely and crudely. As Jean-Luc Lemichez comments, the names Braque, Malherbe, or Picasso,
have simply come to evoke a number of stereotypes:
"Cubisme... préclassicisme... rigueur... richesse...
vieillesse... hommages... midi... hermétisme, etc [...] Ce
n'est plus qu'accidentellement que le nom propre renvoie à
l'oeuvre."

The work of deconstruction / reconstruction Ponge
generally effects on the name of an object is expressed
thus; "Quant aux qualités de l'objet qui ne dépendent pas
tant de son nom que de tout autre chose, ma tentative
d'expression de ces qualités doit se produire plutôt contre
le mot qui les effusquerait, qui tendrait à les annihiler,
remplacer, précipitamment emboiter (mettre en boîte), après
les avoir simplifiées, pliées, condensées exagérément"
(Méthodes 35). This work in the case of painters has to be
redoubled, the emptiness of the proper noun accentuating the
need for meaning if Ponge is to achieve the "sorte
d'épaisseur de chaque vocable, à l'intérieur du texte" to
which he aspires (EPS 170). Ponge's imagination excels
itself in endowing this opaque arrangement of letters with a
surfeit of significations, fracturing it, relating it to
more strongly signifying elements, persistently repeating
its sounds and shapes, and ensuring that it become
productive. If Ponge cannot do this legitimately (if the
word has few associations) then he will do it, as in the
case of Vulliamy, fraudulently. This is in order that it
should not upset the raison / raison of the text; that it
should function as a cog in the textual machine by
maintaining semantic, sonorous, or iconic relationships with
the other elements of the text, and not throw the mechanism
out of balance. Thus the element of the text which is
endowed with least meaning, with least density as a
signifiant, may become instead the most laden with it. This
is a particularly powerful method of preventing the text's
escape from the world of language into the world of ideas;
it ensures all the more forcefully that the surface of the
text is not lost at the expense of transparency.
Artists, then, like things, may be for Ponge "déjà autant mots que choses" (FAB 23) but what manner of portraiture does this produce? If it can, the name refers to qualities of the man's personality, painting or creative method, but allowing the text to be generated by the possible meanings evoked by a name can make it appear tortuous and unnecessarily hermetic, giving the reader the feeling that the proper name is being used improperly at the expense of logic. This is an approach which reveals Ponge's interest in giving a lesson on language rather than his interest in the artist concerned. No combination of letters is allowed to appear innocent - not even when they constitute a proper noun. Ignoring the protocol which dictates that names are sacred, untouchable and somehow beyond linguistic play, Ponge's use of them encourages a literary reading. The artist's name does not simply provide the subject of the text, and the author's name does not merely connote ownership of the text. Their incorporation in the body of the text flouts such single level intentionality and opens the textual space to a multiplicity of possible meanings. This aspect of the art criticism, then, adds further fuel to the argument that the critical essay, like all Ponge's work, "fonctionne plus encore qu'elle ne signifie" (Méthodes 311).

Adéquation

Ponge not only takes the proper noun as a guideline for the development of his critical essays; more importantly, he looks to the artist's character and creative method to endow his text with appropriate form. This is what Ponge calls adéquation, and it is an especially exciting aspect of all his writing. It is one of the most original, flexible rhetorical features of his poetry, and one which is also
present in the criticism, although with different results. *Adequation* is infinitely more subtle than mere description. It is part of Ponge’s attempt to achieve more intimate coincidence between language and what it denotes, and in the absence of traditional poetic forms it provides the necessary contours for the prose poem ("Plus de sonnets, d’odes, d’épigrammes"; "Chaque objet doit imposer au poème une forme rhétorique particulière" (PN 37)). Ponge’s aim is to produce a textual equivalent of an oyster, orange, rainfall or apple; "un texte qui ait une réalité dans le monde des textes, un peu égale à celle de la pomme dans le monde des objets" (Méthodes 283-84). The text will behave according to the particularité of each object and will have as much concrete reality in the textual world as the real object has in the natural world. These two worlds are seen as parallel systems united by the author:

C’est leur copulation, que réalise l’écriture (véritable, ou parfaite): c’est l’orgasme qui en résulte, qui provoque notre jubilation.

Il s’agit de les faire rentrer l’un en l’autre: de n’y voir plus double: que les deux apparences se confondent (exactement) (ce qu’on appelle le registre en termes d’imprimerie) (FAB 23).

Ponge rarely takes this as far as shaped poems or calligrammes. His is a more subtle form of mimetism, "beaucoup plus cachée" (Méthodes 37), involving less an iconic relationship to the object than imitation of its dynamic qualities. The outer world is a clock-like mechanism, like the interrelating cogs of language, and the text recreates the object’s functioning in a verbal universe. Thus as Ponge explains in ‘Le soleil placé en abîme’, "la multiplication intérieure des rapports, les liaisons formées au niveau des racines et les significations bouclées à double tour" produce in the text "ce fonctionnement qui seul peut rendre compte de la profondeur
substantielle, de la variété et de la rigoureuse harmonie du monde" (Pièces 137). This is the poet's way of encouraging a rapprochement between the world of language and the concrete world and hence making us more fully aware of their interdependence.

The poem, then, takes the cue for its form and style from the object concerned. A further correspondence is achieved by Ponge's imaginative suggestion that every manifestation of the outside world is an attempt at self-expression, a more or less successful, more or less laudable kind of language. The 'languages' attributed to objects are judged by the sophisticated standard of human language (a fixed point around which they all evolve) and are made to provide fables of expression - parables about the right and wrong way to speak. Thus the snail, in spite of a certain lack of discretion, is on the whole praiseworthy (TP 57-61), while the trees provoke disgust with their reiterative and uncontrolled "vomissement de vert" (TP 53-4). Paradigms of filth and hygiene provide indications of Ponge's response, and substances are used to similar ends; the viscous and amorphous are negative to the point of being disgusting, while the hard and well defined are positive. Hence the implicit hierarchy provided by the various parts of the oyster: its shell, its viscous interior, and its pearl (TP 48). All these comparisons ultimately serve to outline the particularité of the language spoken by "l'espèce parolière". The constant illustration of objects as relatively unfortunate, condemned to obey natural laws or rules and to express themselves only in one given way highlights our own privileged freedom to use language creatively.

Carried over into the critical texts, adéquation appears as a particularly innovative feature, and the notion of one rhetoric per artist (or in fact, per essay per artist) is maintained. Rather than tailoring his texts to offer verbal adéquation to particular works of art (although
this does occur in the essay on Giacometti), these texts attempt an ambitious and perhaps audacious equivalence with the method and manner of the artist under scrutiny. Essays are written à la manière de, creative processes are not only described but imitated, and the essence of the artist is captured in the very rhythms and form of the text. This will be discussed fully in the following chapters, and a single illustration is sufficient here. Ponge's 'Texte sur Picasso' (AC 324-44) is a fine example since in following the dictates of Picasso's genius Ponge abandons some of his own typical features. Most remarkably, the hesitancy which generally accompanies the opening of his texts is absent. There is no block in creation here, but a spontaneous, prolific flow. The text takes the kind of liberty which Picasso, in his own medium, had made legitimate, incorporating "des sautes brusques de tension, des trous d'air, des imbécilités, des grossièretés, des impropriétés" (AC 331-32). As the struggle of creation must always result, according to Picasso, in "une certaine laideur" (AC 329), Ponge justifies the fact that his own essay is "monstrueux" and "pourra, de ce fait, vous paraître laid" (AC 328).

The upshot of this technique is to suggest a rapprochement, a shared poetics between literature and the plastic arts, and to illustrate that language is capable of achieving effects parallel to those of the most adventurous modern painting. Borrowing from painters is one way of privileging the concrete component of language, since contemporary plastic art is characterised by its preoccupation with form, and is freed from the strict requirements of subject matter. Painters attract us by the surface of their work, by its texture, colour and form, not by inviting us to look through their painting at something beyond it. Ponge's own comment on this reveals his ambition to have language appreciated in a similar manner:

Il semble seulement que la poésie soit un peu en retard
maintenant sur la peinture parce qu'elle a donné moins d'œuvres construites, résonnant par leur seule forme (mais nous nous en occupons) (Méthodes 203).

A *cas limite* of Ponge's desire to have the material side of language recognised comes with the 1947 text 'Pochade en prose' (AC 147-50). This is not written for a particular painter or circumstance, although Ponge could have enlisted painters such as Dubuffet, Wols, Hartung or Fautrier in his discussion. Instead the text is a reflection on the methods of Tachisme in general, a spontaneous élan suggested to Ponge not by a painting but by the *faux marbre* of his bathroom suite which also provides a non representative surface of randomly placed colours. The title of this piece suggests a manipulation of the writer's material (prose), in a manner borrowed from painting (pochade), the latter defined by Littré as an "Esquisse rapide et négligée où la brusquerie de la main a jeté ça et là les couleurs ou les traits". This haphazard type of creation is considered worthy in its own right; "Les taches, les éclaboussures, les hasards et les surprises des formes, des matières: il y a beau temps qu'on a utilisé ces moyens rhétoriques...". Here the method consists in throwing a fistful of "matière-à-expression" against a "cible" (a page, canvas or wall) "à décorer, à orner (ou salir), à victimer (invectiver)... Puis d'attendre, de constater ce que ça fait..." (AC 147). Ever obedient to the dictates of *adéquation*, this piece has two movements; the initial élan on the Saturday night, and a certain restoration of order, of reflection, on the Sunday morning.

For Ponge the advantages of this kind of painting are that paint flaunts itself as paint, any semblance of representationalism is accidental and the process of creation becomes the subject of the art. There is, then, complete unity of matter and meaning; "Quel avantage? C'est que la création ici *comporte* sa matière, qu'il y a unité ici
entre la matière et la signification" (AC 149). There are also disadvantages, however. It is too easy a method, too anarchic and open to abuse; "'Tout est permis': Voilà le postulat de ce genre d'expression...". The first part of Ponge's declaration could be lifted straight from a manifesto, but it is instantly modified; "Et je ne dis pas que son contraire ne vaille pas mieux, ah! non, bien sûr je ne le dis pas!" (AC 148). The second part of the essay obeys Ponge's innate urge to restore order; "J'éprouve le besoin, ce matin, de mettre un commencement d'ordre dans la suite de pensées qui m'ont été suggérées par les faux marbres de notre salle de bains, ici" (AC 149). Ponge declares himself interested in isolating the laws proper to this type of expression, and the title he proposes for his finished piece is more formal, suggesting that Tachisme will be a theme, but not a method; "D'un genre moderne d'œuvres d'art: la tache ou l'éclaboussure suggestive" (AC 149). It is clear that the word can never be a tache. To throw a "poignée" of words on the page would be proper to Tzara with his randomly assembled newspaper cuttings, but not to Ponge, so although 'Pochade en prose' records Ponge's attraction for a genre which is purely reliant on the opacity of material, the ultimate and deliberate break down of adéquation points to differences rather than to similarities. Tachisme in fact gives such complete autonomy to the material that it takes the work of art too far away from the realms of meaning for Ponge to provide a text relying on complete adéquation.

As in the poetry, a moral of expression emerges here. The more quirky attempts to stretch media outside their existing boundaries (soft sculpture, kinetic art, earth and body art, all contemporary with Ponge's art writing) are ignored and there is a general critique of pure abstraction (abstract artists, says Ponge, "abstrahissent" (AC 83)), and of hybrids. Hence Ponge's comment on the cut and glued pieces of paper, newsmprint and playing cards which Braque began to use in 1909 and which were an important part of the
Synthetic Cubist period (AC 64-65). This is a "tentation puissante qui s'offre alors aux artistes pressés". The papier collé was "trop facile", "indigne d'être continué", "immanquable" and therefore necessarily less "héroïque" than ordinary oil paint "celle des mauvais peintres, des pompiers". The summit, as with poetry, "aura été d'abandonner l'idée de mettre le feu à l'eau. Puisque, nous le voyons bien, nous faisons des tableaux, faisons des tableaux, faisons de la peinture. Nous aurons la peau de la peinture à l'huile en la traitant d'une certaine façon". Thus experiment must be balanced by order, taking into consideration what is proper to each medium and working within those limits. As Gavronsky puts it, "the poet, much like the painter, must acknowledge what appears to be a transparent dependency on materials not of his own invention."

Just as modes of expression were attributed to objects in the poetry and then compared with language, so the forms of expression Ponge writes about here are not only imitated by, but compared with his own. The texts on artists emerge as the logical conclusion of Ponge's protracted investigation into different ways of expression, and while there is convergence on many issues, Ponge is keen through all this inquisitive and playful parallelism, to distinguish the media from each other and reveal their differences. Adéquation in the criticism is, then, both a form of tribute and of (gentle) rivalry. Ponge frequently begins by praising a painter's language but ends up talking about his own. It is made clear on several occasions that the merit is greater for the artist of the written word, who is obliged to undertake a perpetual combat with a palette of treacherous and meagre materials which are contaminated by prior signification. The painter may struggle with his own materials, but he is not obliged to make such an intense effort to purify them. Comparing the lines of his written introduction to the lines of Kermadec's work, Ponge comments
on the superior merit of his own; "elles ne sont pas tracées aux crayons de couleur et vous en savez bien la damnation et le mérite, qui est de devoir affronter directement les significations" (AC 322). Thus language is prized above all, placed at the summit of the hierarchy of expressions, and the message which emerges is, as Spada comments, "la supériorité de la littérature sur les beaux-arts". One of the effects of adéquation in these pieces is, then, to refer us back to language, back to the position of the author. This takes us to the final issue to be examined here, the issue of self-portraiture.

In his two essays on Ponge's art criticism Gavronsky speaks of creative autobiography, or "autoportraiture". In each he brings in the figure of Narcissus, which we might use as a central myth for self-referential prose; "Pourquoi pas le dire? Narcisse encore une fois évadé dans son reflet-parole dessine à la surface du texte les lignes qui correspondent objectivement à l'Autre mais aussi, par ce subterfuge, à soi-même". This is appropriate to Gavronsky's view of Ponge's critical texts on several scores. Firstly, painting, like the nymph Echo, is mute. Secondly Echo is an all but redundant presence for Narcissus, her only contact with him being her helpless repetition of the words he puts into her mouth, and thereafter assumes belong to her, mistaking his own voice for that of the nymph. It must also be considered, however, that Narcissus ironically provides the words Echo actually desires to speak. The ultimate conclusion of the Narcissus myth is the wasting away and death of both Narcissus and Echo, with sexual union failing to take place, and here the appropriateness of Gavronsky's myth breaks down because of its negative connotations. It is true that Ponge turns to other creative figures to define himself, but this is a more dynamic, interactive process than the Narcissus myth suggests. In his 'Courte Méditation reflexe aux fragments de miroir' (AC 54-57) written for an exhibition of
Charbonnier's still lifes, Ponge is initially unhappy about Charbonnier's choice of a portion of an existing text as a preface; "Ces sortes de déclarations, à les relire, en vérités, comme dans un miroir, m'agacent" (AC 55). Narcissus' mirror is dangerous in so far as it passively reflects a replica of whatever is placed before it and entraps us in a static image. It does not transform the world but takes it for granted, and hence denies language its true creative function by accepting the given.

A more relevant key to the self-referential aspects of all Ponge's criticism is to be found in the title of his last essay on Braque 'Bref condensé de notre dette à jamais et re-co­naissance à Braque particulièrement en cet été 80'. The dismembered word "re-co­naissance" is typically dislocated by Ponge into separate signifying units to exploit all its potential meanings, rather in the manner of Claudel in his 'Traité de la co­naissance au monde et de soi-même'. Claudel uses this term to underline the organic necessity of rapports between objects, and man's interdependence on outside factors for his perpetual act of self-definition. Man "ne naît point seul; à chacun de tous les instants de sa durée il co­naît". Thus "[Il] devient le point de coordination des phénomènes divers auxquels il apporte son témoignage commun". Claudel expresses the very Pongean notion that nothing is knowable in itself, or is ever in a definitive form, but is perceived only in its relation to other things. In Ponge the term "re­co­naissance" incorporates notions of the recognition of the self in the other, of thanks due to a fellow creator, and of an endless series of mutual redefinitions or rebirths in each text as fresh knowledge of the other, and hence of the self, is attained. It also suggests that although Braque is dead, through the text he becomes reborn in our memory. Thus Gavroneisky's suggestion that Ponge's main concern, even in the art criticism, is to 'conquer' his own death by leaving a self-congratulatory monument behind him ("En traçant, se
traçant, pierre immortelle, pierre tombale, il érige son propre éloge" is quite misplaced. To opt for Narcissus is to suggest that Ponge's criticism is completely one-sided. Such an image overlooks the fact that self-referentiality in Ponge springs from a fear of petrifaction. It also ignores Ponge's attempt to engage the reader and sensitize him to the power of language. Most of all, it underestimates Ponge's intimate understanding of the artists about whom he writes, and denies him any degree of success in his determined attempts to convey to us the flavour of their creative endeavours. Ponge's immense struggle in his study of Fautrier's *Otages* to which we now turn is a fine example of such determination.
NOTES


7. Ian Higgins, p.112.

8. 'Entretien avec Francis Ponge', Cahiers critiques de la littérature, no.2 (December 1976), 4-32 (p.13).

9. In 'SCVLPTVRB', for example, written for Germaine Richier, Ponge speaks of "l'oeuvre ici choisie comme prétexte" (L'Atelier contemporain, p.101).


15. Riffaterre, p.85.

16. Riffaterre, p.87.


20. Philippe Bonnefis, 'Faisons carrément l'éloge de l'Araignée', Revue des sciences humaines, 38, no.151 (July-September 1973), 379-409 (p.382). Bonnefis refers us to the following definition of 'titre' in Littre: "Terme de chasse. Lieu, relais où l'on poste les chiens pour courir la bête à propos quand elle passe."


23. Michael Riffaterre, 'Ponge tautologique', p.78.


27. Alan Waite, 'Ponge's Oyster - Poetry and Reading Cues', Nottingham French Studies, 22, no.2 (October 1983), 53-63 (p.54).


29. Michael Riffaterre, 'Ponge tautologique', p.78.


32. Quoted by Terence Hawkes in Structuralism and Semiotics, p.71.


34. Michael Riffaterre, 'Ponge tautologique', p.69

35. André Brincourt, 'Beaubourg, l'homme et la coquille'.


37. Mary Ann Caws, The Eye in the Text: Essays on Perception, Mannerist to Modern, Princeton Essays on the Arts, 11, Princeton University press (1981). This concept refers to "the building of the text as it is seen and formed within the reader's collaboration, special attention being given to the surface of the building material, its texturality" (p.10).


40. L'Assiette peinte, 'Pour le consacrer ici, gardons-nous de nacer trop cet objet de tous les jours', Galerie de l'orfèvrerie Christofle (Paris, 1951).

41. Equally in 'L'Assiette' of 1951 (*Pièces*, p. 125) Ponge writes "Nulle ellipse prosodique si brillante qu'elle soit, pour assez platement dire l'humble interposition de porcelaine entre l'esprit pur et l'appétit".


44. Michael Riffaterre, 'Ponge tautologique', p. 66.

45. Riffaterre, p. 66.


47. Starobinski, p. 60.

48. Starobinski, p. 79.

49. Starobinski, p. 62.


51. In *Entretiens de Francis Ponge avec Philippe Sollers* Ponge comments that it was during a lecture at The University of Chicago, and upon reaching the words "blanchâtre" and "opiniâtrement clos" that he realised how many words of the same order were present in the text. He concludes of their presence that "ce n'est pas du tout par hasard [...] Je ne l'ai pas, non plus, fait exprès" (p. 111). In the *Colloque de Cerisy* Ponge comments on another feature of the oyster poem; "Plus récemment, il y a seulement quelques mois, peut-être [...] je me suis aperçu qu'il y avait aussi dans ce texte une quantité de consonnes doubles, deux m, deux n, deux l, etc [...] c'est que les lI ou les mn rendent compte du côté feuilleté de la coquille de l'huitre" (Colloque, p. 420).

52. Michael Riffaterre, 'Ponge tautologique', p. 70.

53. Riffaterre, p. 73.

54. Riffaterre, p. 70.

56. Starobinski, p.46.

57. Jacques Derrida also links the proper noun 'Francis' to textual rule breaking. In his analysis of the significance of 'Francis Ponge', he speculates as to Ponge's own 'improper' use of his name, recuperating its possible ramifications to account for aspects of the writer's work. See Jacques Derrida, 'Signéponge', Digraphe no.8 (Paris, 1976) 17-39. Portions of this text are also to be found in Colloque de Cerisy (pp.115-51) where they are followed by a discussion. See also Christopher Morris's review of Derrida's essay, 'Names', London Review of Books (20 February 1986), 10-12.

Francis is seen by Derrida to incorporate notions of frankness and freedom, while Ponge involves notions of spongiosity, persistent in Ponge's work, its texture evoking fascination or disgust. The sponge is double-edged; "ignoble", as Ponge says, in as much as it "se remplit de vent, d'eau propre ou d'eau sale selon" (TP 46), but also associated with a cleansing function which is totally consistent with the hygienic purpose and effect of his work ("Il ne fuit donc pas devant le sale, il écrit avec le sale, contre le sale, sur le sale, du sale. C'est sa matière" (Colloque de Cerisy, p.129)). The sponge is Derrida's image for literature which transgresses rules and is freed from logic. As Morris comments, the sponge's "phantasmal zone of tangled crossings and confusions" allows it to "stand metonymically for everything that tends to disrupt or subvert the proper economy of reference"; since it is porous but remains unchanged it also has an "absurd but incomparable aptness as a figure that denominates the potential for meaning concealed within proper names." (Morris, p.11).


60. Serge Gavronsky 'Art Criticism as Autoportraiture', p.67.


63. This essay was written in 1980 for inclusion in a retrospective catalogue; Georges Braque, Fondation Maeght (5 July - 30 September 1980), pp.13-22.


The Hostages

On 22 October 1941 at Châteaubriant forty eight French hostages, families and friends of known or suspected Résistants, were executed by the Germans in reprisal for an assassination. On 23 October a further fifty were executed in reprisal for two more. The horror of these murders was to be given frequent expression by many of the French poets who were writing during the Occupation, but the murders also had their painter, Jean Fautrier, who made of them his unique and terrible subject. Pursued by the Gestapo, Fautrier took refuge in a sanatorium in the Vallée-aux-Loups with the help of Jean Paulhan, and from his hiding place he overheard the shots from the many nocturnal executions conducted in the nearby woods by the Occupying forces. It was this experience which gave rise to one of his most passionate creative outbursts, the series of sculpted and painted Otages which are celebrated in Ponge's first major essay of L'Atelier contemporain. Here Ponge embarks upon a bold confrontation of a difficult subject, and provides unequivocal support for a difficult artist - an artist to whom he will frequently return throughout his art criticism, yet one who seems, at first sight, a singularly unlikely candidate for his attention.

Disquieting and ambiguous, many of Fautrier's previous works had already proved profoundly troubling for the spectator, notably those from 1932 which saw the onset of his essentially lugubrious manner. His studies of hanged and blinded rabbits, his Moutons pendus, his Sanglier losing its entrails all reveal a painter whose sensibility and indignation draw him towards the macabre and whose creations seem to inhabit the same atrocious hinterland of
consciousness as certain visions of Goya, Rembrandt and Soutine. Even Fautrier's paintings of still life objects embody a threatening aspect which is partly attributable, according to Paulhan, to contemporary atrocity; "J'ai dit que les fleurs de Fautrier étaient un peu plus convulsées que des fleurs, et ses poires abusives, et ses nappes forcenées. Mais nous venons de connaître un temps où les hommes se sont trouvés soudain plus convulsés que des hommes. Un temps où l'homme vaincu se trouvait très exactement en proie à des ogres et à des géants haineux - qui ne se contentaient pas de le torturer, qui le souillaient encore". It seems natural, then, that Fautrier's indignation should have given rise to an obsessive series of dramatic paintings and sculptures at a time when oppression, brutality, and the macabre were not confined to the realms of nightmare but had to be faced as daily realities. The challenge to expression was intense. Thus Fautrier began his series of Otages, a direct and undaunted attempt to face the subject without evasiveness and a highly individual response to the urgent problem of style, felt more intensely than during and after the First World War.

Briefly, here is an indication of how Fautrier worked. Taking the hostages individually rather than en masse, as in Picasso's Le Charnier for example, or in many of the written responses to the killings, he maintains the emotional intensity of the individual aspect, the personal horror for each hostage, alone, anonymous, even interchangeable. "Point de portraits", comments Ponge, "Et nous n'avons donc pas la sympathie pour un être déterminé, mais une nécessité beaucoup plus poignante, irrésistible" (OT 27). Fautrier presents not only the unseen massacred individual, but highly personal expressions of the mingled anger, revulsion and feelings of human tenderness aroused in him by the shots and the cries. More importantly still in Ponge's eyes, his paintings also represent triumphs of response by virtue of a
totally original language, the medium changing and developing in a compulsive and persistent series of attempts to turn this emotional complex into art. Fautrier's rawness which he carried over into his series of *Nus* and *Objets* led him to be placed alongside painters such as Dubuffet, Hartung and Wols as the earliest and most profoundly independent creator of new and provocative forms which have been globally defined as 'psychic improvisation' and as *Art informel*.

Some preparatory gravures for the hostages are perhaps less difficult and more direct than the paintings for which they form the basis and on which Ponge concentrates. *Etude d'otages* of 1942 and *Les Fusillés* of 1943 show many of the typical features of these works. Both may be described as nocturnal, having dark backgrounds from which a cluster of faces, or several skeletal corpses, emerge as if illuminated by pale moonlight. In each case the features of the *Otages* are merely suggested by a vertical slash down the face, and a roughly drawn central eye or mouth. This loop enclosing a cross-like shape will become, as Ponge puts it, the "sigle" (*OT 39*), the hieroglyph of suffering which is common to the mutilated faces in all the paintings.

Fautrier's first sculpted response was the roughly representational *Grande tête tragique* of 1942, cast in bronze. This disfigured head offers a condensed comment on the act of torture, embodying as it does both the wound and the victim's response to being wounded. The horror of a facial attack is instinctively recognised as the nadir of humanity, going beyond the desire to kill and bordering on the excitement of mutilation. Here the absence of the enemy, the refusal of the anecdotal and the anonymity of the victim elevate the sculpture to the status of a universal symbol of martyrdom. The expression is one of dazed, wounded surprise; the mouth, lips parted in passive disbelief, disappears in the right half of the face, which is cruelly erased, scraped away by the artist in a cathartic repetition of the original
act of violence. It is as though Fautrier had actually sculpted the face in its entirety before partially obliterating it. Another sculpture, Tête d'otage of 1944, offers a contrasting shift towards the more uncompromising language in which the paintings communicate to us. This featureless lump of lead appears to have moved further towards disintegration, retaining the rough shape of a head but making no other concession to representationalism.

The first painted hostages retain some of the recognisable features of humanity, although vastly and dramatically simplified, and pasted on the canvas in traditionally symbolic colours: blacks, sombre ochres and deep reds. What features there are are splayed and distorted; one heavy eyelid hangs over unseeing eyes and lips are slashed and frayed. The roughly textured bouillie with occasional streaks of running colour is haphazardly surrounded on the dark background by a thinnish line (the contour of a head) often overlapped by the paste it is meant to contain. These symbolic elements are gradually accompanied by an incongruous scale of delicate shades, bearing little relation to the colours of bruising and bleeding. The palest pastels (pinks, greys and white) mingle in powdery, fresco-type applications. There are deep, wiry scars scraped into the thick, almost sculptural slab of subtle colours, but the Turneresque mastery of shade is inescapably pretty in its combinations and nuancing. The absence of violence seems strange and unacceptable, and the shock value of the later Otages springs from the strange and provocative discordance between their subject matter and their feminine, sensual delicateness. Fascinated by metamorphosis, Fautrier often produced images of things about to be, things whose presence is imminent but only half-formed. In the instance of the Otages the process is reversed. The hostages decay in the way that Fautrier's metamorphosing series progresses, their representation becoming "à la longue de plus en plus saisissante" (OT 31).
The heads are half disintegrated, returning to the earth from which they are eventually indistinguishable, as form rendered formless returns to basic matter. Taken as a series, then, the Otages offer suggestive and challenging expressions of some of the most barbaric events to be suffered by the French nation.

The secretive pleasures of clandestine communication or of contrebande work, involving the resourceful uses 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, but in 1945 they finally escaped their enforced concealment and had their first public showing. The Galerie René Drouin in Paris exhibited the Otages with an introduction by Malraux, resulting in large audiences, some public acclaim, and a good deal of incomprehension and puzzlement before these ambivalent and strikingly new works.

Art and protest

The first of Ponge's essays on Jean Fautrier provides a fruitful starting point for a study of this kind, whose purpose is partly to explore the stages whereby Ponge comes to grapple directly with subjects which he previously avoided or tackled indirectly. For a writer whose cool-headed prerequisites of creation are objectivity, strict linguistic control and unemotionalism, this is indeed a major challenge. The creative strait-jacket of the Occupation and the atrocity of war spotlight the creative efforts of Ponge and Fautrier alike, raising problems of artistic expression and communication in acute fashion. This may be seen as a formative episode in the long struggle of two developing languages, Ponge placing his own medium under new demands to account for the evolution of Fautrier's very
personal technique. In no other text do we see Ponge straying so far from his 'archetypal' range of subjects and it is clear, in his brief exploratory piece of 1944, 'Fautrier à la Vallée-aux-Loups' that there will be difficulties: "On verra cela bientôt. Inutile d'en dire grand'chose. En quelques mots d'ailleurs, ce serait difficile. Quant à moi, voilà plusieurs semaines que je cherche à propos de cette peinture mes mots" (FVL 22).

'Note sur les Otages' was a texte de commande written to accompany the Otages in a book of reproductions and springing from Ponge's admiration for Fautrier's ambitious works. It carries the contextual label "Paris, janvier 1945", indicating the conditions in which it was written, Paris having been liberated for a mere five months and the nation still 'shell-shocked' by the as yet open wounds of recent events. This immediacy is an important factor in the essay. It corners Ponge into an open expression of horror and protest, whereas his natural tendency is to engage in oblique expression. Ponge's customary form of protest is perhaps unusually subtle and indirect, although his whole poetic endeavour is, of course, born out of protest. It has been a hallmark of his writing from the start, and in the early stages it was certainly less camouflaged, with writings from the twenties and thirties including socialist apologies, satires, and texts which, whilst being hermetic, were nevertheless more obviously politically engaged. In the later texts whose approach is more mature it is still clear that resistance and protest are the conditions of all valid forms of creation in Ponge's eyes, but here he exercises his belief that protest is best achieved if direct comment is avoided. An early Pongean text was meticulously prepared, seen by its writer as a profoundly subversive bomb, with the ability to change language, the reader, the world, and the relationship between them. Speaking of the change in his "action guerrière" after writing his 'Trois satires' in 1923, Ponge explains, "c'était la forme de la
bombe, et la préparation, la longue préparation de la bombe qui m'intéressait, et je me retirais pour faire cela. Je ne participais donc pas aux actions extérieures, je me renfermais et je préparais mon engin" (EPS 68). Expression thus becomes an oblique but nonetheless active instrument of change. In the case of the poems on objects, direct social comment is not an issue. Dissent is replaced with a more positive concentration on the fundamental tools with which we define ourselves and our world, and the inanimate objects chosen for his typical poems are often described in terms of the metaphorical lessons they offer for the user of language. 'L'Orange', for example, illustrates "deux manières de mal supporter l'oppression" exemplified by the respective behaviour of a sponge and an orange "après avoir subi l'épreuve de l'expression" (TP 46). It has already been suggested that the behaviour of all Ponge's objects is described as having greater or lesser degrees of merit depending on their ability to resist the undesirable aspects of expression to which human language is prone. It is in this sense that Ponge claims true subversiveness, true revolution is in literature itself, however apparently divorced from politics or social issues its theme may appear, "parce que nous sommes dans le langage, nous sommes enfermés dans le langage qui est le nôtre, et que rien ne se passe quoiqu'on veuille en dehors de cette langue. Et que c'est à la modification par transmutation des termes, [...] par le travail sur cette langue, que nous pouvons changer les choses, y compris la politique."

During the period which concerns us here Ponge was actively involved in Resistance activity in the zone sud. Under the guise of a representative for Seghers' publishing house and the journals Confluences and Fontaine he performed a role as a member of the Communist founded Front National Resistance group, and it may therefore seem curious that the apparently innocuous themes elected for his texts on objects should have continued to surface at this time. True, some of
Ponge's chosen objects - soap, coal, potatoes - could be said to refer to a period of privation, but his output of contrebande work was in fact relatively slight and the discrete references to the circumstances of Occupation couched in his apparently typical descriptions of 'La Lessiveuse' of 1943 (Pièces 72-76), 'Le Platane' of 1942 (Pièces 60), 'Ode inachevée à la Boue' of 1942 (Pièces 60) or 'Le Lilas' of 1942-50 (Pièces 119-20) were so subtle that these poems can be read today without readers ever becoming alerted to their latent protest. In an interview of 1976 Ponge explains that he was sometimes accused of not publishing sufficiently revolutionary texts in the various reviews which served as organs of propaganda. While emphasising that he was in any case never directly requested to write for these reviews, he adds that he would have refused, explaining, "je ne suis pas un peintre de batailles comme Édouard Detaille par exemple, ou d'autres [...] je suis plutôt un peintre de natures mortes, si l'on veut, [...] Et [...] je suppose que toutes choses étant égales d'ailleurs personne n'aurait demandé à Chardin ou à Braque de faire des peintures sur les guerres de leur époque". Given the above statement, it may seem odd that Ponge should choose to devote a text to Fautrier's mutilated Otages at all.

It is true that Ponge has written several epitaphs, but his previous treatments of death itself are unsensational and limited to the dedicatory poem for his father, or the memories of the room in which his grandmother died." On two occasions alone he confronts the issue in a quite different way. One of these is in 'Baptème funèbre' (Lyres 35-37) which is written in the same year as the Fautrier piece, and whose intention is to commemorate the death of René Leynaud, a fellow poet who was arrested by the militia and shot by the Germans on 13 June 1944. This poem has already been discussed as one of Ponge's more ambitious works on people, but in the Fautrier text, facing mass killings of particular
inhumanity, the problem of death is of even greater magnitude. 'Note sur les Otages' is unique and demands detailed analysis for a number of reasons. Apart from its length and the little critical attention which it has so far received, it is exemplary as a double piece of circumstance; that is, it is at once a response to Fautrier's paintings and a response to the killing of hostages. In deciding to produce an accompanying text for Fautrier's *Otages* Ponge is faced with more than just the substantial problems of writing about another person and another person's work. To comment on these paintings implies, of necessity, a painful and emotional process of meditation on their gruesome and all too recent theme. Ponge's responsibility to both Fautrier and to the reader is perhaps greater here than in any other critical essay. He must find a balance whereby the sheer sensationalism of the chosen subject does not dull or override the importance of this new and difficult art, so far removed from the French tradition of *belle peinture*; he must show the value of Fautrier independently of this subject, but circumstances also require a thorough, cathartic outpouring concerning Nazi brutality. This first major essay of art criticism is the only one to have as its specified subject a direct reference to events of the Second World War, and to offer, along with detailed analysis of another man's work, a major stance concerning the problematic relationship between art and atrocity.

'Note sur les Otages' is, in fact, a largely theoretical text. It provides a detailed account of Ponge's concepts of creation and of adequate protest in such intolerable circumstances. It studies responses to various atrocities, assessing their validity and qualities, and gives an open dissection of the sort of problem faced by writers who accept the uncomfortable duty of responding to human savagery: "L'on ne pouvait certes se taire devant de pareilles horreurs, ni devant de pareilles détresses. L'on ne pouvait ignorer de tels sujets. Ils vous hantaient."
lors, comment les traiter?" (OT 11) What should one choose to say concerning such atrocity? How should one choose to say it? How should works such as this ideally affect the spectator? Certain other pertinent questions arise out of this essay: what happens when a work of art is used as a direct form of protest and a specific weapon? How do artistic and social demands best combine and interrelate? What dictates the delicate balance between social protest and artistic progress? With particular reference to André Masson's bloody and vituperative paintings provoked by the Spanish Civil War, Werner Haftman makes the following generalisation: "There are situations in which art ceases to be important and all that matters is to proclaim your feelings." It is interesting that under certain pressurised conditions the artist / writer often changes his manner of being subversive, and that this change, this new alliance, frequently takes place to the detriment of his art.

Looking at the extensive body of poetry produced in France during the German Occupation it becomes clear that in the approach to atrocity there is one overriding preoccupation. The most essential function of the majority of French World War Two commemorative poetry lies in the sustenance and hope it offers, the type of national rebirth it envisages and the way in which it opens up to or contemplates the future. There is little work as unequivocally bleak and cynical as that of Wilfred Owen. These poems are of necessity forward looking and in general they attempt to recuperate the waste of the random killings. Works on such subjects as the hostages are no exception. The grim spectacle of the mass graves may be approached but it is hastily replaced by notions of, for example, a harvest as dead fathers feed their sons and the soil of France is literally composed of its heroes. In their urge to foster hope and determination these poems turned to the universally emotive, archetypal imagery of what Jung called the
'collective unconscious'. A common stock of ideas such as rebirth, seasonal growth or natural cycles are repeatedly set against death to divest it of its finality. As poets succumbed to the pressure of circumstances, their methods were often blatant, ranging from simple and rather unsubtle rallying cries to a multitude of vengeful promises, direct threats and prophesies. Thus Emmanuel promises in his 'Otages' that "Ce sang ne séchera jamais sur notre terre"; thus Seghers, in 'Octobre '41' promises that the dead "ressusciteront vêts de feu dans nos écoles"; thus Luc Bérimont threatens, in 'Le Temps du beau plaisir', that "Les couchés dresseront leurs poings d'épis luisants / De leurs ventres jailliront des armées". The absurd futility of killing is never allowed to be illustrated as futile. Writers often relied heavily on emotively liturgical language or showed a tendency to revert to patriotic cliché and their poems pledge themselves and us to faithful and eternal remembrance, sharing a common desire to confer immortality. Religious faith resurfaced, new myths were formed, old myths were regenerated and traditional poetic forms were commonly re-employed, in a backward-looking artistic conservatism which aimed to affirm the permanence of French culture. Many of these poems are functional rather than durable, having limited applicability and being mere poetry of circumstance. Their status is often uneasy; are they poems, propaganda or mere historical records? Will they serve any purpose outside their immediate context? Ponge's opinion of the best stance to adopt is clear: "je n'ai pas fait des poèmes comme Eluard ou Aragon, contre l'Occupant. Mais ma 'Lesseuse' a été considérée comme un texte de résistant [...] Les écrits qui ne sont directement inspirés par aucune des idéologies de l'époque peuvent être aussi subversifs que les textes marqués par celles-ci. On se laisse des prêches, des écrits de propagande. Les autres textes peuvent révéler le malaise contemporain. Les valeurs subversives sont intérieures, elles ne sont pas visibles."
It may well be, then, that the best and most durable work to emerge from this period is not obviously partisan.  

Perhaps the most notable exception to the emphasis prevalent in the majority of poems commemorating the dead is provided by André Frénaud's 1945 series of four poems grouped under the heading 'La Nourriture du bourreau'.  It is worth looking at these briefly since in contrast to Ponge's response they are unreservedly negative, strictly belonging to that category which he claims to be practically non existent, "la littérature de la décomposition" (OT 21), and since one of these poems, 'Figures sur le navire' was directly inspired by two of Fautrier's gravures. One of these was a group of human figures with the dead looking out at us, which Frénaud interprets as a ship loaded with bodies staring at and advancing towards the spectator. All of these poems, 'La Libération du corps', 'Assèchement de la plaie', 'Nourritures de la terre' as well as the above mentioned, are uncomfortably graphic and horrific, seething with grim irony and often evoking, but flatly rejecting the typical consolatory mechanisms employed by other poets to foster hope. Refusing, for example, the comfortable cushion of Nature's reliable benevolence, Frenaud replaces the notion of golden wheatfields with the un-bowdlerised image of anchovies; bodies packed together in shallow trenches.  

This "belle nourriture aux couleurs nouvelles" is merely food for burrowing insects, and the poet takes pains to show an indifferent Nature. His stress on decay and decomposition is implacable and unrelieved. The whole spectacle is "puant, coulant, couillant, croulant". The dead assault us with their "gros rires" and the wind blows through the carcass heap inducing an horrific parody of life, a "fête funéraire". However masterful these poems may be, however daring in their frank response to the horror, their stubborn concentration of focus makes for such uncomfortable reading that one finds it impossible to be uplifted. One of the problems is that Frénaud approaches the mass graves as a
composition, that is, in a painterly manner. His poems avoid the anecdotal and insist upon a single image; that of the atrocious colours and textures before him. Like paintings, the poems offer no catharsis because they are static and do not evolve. Frénaud's deliberate election of a 'painterly' set of difficulties is doubtless a result of two factors: his resistance to consolatory platitudes in the face of such a subject, and his reliance on a picture as a starting point. His response highlights the acute difficulty for plastic artists, as opposed to poets, in dealing with atrocity.

In the light of these pitfalls, how do Ponge and Fautrier deal with the hostages? Naturally the instincts to condemn and to provide hope are shared by Ponge who comments in this essay that the events must be relived or 'reconstituted' by the artist ("Il fallait la refaire en reproche" (OT 25)), but clearly transcended. A purely beautiful painting, however, is doubtless as difficult to accept as one of Frénaud's poems, although for different reasons and although beauty is, according to Ponge, the ultimate objective and Fautrier's ultimate achievement. The struggle in the pictorial sphere as Ponge sees it is to create lasting beauty out of the horror, yet still take full account of the latter, without being too nakedly anecdotal: "Si on parle de choses tragiques eh bien il faut le faire de telle façon que l'on sorte des tragédies, enfin des spectacles tragiques, qu'ils soient donnés par la peinture, comme par exemple les Schiavoni, les Esclaves de Michel Ange, ou enfin d'une exposition, d'un musée montrant des scènes tragiques, ou des tragédies à proprement parler, qu'on sorte de l'écoute d'une tragédie plutôt content du fait qu'un artiste, qu'un écrivain, ou qu'un sculpteur, ait été capable de tant de beauté."

Ponge's text is one of strong contrasts, alternately focusing on the horrific and the beautiful. It is punctuated with the words "horreur" and "beauté", appearing in
juxtaposition as an antithetical pair, and significantly in the above order. The artists Ponge chooses to compare with Fautrier are elected because of their heroic affirmation of beauty. Apollinaire, for example, still seeking to find meaning in war, his response characterised by a genuine and poignant hunger for joy which led to images of exploding shells as breasts or flowers. His response is a "héroïsme modeste et souriant" (OT 12) indulgent rather than vituperative and gaining power from this very "sublime indulgence". Fautrier shares his "sorte d'héroïsme [...] et de divine, d'obstinée résistance, opposition à l'horreur par l'affirmation de la beauté" (OT 12). Equally important here are Michelangelo's Esclaves, the marble figures sculpted for the tomb of Jules II. In these, captive man is frozen in a magnificently harmonious contorsion; our overriding impression is one of pleasure, satisfaction "à cause de l'harmonie des lignes, de la noblesse des attitudes, du calme, de la hauteur, de la majesté, de la grâce dont elles sont empreintes" (OT 9). In every aspect of Fautrier's work these stark contrasts reappear. The ambiguity of the spectator's response is captured in Ponge's text with the two extremes of "ravissement d'oeil" and "épouvante d'oeil" (OT 32) and with the suggestions of Fautrier's dangerous, alluring feline attraction "Appelant chez lui, à son intérieur. Pour vous griffer?" (OT 36). The delicacy of his built-up paste "affecte le plus souvent l'apparence de pétales superposées" yet the floral imagery is contrasted with a violently craggy, geographical irregularity of scored surfaces "elle est profondément striée ou ramassée en crêtes, ravins, crevasses" (OT 33). This is summed up in Ponge's final triumphant formula, "Gêne et rage éclatent en bouquet suave" (OT 41).

In 'Fautrier à la Vallée-aux-loups' published before Fautrier's Œtages were exhibited, Ponge speaks of Fautrier's beauty and adds "Peut-être trouvera-t-on ces expressions indécentes à propos d'un sujet aussi terrible que 'les
Otages'. Et certes, Fautrier a dû ressentir bien fortement ces horreurs pour en éprouver ensuite (esthétiquement) l'obligation. Mais le miracle est là justement: il nous restitue les Otages en beautés" (FVL 22). Aware that some of Fautrier's Otages are almost indecently beautiful, and therefore risk being unacceptable in such a context, Ponge's essay sets out to bridge the gap. By lengthy debate of the issues involved, by taking us behind the scenes of his own and Fautrier's painful confrontation with the hostages, he shows that both artist and writer have earned the right to opt for beauty.

**La Bataille contre l'horreur**

A feature which accounts for the instantaneously exciting nature of many of Ponge's texts is his determination to involve the reader in the creative act. Here it is perhaps more important than ever that Ponge should engage us in Fautrier's creative process, and in his own. He begins, then, by recreating the common psychological reaction of the artist or writer faced with atrocity, making it clear that he is involved in something graver than a mere challenge to plastic form or to verbal dexterity. Ponge examines the killings as a moral and as a specifically artistic problem, both of which must be addressed. His introductory passage, set apart from the body of the piece as hors texte and highlighted by italics, was initially published separately as 'La Bataille contre l'horreur'. It is more than a preamble, having instead a vital, functional role. It places the reader immediately in the thick of the issues which Ponge's text will develop and illustrate, and makes it clear from the start that this is very much an essay about the difficulties and responsibilities of creation:
Ce serait trop peu dire que je ne suis pas sûr des pages qui suivent: voici de drôles de textes, violents, maladroits. Il ne s'agit pas de paroles sûres.

Il est un moment de la création où l'on se sent comme bousculé par la grêle de coups que vous assène votre sujet. L'on peut réagir alors par une grêle de coups désordonnés (beaucoup portant à faux ou dans le vide). A peu près comme un arbre réagit au vent. Est-ce que les feuillages enregistrent les coups de vent ou y répondent? Qu'on en décide (si l'on veut).

Ceci, qui peut être vrai s'agissant d'un sujet quelconque, l'est à fortiori s'agissant de ceux qui, par nature, affectent si violemment la sensibilité que dès le premier round ils la mettent groggy: pour les sujets trop ravissants ou trop atroces.

Mais supposez que l'atrocité même soit le sujet...

Alors, il s'agit seulement de tenir debout, de finir à tout prix le combat et de ne s'écrouler qu'ensuite, après le coup de gong (OT 8).

The essay's split title offers a pointer to the two main functions Ponge's prose is performing: endeavouring to confront the type of suffering inflicted by Nazi inhumanity, whilst also assessing Fautrier's series of attempts to grapple with that same point de départ. Both the affair of the hostages and the paintings give rise to disturbing emotional responses, swamp the writer and endanger the kind of linguistic and emotional control Ponge's expression demands even under normal conditions. A similar fear that language will be inadequate and will fail the writer recurs in several of the World War Two poems which attempt to deal openly with such atrocities, and is also present in Ponge's only other comparable work, 'Baptême funèbre', where the creative difficulties are again written in to the poem so we share Ponge's "tremblement devant les paroles" and his initial statement of helplessness, "FACE A UN TEL SUJET QUE PUIS-JE?" (Lyres 36).

The overall thrust of this introduction is its serious view of creation as an aggressive encounter, a life and death combat, stress being placed upon (literary) resistance at all costs. Clearly, Ponge feels a victim to his repugnant subject and is called upon to be particularly defensive. If,
as he claims, "Un sujet quelconque" can present itself as an adversary with annihilating potential, then the abstract extreme of atrocity is a dizzyingly inconceivable opponent. Ponge is more at home with small concrete objects and we have seen that his attempts to deal with anything larger, more abstract or moving are fraught with difficulties. In the case of 'Baptême funèbre' Ian Higgins suggests that it is not only the horror, but also the abstract "motif of [René Leynaud's] perfection" which "threaten[s] the beholder with a kind of hypnotic, mental numbness". Ponge's metaphor of the creator as a tree, his adversary the wind, is a good illustration of such difficult creative standpoints. The wind is perfectly intangible, unpredictable and ungraspable, the antithesis of his preferred subjects. The "atrocité" of the killings and also the "horreur" and "beauté" which Fautrier synthesises in his work are all abstracts which call into question the proficiency of words.

In the third paragraph the metaphor of a tree assailed by massive forces gives way to the more positive, because less passive, metaphor for creation; that of a boxing match (see "rounds", "groggy", "coup de gong"). The implications of this choice are significant for several reasons, not least because there are aspects of a boxing match which describe this text well. Firstly, the metaphor suggests that Ponge is not 'ambushing' his subject / opponent with oblique textual references, but is facing it head-on, without the distance a less magnetic subject would permit him to maintain, and with a temporal proximity which destabilises his habitual techniques. The "idée globale intime" on which he usually draws, the "idée profonde, à la fois naïve et complexe, simple et nourrie (épaisse, colorée), puérile et pratique" is absent since there is no foundation of preformed ideas on which to draw. Ponge explains that he had a different task to cope with in the art criticism in general since the "sédimentation d'impressions ne vient pas de l'impression enfantine", but if we consider that the
certainty of response increases in proportion to the familiarity and approachability of the object under scrutiny, it follows that this major, direct attack on recent events and this first attempt to offer a response to Fautrier place Ponge at a totally new creative standpoint.

One of the issues approached in this introduction is the problem of achieving and maintaining an appropriate form for the expression of horror. Ponge's own text begins with uncertain, half-apologetic comments on its own nature which, since it is born out of violence, is itself said to be violent, clumsy, somewhat pell-mell. It is explicitly acknowledged as a series of formless and anarchic blows: "pages qui suivent", "drôles de textes", "violents", "maladroits", "une grille de coups désordonnés" and "pas sûres". The reader is prepared for a chaotic encounter with the pages before him, and for multiplication of the usual Pongean hesitancies, self-corrections, ragged edges and provisional statements which often make for difficult, if stimulating, reading. The promised rawness of response is, however, at odds with the obtrusive order and structure of the piece, which is noticeable at a glance. Less stylistically adventurous than much of Ponge's work, it is tamed and diced and by the time the reader has covered the first few pages he has forgotten the introduction's warning about 'wild and whirling words'. The impression is very strongly that of a calculated linear plan with clarity in the outline of route and method, syntactical normality and a less frequent appearance of the typical jeux de mots, abstruse references, and ludic or hermetic elements. Instead there is a neatly partitioned series of enumerations: section I lists various responses to war or human suffering; section II offers a discussion of the function of words in accompanying works of plastic arts; section III provides a systematic list of various means of death and their suitability for artistic treatment, "La plus simple [...] une moins ordinaire [...] une autre moins ordinaire encore
[... ] Pour continuer nous découvrirons encore une autre aventure [... ] Enfin venons-en à notre dernière aventure, la plus récente" (OT 21). This kind of unconfused structuring continues through the other sections, with clearly indicated textual links which appear to imply anything but lack of control. As we will see, by comparison with Ponge's later piece on Fautrier's *Nus*, this seems particularly diluted. Even the usual *mise en abyme*, the self-referentiality which is a constant in Ponge and which is normally integrated within the body of a text, is cautiously set apart here - firstly in the italicised introduction, and secondly within the confines of section II which makes no mention of the hostages but is entirely devoted to the implications of Ponge's new function as art critic (OT 15-20).

Perhaps the key to this problem lies with the analogy of the lutte, in its implied oscillation between two possible extremes - structure, order and control on the one hand, and anarchy, collapse and incoherence on the other. Again, it is significant that Ponge's fight is of a specific kind. The boxing match is certainly an unleashing of violent responses, but with order imposed, and the text shuffled into five 'rounds'. The difference between the actual nature of the text and the nature we are led to believe it will have points to a fundamental Pongean paradox which is exemplified here maybe more clearly than anywhere else: the more straightforward, clear and ordered the text, the more violently emotional and complex are the impulses behind it. Textual obscurity and complexity, on the other hand, indicate that the writer is at leisure to play. Again, the 'Paroles à propos des Nus de Fautrier' is a case in point. There, the position of the author is one of confident supremacy, and Ponge is at liberty to select his method of attack.

Of Ponge's "grèle de coups désordonnés" with which he conducts this fight, many bypass their target, or appear circuitous. Bouts of a boxing match may of course be evasive.
and a fight is conducted and won by dodging one's adversary as well as by delivering direct blows. Ponge begins here with a cautious, ordered method of fighting, often averting his gaze and only from time to time coming directly "en face de l'idée des otages" (OT 23). The meaning is therefore partly to be sought in the tactics which delay direct confrontation, and in the silences and spaces between the bouts of the encounter. As Eliane Formentelli comments in her study of the piece, "Il faut laisser au texte le temps d'éponger cela". It may seem odd, for example, that in sharp contrast to the idea of a battle with which we are initially confronted, the opening of the essay proper is a calm and collected discussion not of Fautrier, not of the hostages, but of Michelangelo. This is the first of many tactical moves wherein Ponge substitutes the tolerable for the intolerable and the upshot of the comparison with Michelangelo's Esclaves is to allow Ponge to turn immediately towards Fautrier's beauty, his "harmonie de couleurs", his "calme", his "hauteur de vues sublimes" (OT 10). This, however, is too abrupt an acceptance of beauty. After the comparison comes a reflective pause before the next sub section:

Il ne faut pas en ces matières aller ni juger trop vite. Ce n'est probablement pas à présent chose bonne à dire que de laisser entendre que devant l'horreur deux attitudes sont possibles: l'une étant le refus de considérer l'horreur, et l'accent mis sur le beau côté des choses, - et l'autre étant la résolution de lutter contre les causes présumées de cette horreur (OT 11).

Despite his urge to present us at once with Fautrier's beauty, Ponge has no desire to appear like an ivory tower aesthete. He has to take the reader through a lengthy investigation of the problems involved and annul the polarity between these two approaches to horror before he can persuade us of Fautrier's value and achievement. That is, he must convince us that the Otages paintings integrate
the ideas of beauty and of protest. He must also engage in direct confrontation with the hostages himself.

From Ponge's introduction it is clear that his ideas about the nature and value of expression have taken on a new intensity and relevance in their present context. His notions of the multiple responsibilities involved in writing, his emphasis upon the struggle rather than its outcome, upon the act of creation rather than the object created are particularly pertinent when one considers that any type of creativity during the war years, irrespective of its content or message, was considered as combative, subversive, an act of resistance, by the oppressed and the oppressor alike. Stories which later came to light provide a record of the attempts to keep individuality alive in the concentration camps where "tout était mis en œuvre pour égarer le déporté, en faire un automate sans âme. Ecrire un poème […] broder un mouchoir, dessiner, était un acte de résistance. Il pouvait entraîner la mort immédiate. Il était témoignage de foi et d'espérance." The fact that expression is always equated with virile resistance and non-expression with limp acceptance explains why most of Ponge's texts convey, by direct or indirect means, the fact that he is actually engaged in the effort of expression and that we are engaged in the effort of reading. All Ponge's writing arises, then, from a sense of responsibility, and is not a luxury but an ontological necessity, as the imperativeness of his introduction suggests. In the act of creation no less than in the social sphere resistance must be sustained or the consequences will be an undermining of the author's identity (the defeat at the hands of enemy forces deprives man of his essential liberty; so too does the defeat of man by language, his means of creating and defining himself and his world).

Ponge's idea of responsibility, his exploration of the motives and of the risks encountered by the author or artist in treating such subjects, go beyond this idea of individual
liberty. It is not only the author's identity which hangs on this text, but the ultimate destiny of the hostages. Ponge had already affirmed that as a writer he was hostage to the objects about which he writes - obliged to speak by the "muettes supplications" of the voiceless. The hostages, "abusés... sans défense, sans plaintes, sans lutte possible" (OT 25) are the human equivalent par excellence of these mute objects. This position is made even more explicit in a note book kept by Ponge from May 1941 to February 1943. Here he writes "Ceux qui n'ont pas la parole, c'est à ceux-là que je veux la donner. Voilà où ma position politique et ma position esthétique se rejoignent". In analysing the impulsions obeyed by artists who tackle such subjects, Ponge shows the major factor to be the absolute necessity of some kind of response, indicated here by the obsessive reminders of the silent dead ("ils vous hantaient") and the heavy use of imperatives ("il fallait opposer quelque chose, il fallait, en constatant l'horreur, la stigmatiser, l'éterniser" (OT 25)). The urgent question "Comment se comporter en face de l'idée des otages?" is a general as well as a specifically artistic one, encouraging the feeling that these events should in some way change our behaviour. Just as Camus insisted that the question of suicide was the one subject preeminently worthy of consideration, so Ponge cites the idea of the hostages as an essential hurdle on which the future hangs; "On peut dire que voilà une des question essentielles de l'époque" (OT 23).

For the artist this is a subject fraught with paradox. Because of its exceptional nature it appears ostensibly easy. For "un artiste scrupuleux" (OT 13) it is exceptionally difficult. Naturally by not expressing himself, the artist is also guilty; guilty of negligence. Reaction and non reaction are both significant, active choices. Having decided to rise to the challenge, however, the artist may risk even greater guilt. Ponge expresses a need to face these events in an encounter whose outcome is
both cathartic and inflammatory: "Il fallait la refaire", "en gros plan" (OT 25), and here we must look at the term "refaire". It is perhaps best to do this with reference to 'Baptême funèbre' where the risks run by the artist are more succinctly expressed. It has been mentioned that the emphatic capitals of this poem, "FACE A UN TEL SUJET QUE PUIS-JE?" outline the artist's situation and express his fear of creative impotence. This is bad enough, but Ponge goes on to suggest that the artist as well as the executioner can bestow life or death. His role involves the weighty responsibility both of preserving Leynaud's memory and of creating hope for humanity out of an inhumane subject. The artistic treatment of such events can make the difference between a second death and a new birth, and in this poem the position in which Ponge finds himself as he attempts to write is uncomfortably similar to that of the executioners; "Oh FACE A UN TEL SUJET comme si je faisais partie du peloton ennemi" (Lyres 36). This kind of close and powerfully suggestive parallelism between the artist and the executioner is perpetuated in the Otages piece as both writer and reader find themselves repeatedly "en face de l'idée des otages".

One of the first questions a writer or painter must ask before commencing such a work is how literal the response is to be. Which elements are to be stressed and which omitted given that "l'homme ne conserve, même de l'horreur, que les images qui lui plaisent" (OT 32)? One of Ponge's chosen approaches is a cautious attempt to grasp the differential quality of this subject by analogy with other deaths and their fitness for artistic treatment. Again he seems divided between working by indirectness and directness. The first half of section III for example takes the form of an enumeration, exploring various deaths and their effects on the human body (OT 20-22). All seem innocuous by comparison and the reader feels the listing process to be a powerfully evasive measure, concentrating on
a number of more comprehensible options before confronting the intolerable. Working from the simplest causes of old age or illness, which give rise to various artistic renderings as protest against the human condition, or alternatively as consoling acquiescence in reassuring portrayals of death, Ponge takes us through death by accident, the obvious sensationalism of melodramatic crimes of passion or assassinations, scenes of war (he cites Goya), which are generally anecdotal or allegorical. The effect on the victim is of more central importance, ranging from the inert but externally unaltered body to the revealing of the inside of the body ("la vie en coupe") in an accident, the wound of the assassinated, or the "bonnes mutilations" which are the life-giving effects of surgery. Each case allows Ponge to accumulate negative statements; "Il n'y a guère de littérature, de peinture de la décomposition"; "le hasard n'est pas poétique, pas tragique, a du mal à paraître tragique"; "il n'y a là que blessure (et le plus souvent il n'y a pas défiguration) il n'y a pas la mise en bouillie du corps humain", and finally, "Il n'y a rien de si tragique que dans ce que nous avons connu depuis quelques années".

When Ponge does rise to the challenge of speaking directly about the hostages, the jabbing, persistent nature of his prose is both an attempt to express his own emotion and to push the horror forcefully upon the reader by mimetic repetition and accumulation. The unrelenting stream of blows is designed to bruise the imagination: "C'est le résultat de tout cela, c'est l'objet inerte ou pantelant; c'est le cadavre, le tronçon, le lambeau. Voilà le résultat horrible, voilà le cadavre, le moignon, le meurtre contre nature, insoutenable" (OT 27). Equally, the hostages are "torturés, déformés, tronqués, défigurés par les balles, par la mitraille, par la torture" (OT 10). This artistic barrage is an essential reminder of the reader's responsibility; we become victims to the victims, hostages to the hostages, obliged to respond.
In the second part of section III Nazi torture is referred to in starkly direct and uncompromising terms (OT 22-5). Ponge prods at the nerve of contemporary anguish and makes unambiguous statements about the Occupiers. The comparative weakness of Ponge's direct social comment has not escaped critical attention, but here the specific, simply stated, has a certain blunt power. The repetitions, the restraint of the "constat" (Ponge returns often to this term in describing Fautrier's work) are illustrative of the "stupéfaction" which is seen as a principal reaction and are stronger here than the directness of an uncontrolled "colère vengeresse". The cold repetition of "cannibales... cannibalisme" and "sauvagerie", the brevity and control of many of the sentences, culminate in a final paragraph of great impact. In the texts about objects Ponge attempts to return to zero, to treat each object as if it were totally new and hence to present it in a fresh light. Here the same approach is chilling; "sans doute la maladie, l'accident causent-ils des défigurations pareilles. Mais toute la gravité de celles-ci vient de ce qu'elles ont été voulu par chaque tortionnaire pour chaque victime, voulu de tout près, en gros plan. Et plus encore, ce n'est pas dans le tumulte et le feu de la bataille, mais dans le silence et le sang-froid des Occupations qu'elles ont été perpétrées" (OT 25). In following through the brutal closed circle of torture Ponge concentrates on the closeness of the human faces, chosen by Fautrier as the registers of emotion and meaning, the litmus paper of humanity. He briefly relives the event and looks at the psychology of the torturer; "Le désir du tortionnaire - compte non tenu d'un certain sadisme qui se développe, paraît-il, dans l'exercice de la torture - est de provoquer des aveux (par conséquent, de justifier le tortionnaire)" (OT 24). Silence divests the torturer of the possibility of self-justification and it is interesting that whereas Ponge re-lives the act of violence, albeit briefly, Fautrier omits it completely; "Fautrier ne s'est pas senti
de goût pour peindre le bourreau, ne s'en est pas senti le cœur ni l'âme" (OT 30). His refusal of the act of violence as a subject for representation leaves a stillness and silence hanging over the "constat" which permits an ambiguous encounter. Confronted with Fautrier's paintings the observer is as close to the victim as the torturer was, and is hence placed in his position, which urges him to consider and reassess his role. There is a certain subtle genius in the elimination of the aggressors from the pictorial field, for the face to face aspect also permits more easily the suggestion of the canvas as mirror (see the ambiguity of Ponge waking in the morning and rising to see "ma tête d'otage" (OT 28)). Thus both roles are suggested. Standing before the canvas and simply looking, we are at once potential executioner and victim ("Tandis que la victime, la victime, ah! je sais bien que j'aurais pu l'être" (OT 30)). It is obvious that the most common reaction is one of sympathy with the victim and incomprehension of the torturer from whom we dissociate ourselves ("Ni vous, monsieur (cher amateur), ni moi ne sommes des sauvages" (OT 23)), but there is still a hint of accusation, a nudge to responsibility; "nous vivons en pleine sauvagerie... N'en sommes-nous pas complices?" It is of course true that in the case of the hostages who were murdered the issue of moral responsibility was by no means black and white since the killings were a direct result of Resistance activity.

Significantly the act of aggression is often omitted from poems about the hostages, which dwell only on what the executioners left behind them. Ponge compares this tendency to classical antecedents, to the representations of Christ in the Middle Ages or the Renaissance which rarely showed the actual nailing of Christ to the cross. Fautrier's work is similar in emphasis to the Piéta, the "descentes de croix" of Michelangelo, representing the martyr after the event. Again this is a refusal of the easy option which gives graphic renderings of torture "afin de ne laisser
aucun doute sur l'origine, la cause, la responsabilité de ces défigurations" (OT 30) and which is exemplified by Ponge's contemporary point of comparison, the album Vaincre. This collection of twelve lithographs on the theme of the Resistance published clandestinely in June 1944 by the Front national des arts contained dramatic renderings of scenes of torture and fiercely satirical analysis of the Occupying forces. Titles include Toujours appliqués au mal, Interrogatoire, Auschwitz, A mort la bête, Judas, and Scène vécue. Ponge's implicit criticism of these "gestes... attitudes théâtrales" (OT 26), all of which are absent from Fautrier's work, is consistent with his affirmation of the value of indirectness; "il peut y avoir" he states earlier in the essay "plus de délectation (et moins d'efficace) dans la dénonciation de l'horrer comme telle, dans sa représentation horrifique, purement réaliste (?) que dans la tentative de transformer l'horrer en beauté" (OT 11). The concern of these painters (all of them Resistance fighters) to link their art to present preoccupations was perfectly legitimate, but the results of their endeavour are merely grotesque.

Here the artist's efforts begin where the torture ended, creating the future without the Nazis. Ponge cites as the most common reaction the desire to annihilate, to abolish the executioners, and in a sense this is what Fautrier does. Ponge too cleans the slate of them in 'Baptême funèbre' for although it is the actual shooting which is relived textually, this is largely to stress the weight of responsibility incumbent upon the writer, and the perpetrators of the crime are merely guns, any specific human agent being conspicuous by its absence. This may also account for the impact of Picasso's Guernica or Le Charnier as compared to his later Massacre en Corée; "Enfin, quand il n'y a peinture que des victimes, l'on peut y voir une volonté de glorification, de ferveur expiatoire, ou seulement de sollicitude, de soins, de parure" (OT 13).
Remembrance, solidarity, guilt, human sympathy, outrage, a desire for beauty, "Je pense qu'il peut y avoir un peu de tout cela en Fautrier" (OT 13).

In 1944, George Limbour makes some speculations which unwittingly throw an interesting light on Fautrier's achievements. He suggests that "Peut-être nous montrera-t-on dans les mois à venir des tableaux et des dessins représentant les scènes monstrueuses de la guerre". He also outlines the substantial problems this presents for a painter: "Néanmoins la peinture moderne, si détachée de la réalité, si hostile au sujet, ne semble pas bien apte à de telles transcriptions, où le contenu littéraire risque de prendre plus d'importance que la recherche plastique". It is more appropriate for the artist to retire to his atelier, claims Limbour, to remain "en dehors du champ des souffrances humaines" and to occupy himself not with concentration camps, scenes of devastation or the poignant expression of human faces, but with purely pictorial problems. He goes on to suggest, however, that art also needs to reflect the torments and aspirations of its epoch and predicts that even at the risk of "une certaine impureté", there will emerge some attempts to deal with recent atrocities. He predicts also that these will be drawings and gravures, more eloquent in such cases than oil paintings.

It has already been suggested that one of the most fundamental problems facing creators during the war, and particularly artists, was the manner in which this episode could be integrated into the pattern of their creative development without either arresting or forcing compromises in their quest for style and form. The necessity for accessible forms of communication became more pressing, but could an artist really provide this without compromising his artistic integrity and merely producing representational documents? Are the demands made by art itself and by this kind of subject ultimately reconcilable? Is purely formal
research irrelevant in the circumstances of war? The problem of style is voiced succinctly by Sartre in his 1961 essay on Lapoujade, ‘Le Peintre sans privilèges’, where he contrasts the respective potential of realism and of abstraction. In attempting to respond artistically to the evil men do to their fellows, one is stuck between two alternatives, neither of them satisfactory; “trahir la peinture sans grand profit pour la Morale ou, si l'œuvre, en dépit de tout, paraissait belle, trahir pour la Beauté la colère ou la peine des hommes. Trahison partout”. Without beauty the work of art merely contributes to the ugliness of the world and in such a subject representational veracity does a disservice to art by the “Spectacle insoutenable [...] qui met le spectateur en fuite” (again the lithographs in Vaincre could be said to be a case in point). Perhaps the truest form of progress is to see both types of resistance - resistance against social atrocities and resistance against the restraints and limitations of the artist's medium - as fundamentally interrelated and interacting. The ideal would be to achieve a balance wherein painting, in fighting for the freedom to submit itself only to its own laws, is also serving a direct social end. Sartre regards this as a happy chance, a "coup de dés miraculeux", and it is instructive to view Fautrier's developing language in his Otages series in the light of Sartre's comments on the outstanding brilliance of Picasso's Guernica. This memorial painting belonging to Picasso's apocalyptic, emblematic phase of the Thirties records the martyrdom of a defenceless Spanish town destroyed by German and Italian planes for the fascist forces of General Franco. It offers the ultimate in scorching accusation, yet retains a calm formal beauty. This has clear similarities to Ponge's comments about the combinatory aspect of Fautrier's work. To Sartre, Picasso's revolution in form corresponded perfectly with “la désintégration des hommes par leurs propres bombes”. The carnage did not interrupt Picasso's artistic quest with
imperious demands for some alternative form of expression, but slotted itself naturally into that quest, the social protest and artistic progress advancing each other so that “un procédé d'investigation devenait le sens singulier d'une révolte et la dénonciation d'un massacre”. The painting thus illustrates the often unrecognised fact that both artistic and social changes are products of the same forces. It is tempting to suggest that Fautrier achieves a similar 'miracle' and to site him and Picasso (seen very much as a pair, if antithetical, throughout Ponge's Otages piece) as two landmarks in the expression of atrocity. Ponge's essay ends, in fact, on such a note:

Le hurlement de l'Espagne martyrisée avait été exprimé plastiquement par la toile illustre de Picasso, Guernica. Huit ans après, voici Les Otages: l'horreur et la beauté mêlées dans le constat" (OT 42).

**Fautrier at work**

In 'My Creative Method' (December 1947 - April 1948) Ponge declares himself gratified by the request he has received to explain not his works or a particular work, but his creative method." The implication is that there exists no more successful way of explaining what he meant by a particular text than repeating that text as it stands. To resort to other words is to say something different, and to ignore the infinitely more fascinating topic provided by the process of creation. Equally, before the hostages' faces Ponge dare not speak of their expressions "par crainte d'interprétation" (OT 26), and with Fautrier in general he adopts the same approach: "Ce que Fautrier a exprimé par sa peinture ne peut être exprimé autrement. Comment pourrait-on tourner la difficulté?" (OT 32). This is achieved by providing an invigorating study of the artist at work, and
having participated in Ponge's own struggle with atrocity, we are now guided through Fautrier's. In each case the effort and the intensity are stressed, and the metaphor of creation as a violent combat introduced in Ponge's prologue permeates every aspect of Fautrier's creative act, which is composed of conflicts on various levels. These dramatisations of expression are consistent with a theatrical metaphor which may also be detected in Ponge's text. The divisions of this essay actually suggest a classical dramatic format, with five acts each offering a fresh development, the whole preceded by a dramatic prologue and culminating in an 'act' of a particularly exciting nature. The words "tragédie", "tragique" recur frequently, and Fautrier's work is referred to as a "spectacle". He also offers the combination of "horreur" and "beauté" in classical order and harmony, like Titian, turning a massacre into a ballet. His art is ruled by a kind of bienséance; the act of violence takes place offstage and we are made to feel terror and pity for the tragic hero ("Tandis que la victime, la victime, ah! je sais très bien que j'aurais pu l'être" (OT 30)). Ponge's later reliance on Racine as a near equivalent to Fautrier reveals that like the dramatist, Fautrier "se limite tout naturellement [...] mettant lui-même un frein à la fureur de ses flots" (FFB 144); both have "pêtri l'ombre et la lumière, le clair et l'obscur, la chair et l'âme, la boue et les émaux"; both offer the peculiar intensity of the "catastase" and the catharsis in one (FBS 356). Such a comparison encourages us to go beyond the static nature of the finished painting and view it instead in terms of a dramatic process. In fact, Ponge turns the tables in this essay, suggesting that it is drama which enforces the spectator to be static, whereas in Fautrier's case "chaque toile vous attire, vous amène à elle, provoque en vous un mouvement, vous incite à une action virile" (OT 36).
The significance Ponge attributes to the effort of the artist cannot be overstated. It provides the climax of this piece and occupies the whole of the last section, hence indicating even by its positioning that the radical and courageous departure of Fautrier's technique from anything preceding it is what Ponge sees as the heart of his importance. It is also notable that Ponge continues to explore and confirm his own creative stance by comparing it with Fautrier's methods, methods "sans repentirs" which tally nicely with his developing emphasis on the spoken word and the inclusive note book. As has been suggested, however, the mise en abyme whereby Ponge explores his own text at the same time and in the same terms as the subject elected is less prominent here than in other essays. There is a degree of self-referentiality, but adéquation is applied more consistently to the Fautrier / Otages relationship than to the Ponge / Fautrier comparison. The emphasis on process in the case of the hostages takes on a new dimension, since Ponge clearly feels obliged to use it as a cathartic element. On the one hand he is tempted to celebrate Fautrier's technique per se, independently of the subject matter. Fautrier's striking surface qualities and rough brushwork make him a suitable subject for what we might call the 'graphological' and the 'culinary' theories of non-objective art, and Ponge occasionally appears tempted to explore the textures and colours of the paint itself rather than the way in which it is used to refer to the hostages. Fautrier's paintings "sont de la peinture. Voilà ce qu'on peut dire. Puisqu'on ne peut pas dire qu'ils soient de chair. Ils n'imitent pas la chair" (OT 32). A series of reflexive verbs liberates the material and grants it an autonomous existence "La peinture sort du tube, elle s'étale par endroits, ailleurs elle se masse; le dessin se trace, s'informe; chacun de son côté, chacun pour sa part" (OT 32). Ponge even contemplates praise of the matter itself, "du blanc de zinc sortant du tube [...] du pastel écrasé dans
l'enduit [...] de l'huile colorée" (OT 32-3). On the other hand, however, he endeavours to link Fautrier's method and rich matter to the hostages, which cannot be ignored or lightly treated, thus maintaining his two points of reference at once. The approach he will adopt is already hinted at in the 1944 text 'Fautrier à la Vallée-aux-Loups'. Here Ponge comments that, for his larger works, the artist uses up to fifty tubes of white paint for his base. He begins by using this fact to bind Fautrier's work to its subject: "Qu'on m'en croie, j'exagère à peine. Il y a presque autant de peinture sur la toile que de chair comporte un visage". His following comment moves away from the hostages to the floral imagery he repeatedly uses in his works on Fautrier: "En tout cas, plus que de pétages un gros bouquet de roses de Noël" (FVL 22).

Despite such beauty, Fautrier's creative act as described by Ponge is characterised by intensity, by violence, rage and suffering on several levels. Fautrier begins with no dictatorial conception which will enslave the elements of his painting, but liberates himself and them by abandoning all the footholds of orthodox art, obeying the force of an internal stimulus, and the imperious demands of this particular external stimulus: "Fautrier connaît tant de contraintes intérieures: il a affaire à une telle exigence (d'une part), d'autre part à tant de scrupules intérieurs, qu'il n'a nul besoin de s'en imposer d'extériorus. Sa passion lui suffit" (OT 35). The vocabulary of compulsion, of "La rage de l'expression" (OT 31), is frequent here as in much of Ponge's work. A "nécassité", a "commande" is obeyed. Fautrier is "emporté [...] emporté", the act of creation is primitive and frenzied, and the autonomy granted to the matter highlights not only the struggle to create a new object and a new genre, but also the struggle between the painter and the elements of his craft in the process.

Violence in the creative response is not only metaphorical, as becomes clear with this detailed analysis
of Fautrier's physically energetic method. His activity is furious and brief, following much premeditation and in describing this process, Ponge shifts the emphasis from the torture of the artist by the subject to the attack on the materials. The artist's "coups de pinceau", his physical slicing or pasting of the warm, plastery pâte with his weapon (eigicantly a knife) and his scouring of deep gouges into its surface, seem to be an attempt to repeat, in cathartic fashion, a process of victimisation, not merely through the energy of response but also through the dismemberment of orthodox artistic modes and rules — an essential element in Ponge's creative enterprise too (see, for example, the very early statement of a desire to "défigurer un peu ce beau langage" (TP 9)). The brutality of Fautrier's gestures is emphasised in the description of the rough paste covered in "pastel écrasé" (OT 33), the "gros traits, violemment coloriés" (OT 32), or the tubes of white paint which are "saisis, exprimés, transportés sur la toile" (OT 34-35). New materials are used and old materials have their usual functions beaten out of them as the painter enjoys / endures the simultaneous position of bourreau / victime.

There is deliberate adéquation between Fautrier's creative method and the calculated acts of torture perpetrated during the Occupation — similarities which bind the two activities more and more closely. After much preparation, Ponge says, "l'exécutio doit être rapide et intense" (OT 34). As if for a shooting, Fautrier rises before dawn, and significantly, the almost sculptural hautes pâtes reminiscent in their surface texture only of Chardin's croûtes, remain as raw as the open wound of memory; "Pour certaines parties [...] elle mettra jusqu'à un an pour sécher" (OT 35). Shortly before this, Ponge speaks of the russet red of clotted blood, the texture which appears sticky and matted (presumably these symbolic elements belong to the earlier stages of the series), and emphasises the
strange materiality of the human body. The hostages are portrayed as astonished victims of their own frail physicality as "Chaque face s'offusque de son propre sang", "venu de l'intérieur" (OT 28). Fautrier's technique makes it appear as if the fluid were issuing forth from, rather than applied upon, the pictorial surface. Due to the thickness of their paint layers, Fautrier's paintings "tendent à s'éloigner de plus en plus du tableau et à se rapprocher d'autre chose" (OT 33). The departure from the idea of a 'tableau', the physicality of Fautrier's method and the "épaisseur de la pâte" result in art objects which are half way between sculptures and paintings, the haut relief taking on a strong, disquieting physical presence whose forceful assault on the observer adds further fuel to the constantly smouldering metaphor of the face to face encounter. As with Braque, Ponge detects a reversal; things seem to push forward out of the canvas and the observer is no longer looking into a receding perspective, but his patterns of vision are contradicted, his right to dominate challenged. The essential point of the present comparison is, however, the direct and brutal assault which is achieved by Fautrier, as opposed to the quieter, more sobre and reconciliatory achievement of Braque. Ponge has close affinities with both, but it is significant that at this period of time he should be championing Fautrier and his more aggressive techniques.

The role of bourreau is continued in the effect of the work on the observer. Paulhan witnesses to the inescapable feeling of being attacked by Fautrier's paintings, and in the later 'Nouvelles notes sur Fautrier crayonnées hâtivement depuis sa mort', the various sufferings of artist, material and spectator are synthesised by Ponge; "Patte de velours, et tout à coup, les griffes; il y aura (il y a eu) sensation aigue, minces sillons ou ruisselets de sang, puis caillots, mottes, croûtes en relief et enfin, après plusieurs jours, cicatrices ton sur ton; stigmates" (NN 256). Even the relationship between the pictorial
elements is, Ponge suggests, stamped with the seal of combat; the link between contour, texture and colour becomes a fight for dominance. Fautrier rejected total abstraction, and except in his 1928 series of lithographs for Danté's Inferno—a project which never came to fruition—he never followed Monet or Turner in eliminating outlines. Instead he retains a tension between total annihilation and form, having dismembered and granted almost complete autonomy to each element so that it may live its own competitive life within the arena of the canvas. The rough black line which is there "pour cerner la tête, comme un lacet dérisoire" (OT 39) is in turn "rongé, retenu, caché" (OT 40) and the relics of conventional signs keep the observer at a point of tension with their gnawed away reminders of an obsolete representationalism.

Significantly, Fautrier's new mixture of materials is described as having greater "résistance" than ordinary oils (the word is used incidentally, but nonetheless carries weight), and the technique is seen in terms of a magical, mysterious process. Part of the formula involves "un enduit spécial, brillant", and the idea of heat ("appliqué à chaud [...] cet enduit encore chaud" (OT 34)) is exciting, having implications both of metamorphosis, and of the fire in which Fautrier the martyr burns in a later essay of L'Atelier contemporain. Himself a sacrificial flame, the painter illuminates the path for others, burns that they may conserve their own heat—"En quelque façon, il flambait et se sacrifiait à notre place" (NN 262)—blazing in a passion which eventually consumes him in an "ultime flambée" of self sacrifice. It is, then, with a vigour totally characteristic of Ponge that Fautrier's method is described, and in one of the most powerfully original attempts to grasp the painter's particular quality, the emphasis is again placed on his primitive nature. Fautrier, who has "sa façon bien à lui d'être fauve", combines in his paintings a mélange of the
scatological, the violent and the lyrical, producing beauty from excrement:

Autre chose: Fautrier est un chat qui fait dans la braise.
Il a sa façon bien à lui d'être fauve. Une des façons les plus caractéristiques des fauves. Leur façon d'excréments : en mortier pâteux, adhésif. Et par là-dessus, par l'application de leurs griffes sur la cendre, par un peu de terre, un peu de cendres (puis ils faillent), leur façon ainsi de recouvrir rituellement l'excrément.

Tout se passe comme si Fautrier après s'être, dans ses précédentes toiles, débarrassé du côté peaux de lapins, sangliers, fleurs de chardon, forêts de Port-Cros, peluches, fourrures et œil de braise du grand fauve félin, en était venu et demeuré dès lors à son côté excrément, manière des petits ou gros tas de mortier blancâtre (à cause de la manie contractée d'expression du tube de couleurs, d'expulsion de la couleur hors du tube) avec la nécessité de recouvrir, de cacher, de bénir ces excréments de quelques traits rapides de cendre ou de poussière. De recouvrir la couleur, la matière par un genre de dessin pour masquer cette trace. Pour enfouir sa trace. Qu'on perde la piste. Que l'odeur ne se puisse plus trop flairer. Et c'est alors tantôt citrons, tantôt couteaux ou poissons ou visages. Selon ce qu'il ingurgita ? Ou selon le dessin, le signe dont il recouvre maniaquement l'excrément, toujours le même excrément (dont l'épaisseur, la présence doit rester fort sensible)" (OT 37).

This unsophisticated, basic act of painting is a sequel to the Picasso / Fautrier antithesis developed by Ponge in the previous paragraph. Picasso's masculine energy and forthright methods of attack are described by a string of forceful epithets: "masculin, léonin, solaire, membre viril, érection, ligne se dressant, généreux, rugissant, offensif, s'exteriorisant, conduisant à l'attaque". Fautrier's characterisation answers these features point for point with their opposites. Fautrier is seen as feminine and feline, "miaulant [...] Appelant chez lui, à son intérieur. Pour vous griffer?". Since cats are independent, wild, yet also refined and, on the surface, apparently domesticated, they account nicely for Fautrier's contradictions. His painting is mysterious and nocturnal, "lunaire [...] étalé en flaques, marécageux", and his method of attack, "attirant, se retirant (après tentative de provocation)", is more subtle than Picasso's. Developing the notion of feline
habits in Fautrier, Ponge describes the texture and rough appearance of his thick pâte, the powder he covers it with, and the traces he scratches in it, in terms of a primitive ritual. The painter's material is described as excrement, and Ponge links him to Lord Auch, "défini depuis L'Histoire de l'Oeil comme celui qui confond le sperme et l'urine, la production et la déjection" (OT 38). To compare the act of painting with a bodily function is poles apart from what is commonly admitted as art, and as a metaphor for Fautrier's work it is appropriate on several scores. Firstly, after the thirties, Fautrier removed his canvas from his easel and began to work horizontally like an enameller, bearing down, as it were, on his surface. Then there is the texture of his thickly laden size paint - the "mortier", a mixture of lime and sand used as the basis for frescos (in Ponge's earlier text 'Le Crottin', he remarks that "les crottes du chien ou du chat" have a "consistence de mortier pâteux" (Pièces 49)). Its application is also accounted for by this metaphor, since the paint is squeezed onto the warm surface directly from the tube. In 'Les écuries d'Augias' (1929), an important variation on this idea of painting with excrement, Ponge stresses the nature of his own herculean task of transforming a dead and digested language. Comparing Paris to the Augian stables, he proposes not to clean them, but to turn the base, waste matter to artistic use (TP 175). Here the metaphor is used rather to render the instinctive necessity to paint, the "rage de l'expression" which Ponge shares, as urgent as a physiological need, "une telle nécessité, une telle exigence, si peu reconnu esthétiquement jusqu'à lui, jusqu'à moi" (OT 38).

The scatological metaphor for Fautrier's new application of materials is further complicated by the following 'burial' ritual of clawing ashes, earth or dust over the excrement. This is Ponge's reference to Fautrier's method of sprinkling his canvas with ground pastel, which becomes incorporated in the heated coating. Ponge speaks of
this as a "nécessité", and stress on the covering process accounts nicely for the tension between representationalism and abstraction in Fautrier, particularly in the subject of the hostages. It also applies to Ponge's apparent dilemma over how directly and how often he should refer to the hostages, and to what extent it is permissible for him to point beyond them by concentrating on Fautrier's style. The excrement must not be left uncovered ("Qu'on perde la piste", "Que l'odeur ne se puisse trop flairer") yet neither must it be entirely hidden under "le dessin, le signe dont il recouvre maniaquement l'excrément". The "épaisseur", the "présence" of the excrement "doit rester fort sensible". The verbs "recouvrir", "cacher", "bénir" suggest not only the ritual burial but also the attitude towards this. Fautrier's commemoration of the hostages is an artistic replacement of the funeral ceremony.

Following this description, Ponge moves from the scatalogical to the sacred claiming that through the development of his unique creative process, through his images of faces "réduits à leur plus simple expression", Fautrier has achieved a series of primitive, insistent drum beats - a note, a hieroglyph, an ideogram. "LefEJ d'Otages: sigle" (OT 39). This powerfully emotive 'acronym' at once offers a rough representation of human faces, contains the O and T of Otages, and, according to Ponge, is a modern-day replacement of the crucifix, "aussi imposant et aussi bien trouvé que simplement le signe de la croix. C'est autre chose parce qu'il y a l'espèce de lacet qui entoure la croix, et qui signifie aussi le drame de l'amputation des hommes". 'Fautrier à la Vallée-aux-Loups' shows Ponge struggling to seek a word "pour remplacer après peinture le mot religieuse qui s'en rapproche trop volontiers" (FVL 21). He appears to have found no more apt substitute, affirming here that "Il s'agit de tableaux religieux, d'une exposition d'art religieux" (OT 29) and that Fautrier's "sigle" is a
uni-versally relevant symbol for human suffering wherein "le fusillé remplace le crucifié" (OT 29).

The hostages' mutilated faces are, then, kept powerfully before the reader by Ponge's metaphorical allusions. The titles of the works - Otage, Tête d'otage, Grande tête tragique - also root the otherwise often unidentifiable visual stimulus in the concrete reality of a firm point de départ. Finally, there is the paradoxical success of the Informel on a representational basis, the emotively symbolic nature of the beginning of the series, and the final ambiguously beautiful paintings both offering, through direct evocation or precisely because there is little relation to the normal appearance of human flesh, powerful expressions of mutilation. The fact that the paintings are to be taken not in isolation but as a series also allows metaphorical interpretation through number and anonymity, Fautrier's typical method of serial production working as a powerful metaphor of the serial killings. Ponge's guidance of the reader in this text, the studied integration of his comments on Fautrier's work with reminders of the hostages, subtly provide an appropriate and approachable reading of these difficult paintings. On the one hand, Fautrier's paint is linked to flowers rather than to flesh, and he is praised for his release of matter from representational demands. On the other hand Ponge speaks of the red paint, "un atroce brouillard roux de sang" (OT 28) being "poisseux", and of the thin layer of crushed pastel covering the base being "plus mince encore qu'épidermique" (OT 35), hence recuperating the work on a representational level by soaking every feature of Fautrier's painting with metaphorical reminders of the hostages themselves.

It is, then, inevitably through a kind of compromise that Ponge attempts to make Fautrier acceptable to a public which may not have been interested in making the imaginative leap between atrocity and beauty. There is no doubt that Ponge's presentation of Fautrier's creative method is
bridging any potential gap between the idea of the hostages and the final work of art, influencing and guiding the appreciation of readers who might otherwise be baffled and frustrated by the newness of Fautrier's work.

**Beyond the hostages**

It is tempting to conclude that in the final analysis the most important aspect of 'Note sur les Otages' is not any emphasis on 'engaged' art, but on Fautrier's revolutionary form. The essay's latter section is a tribute to the painter's essential courage, breaking with what Ponge refers to pejoratively as "les charmes confirmés et habituels" and producing works whose primitive mark of extreme clumsiness brings them "proches de la laideur congénitale au matériau employé" (OT 38). Pointing to the limitations of the codes with which we receive and make our meaning, Ponge returns to a favourite subject; the arbitrary systems by which our understanding is structured. Negro, Arab, Chinese and Hindu music is music, even if our ears are so ill attuned to it that we experience it as mere noise, and our response to Fautrier may be similar since the painter "accorde un nouvel instrument" - not a recognisable instrument, but a "boîte d'harmonie", a "casserole" (OT 38). Ponge emphasises the moving spectacle of human effort "rien de plus touchant que cela", and presents Fautrier as a lonely hero, a martyr, having "refusé de plus en plus de choses [...] réduit au minimum la concession à la peinture traditionnelle" and finding himself "seul avec son idée et ses couleurs et ses pinceaux" (OT 40-41).

At the end of his essay, however, Ponge continues the work of comparison which has helped him to characterise Fautrier throughout, detecting in the painter's most strikingly original and radical departure the powerful evocation of certain predecessors:
Il est méritoire en ce moment, au moment du triomphe de Picasso (Ingres) d'avoir le courage de faire penser à Turner, à Ziem, à Carrière, à Monet. De Giotto ou Raphael, de nous ramener au Corrège, à Guardi. D'aller à l'extrême de cette tendance.

Qu'on y songe: c'était la seule réaction possible (OT 41).

This point, undeveloped by Ponge in his final, condensed observations, requires elucidation. The groupings of artists, headed by Picasso and Fautrier respectively, deliberately point to two opposite visions. The first group stand for a more austere, architectural type of painting. They share classic realist tendencies, control, and a geometric approach to the structural elements of painting which is deeply rooted in the French tradition. Picasso absorbed lessons from Giotto's archaic simplicity, emphasis on clear form and static composition. In Cubism, he echoes Raphael's classicist idealism, capturing the 'essential' reality distilled from Nature, while Ingres' systematic mind, logical construction and sobriety find a modern counterpart in Picasso's neo-classical paintings with their formal coolness and linear clarity. All these artists exaggerate formal density; all manifest scrupulously ordered artistic experiences. Their world has solidarity and balance, their images are tranquil, sublime and clear, their form pure and precise. This group has more to do with control and with formal definition than with feeling, and it is perhaps the group we would expect Ponge to espouse above all.

The second group stand not for precise form, but rather for a blurred, impressionistic vision and reliance on more lyrical, imaginative qualities. All are essentially colourists for whom the material consistency of things is less important than atmospheric effects. All lay stress on the pictorial surface, on the analysis of colour and matter for their own sake. Turner's billowing storm clouds and waves, his extraordinary intensity of colour, his near denial of the motif, the great freedom with which he used his paints - all these features have clear relations to
Fautrier. Equally, this group are not concerned with logic but with the confusion and obscurity of reality; Fautrier combines Francisco de Guardi’s intimate, lyrical poetry of dreams with Turner’s darker vision of the frailty and ephemerality of mankind in the face of destructive phenomena. His love of matter, exquisite colour and elegance go hand in hand with his anguish and consciousness of sin. All these painters work by fleeting allusions, ellipses and the creation of an enigmatic, emotional atmosphere.

Why, though, should it be seen as praiseworthy to go to the extreme tendency of a Turner at this period and to turn away from Picasso, the universally acknowledged master? One reason is that war has the unfortunate effect of checking artistic experiment and encouraging conservatism. It is therefore commendable that such a powerfully original mode of expression should flourish in the midst of oppression, that Fautrier should string a new instrument bearing no relation to anything played in the popular artistic orchestra of his century. French art during the War was largely dominated by energies inherited from the Fauve and Cubist generation, and the attention devoted to the 'giants' of the Ecole de Paris made it particularly difficult to distinguish the worth of painters who, like Fautrier, belonged to what is referred to as the 'middle generation'. It is true to say that Picasso’s decision to remain in Paris during the Occupation was an act of courage and an important symbol for other artists, since his work had already been condemned as l’entarte KUNST, degenerate art, and the risks that he may be taken hostage or deported were clear. Picasso’s works which reflect this period are undeniably powerful and tragic, but his genius was officially accepted, his capacity to disturb diminished, and Cubism was by this stage a somewhat over-prolonged success story. Part of the problem lay in the natural attempt to resist the infiltration of German art and culture, and the most obvious method of protest was to turn to the great painters already
loved by the French, to Picasso, Matisse and Cézanne, rather than to new and unknown artists. Fautrier's attraction for Ponge, however, is clearly that he represents a totally new kind of expressive authenticity. His achievement in the Otages, his resuscitation of the great painting of the past with its rich matter and exquisite colour, is doubly courageous in Ponge's eyes since it takes place against all the odds. On the one hand the motif of corpses, torture and horror would appear to disallow such methods, and on the other Fautrier's style reveals a startlingly confident disregard for the artistic currents which immediately preceded it. The Informel, the glorification of pure matter or gesture on which Ponge sets so much store in this essay, may in fact be said to have taken effect not through Cubism, but rather against it, and through a need to break with the immediate past. What Ponge is particularly happy to celebrate is the plastic proof that a new generation had emerged, however foreign or provocative its production may have appeared and however much persuasion may have been needed to ensure that such works were accepted. This is why Ponge attempts to bridge the gap between Fautrier and his audience with the encouraging suggestion "C'est toute une sorte, une famille de sentiments nouveaux que Fautrier vous propose", and with the affirmation that shock and even displeasure are important and positive first reactions to the work: "il faut déplaire d'abord pour plaire plus sûrement ensuite", "Enfoncez-vous bien cela dans la tête. Résistance bon signe" (OT 39).

Ponge's instincts about the important repercussions of this new art proved to be accurate, as did his predictions concerning public reactions. Immediately after the post-war period, Fautrier's Otages were all but forgotten, despite the efforts of passionate supporters such as Ponge, Malraux and Paulhan. Fautrier was criticised for monotony, for being too elliptical or for bordering on annihilation, and Ponge later refers to "l'incompréhension chronique" from which he
suffered (NH 10). In retrospect it seems obvious why the problems of Fautrier's pictorial innovation could not be considered per se in 1945 when they were naturally overshadowed and distorted by the harrowing and all too recent theme of tortured French hostages. When these paintings and their artist were rediscovered, however, they were rediscovered for precisely the reasons Ponge had praised Fautrier at the time of his post-war emergence. History was to confirm Ponge's affirmation that the Otages represented the first step towards a new kind of painting, the Informel, which dominated the next decade and was prevalent also in American Abstract Expressionists such as Pollock and De Kooning whose achievements Fautrier anticipated. In 1955, ten years after the original Otages exhibition, Fautrier reappeared at the Galerie Rive Droite with his Objets exhibition, a collection of simple images of familiar objects - an ink pot, a basket, a box - painted as if they were projects for such objects which did not yet exist. This exhibition, prefaced by Jean Paulhan, brought its artist some success. Finally, in 1956 with the exhibition of the Nus and Partisans at the Galerie Rive Droite, Fautrier achieved commercial success and a greater degree of popularity and went on to take the 1960 prize at the Biennale de Venise four years before his death.

Ponge's achievement in his 'Texte sur les Otages' is a double one for the essay reveals both his willingness to rise to the occasion in the case of the most formidable subjects and his clear sightedness as a critic who was eager to support the most extremely innovative vision to emerge from this tormented period. In his following text, divorced from the painful and difficult question of the hostages, Ponge's approach is more relaxed and confident. Unpreoccupied by the necessity to act as mediator between a great painter and a reactionary public, he is at liberty to enjoy the complexities of his own medium to the full.
From the Hostages to the Nudes

Fautrier is presented to us in 'Note sur les Otages' as a troubling and complex painter who provides "toute une sorte, une famille de sentiments nouveaux [...] qui vont du ravissement d'oeil à l'horreur, à l'épouvante d'oeil" (OT 32). For the Otages his inspiration was unspeakable brutality, but the following series of paintings takes us to the opposite pole in which the inspiration is Beauty, and Ponge's second text on Fautrier is a preface for the painter's successful 1956 exhibition of Nus at the Galerie Rive Droite in Paris.

In this series of paintings, dated between 1945 and 1955, one might therefore expect to pass from the atrocity of the Otages to their antithesis: a celebration of Beauty in its purest artistic form, the naked female body. The nudes are, however, more complex than this simple transition suggests, for all Fautrier's work is disquieting and threatened by a sense of tragedy. Much of it is also, paradoxically, elegant, sensual and beautiful. The grotesque inspiration shared with Soutine is not totally absent in the case of the nudes, nor is this a departure from Fautrier's Rimballdian side, his "appel aux fantasmagories", his "angoisse" and "Sentiment du péché". In 'Note sur les Otages', Ponge makes a glancing reference to Bataille, and it is not out of place to mention the darker side of this writer's complex eroticism here, linked as it is to horror, infamy and sacrilege. Beauty for Bataille is a deceptive mask, inducing a desire to soil and attack it. His formula "L'amour a l'odeur de la mort" is appropriate to Fautrier, as are the intensity and richness of life and of erotic energy, the "joie fulminante" he refers to and combines with anguish in L'Histoire de l'oeil. Ponge's general comments in the eight pieces on Fautrier reveal that in all his paintings "L'humanité de Fautrier est gênée, gênante" (OT
15), and that in the case of the nudes as well as that of the hostages, his particular brand of beauty is dissociated from "les charmes confirmés et habituels" (OT 38): "Allez voir Fautrier: cela vous produira un effet certain. "Quel beau jour!..." et tout à coup, c'est la tragédie, la douleur, les coliques, les affres morales, le vide et le vertige, la révulsion, la mort" (NN 257).

Fautrier's brand of eroticism, his sensuality, is defined in other texts and compared with Racine's darker side. Painter and dramatist alike have "Descendus plusieurs fois tous les deux dans l'enfer des passions"; both are "passionnés de femmes", and "familiers des Déités cruelles mais là même hantés par l'idée de la Beauté Adolescente..." (FBS 356). If Fautrier's painting is sensual, then it is violently sensual. In a later essay Ponge speaks of "ces accents, qui tiennent du toucher (voire de la déchirure, de l'entaille) érotique" in the drawings of nudes (FBS 354), and all his writing on Fautrier takes account of this uneasy blend. The closing description of the Otages is "l'horreur et la beauté mêlées dans le constat" (OT 42), and here Ponge has to deal with "la beauté et l'horreur" combined in the same way and still producing contradictory feelings.

To clarify this, it is useful to look at some points of overlap. It was suggested that the Otages were often indistinguishable from some of the nudes, affording an uncomfortable beauty and drawing the spectator towards a kind of sensual pleasure, almost unwholesome in the context and irreconcilable with the frisson of horror aroused by torture. (It is in fact of the hostages, not of the nudes, that Jean Paulhan wrote "Voilà qui est trop beau [...] pour être honnête... On croirait un étalage de soieries"). Since certain nudes and hostages are interchangeable, these paintings could almost be viewed as one series, with a blurred transition point from the later Otages to the early Nus. In what way, then, are the nudes uncomfortable? What do they have in common with the hostages? Firstly, like the
hostages, they are less portraits of people than recreations of states of flesh. Paulhan describes this aspect of both the nudes and the hostages with reference to Lautréamont: "Qui ne songerait devant les Otages ou les Nus à Maldoror; 'Cette femme a vu ses os se creuser de blessures, ses membres se confondre dans l'unité de la coagulation, et son corps présenter l'apparence d'un seul tout homogène'". Here the flesh is robust, not decaying, but it is still distorted beneath the powder pinks and blues with their suggestion of pretty, frilly underwear. The nudes, like the hostages, remain a mixture of violence, eroticism and tenderness.

From Fautrier's early representational drawings such as the 1924 Nu au bordel, the nudes become, like the hostages' faces, progressively abstract, "réduites à leur plus simple expression" (OT 40). As with the hostages, there is no anecdotal content, no portraiture, no representation of specific individuals or specifically erotic acts. The body is never represented in its entirety, but certain focal points take over as powerful emblems. The sculptures, small cast iron nudes, are often merely sections of the female form reduced to its most essential areas. Faces, legs, arms are avoided; these are not part of the hieroglyphs of womanhood. Just as the hostages are represented solely by their heads, their most significant features, so these are constituted principally of gigantic, multiple breasts, buttocks and curvaceous folds of flesh condensed into the centre of the painting in an endless reiteration of roundness which Ponge will repeat in his text. This lush curvature takes the place of the "sigle" Fautrier discovered for his hostages, the broken circle stamped with a cross. Here the head is studiously omitted thus constituting a deliberate disembemberment and depersonalisation. The nudes, like the hostages, are anonymous and interchangeable; they are representations of vulnerability, exposure and exploitation.

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A general glance at the nude in painting helps to put Fautrier's nudes into context. Paintings of female nudes have commonly been more than just academic exercises, even when they are disguised as such. They are also self-indulgent projections of male fantasy. Titian's Venus d'Urbino, all of Rubens' rolling flesh, Boucher's sprawling Miss O'Murphy, worthy of a centrefold pin-up, Ingres' orgiastic study of flesh in Le Bain turc, Renoir's plump and impossibly sugary Baigneuses, Matisse's highly erotic drawings, Picasso's splayed female forms, whose multiple breasts and orifices are all visible and turned towards the spectator; all of these women are male creations, represented by men, for men, and according to the type of female shape and attitude men like to see. Could we suggest, then, that the woman is also a hostage, a hostage of male fantasy?

In his study of the nude, Kenneth Clark makes the distinction between the nude and the naked, the latter implying unacceptable embarrassment while the former refers simply to an accepted artistic convention. This distinction between two perspectives on the unclothed female body has been the cause of a certain uneasiness and revealed a dichotomy between the distance afforded in classical studies and the obvious erotic enjoyment of flesh. This was boldly brought out in the open as an issue by Manet with the challenging gaze of his Olympia, perhaps the first nude who knows her own mind, and who deviates from the pattern of conventional postures, unashamedly announcing her eroticism. Fautrier too knows exactly what he is doing. His paintings ignore any traditional formats or conventional postures, any hint of the nudes' so called sacred nature, any pretext of using it as a symbol for anything other than itself. There is no reminder of the nude as a classical art form or as a study of human 'architecture' (a term to which Ponge refers in the text). There is no Venus, no Madonna or Diana; there are no woodland springs or bosky groves; there is no
idealisation or elimination of the defects of flesh under a waxen or marble texture; there is no tasteful (if enticing) drapery; most of all, there is no dishonesty or glossing over of the facts but a frank rapprochement of the nude towards the sexual act, the contortions of sexual pleasure which generally go unrepresented. His women are not nude, but exaggeratedly naked. Although at first sight they may seem disturbingly redolent of the excitement of a peep show, reducing a woman to her erogenous zones the better to satisfy male fantasy, the global, conventional title he gives them is deliberately ironic. Their individual titles — Nylon, Pour mes mains, Les Seins nus, Baby, Guilli guilli — are not bowdlerised, but fetishistic and unpleasant. This is not to say that Fautrier's nudes are self-indulgent. Like the hostage paintings, they are a protest, a violent reaction against the hypocrisy which introduces eroticism into a painting, but denies its presence and protests that the woman's body is merely a pretext for expressing beauty. Together, then, we could say that the hostages and the nudes represent the pornography of war and the brutality of pornography.

How, then, does Ponge go about the task of introducing us to Fautrier's nudes? The first point is that 'Paroles à propos des Nus de Fautrier' gives us no help in approaching the issues raised above and involves no open discussion of Fautrier's work. It is, on the contrary, one of Ponge's most gleeful and luxurious resolves to bathe in the rich matter of his text and an obvious refusal to tackle art or the artist directly. Frequent glances outside the essay are therefore essential if we are to approach a fuller interpretation. Despite Ponge's general feeling that "les adjectifs, les mots ne conviennent pas à Fautrier" (OT 32), the luxury of ellipsis was impossible in a subject as serious as the hostages to which he devotes a diffuse, but comprehensive and comprehensible piece of writing. In 'Note sur les Otages' speech was avowedly difficult, a problem
which, we were told, holds good for "les sujets trop ravissants ou trop atroces" (OT 8), but the opportunity offered by the nudes is far less challenging for a writer whose erotic tendencies have already been given frequent expression. Ponge's speechlessness here is of a different kind, for it is voluntary. If, as is often suggested, Fautrier's painting revolves around that which is hidden and which eludes logic, then Ponge's non discursive, atemporal and reiterative work on the nudes complies with this feature. His very method of writing here revolves around the hidden, the taboo, and bluntly refuses to provide clarification. Paulhan states that there is "quelque chose d'assuré et presque d'insolent" in Fautrier's work, and the same may be said of Ponge's rich, playful and erotic text on the nudes; "Texte farci jusqu'à la boursouflure, texte farceur jusqu'à la bouffonnerie". This text parades its materiality ("Paroles plus près [...] de la substance que de l'esprit"), and its unreadability ("Paroles, crevez ainsi comme des bulles, laissant un orifice, un cratère au sommet de votre gonflement muet" (NUS 138)), in a luxury Ponge cannot afford when writing so hesitantly about the delicate matter of the hostages. Here, only the title and the name Fautrier (mentioned once), indicate the text's subject, and although one could say that the feel of them percolates up through the text, there is no commentary on the paintings. Ponge accumulates a series of parentheses, detours and evasions in which Fautrier's nudes are never directly mentioned or described, and where there is no logical sequence of discourse. Instead the theme of the female nude is the starting point for a text of particularly sustained ebullience which gives Ponge ample opportunity to exercise the rich sexual imagery running through his own work.
Eroticism in Ponge

Ponge's voluptuous delight in the sensual pleasures to be derived from the physical world results in his entire output being strewn with latent or overt eroticism. This makes of the nudes an ideal opportunity to offer a concentrated display of some of his most thoroughly developed themes. A brief glance at the different faces of Ponge's eroticism, and at the eroticism he finds in Fautrier, provides important background information for this hermetic text.

While Ponge's texts do occasionally have erotic subjects (for example, 'L'Adolescente', where "On jouit à la gorge des femmes de la rondeur et fermeté d'un fruit: plus bas, de la saveur et jutosité du même" (Pièces 11)) his eroticism is in general an underlying metaphor for his sensual appreciation of the world of objects. Ponge's contact with the external world is an immediate and instinctive infatuation or coup de foudre, inducing a "violent besoin de me baisser vers le sol, de puiser dans l'eau, de fouiller la terre, cueillir les fruits, me heurter aux objets" (SAV 118). All female flesh is "à offrir, à consommer, à caresser, à manger" (Méthodes 95); as Spada puts it, "Comme il entend donner 'la parole à la féminité du Monde', tout l'univers pongien est sexualisé". This is linked to a voluptuous gastronomic joy ("L'univers pongien devient comestible pour être mieux possédé et savouré") through which Ponge aspires to the possession and appropriation of the objects he courts, thus sharing in their particular, intimate virtues and enriching them in turn. To capture nature in writing is to conquer it, if necessary with violence; "Ecrire, c'est vaincre les choses, leur faire toucher le sol des deux épaules, nécessité d'autant plus impérieuse que l'agressivité s'éprouve comme réciproque - les choses 'ont bondi, arrachant l'oreille de Van Gogh'. L'étrointe [...] ne distingue pas l'affrontement
It is in the very same terms that Ponge describes Fautrier's possession of the object: "Il était nanti de la frénésie chasseresse du feu, qui, ayant bondi sur sa proie, s'y love ensuite, à genoux sur elle, l'embrassant, l'enjambant de ses quatre membres" (NN 254).

Most importantly in Ponge, it is not any specific subject which is erotic, but the act of writing or of painting itself. Ponge shares the by now common Freudian notion of writing as copulation and in conversation with Philippe Sollers he speaks of "l'ardeur qui vient du fond [...] L'Bros qui fait écrire" (EPS 73), describing the irrepresible desire for expression as "quelque chose de quasi physiologique, biologique, qui par exemple, dans l'acte sexuel, oblige l'homme à remplir sa fonction, qui est une fonction de régénération" (EPS 171). Pleasure is linked to the process and not to the finished product. For Ponge as well as for Barthes, writing is "la science des jouissances du langage, son Kamasutra", the only proper treatise of this "science" being "l'écriture elle-même". The enjoyment of writing is, then, assimilated to specifically sexual enjoyment and Ponge, along with Racine and Fautrier is revealed "à l'œuvre, jouant et jouissant en maîtres de l'épaisseur sémantique et charnelle du langage par chacun choisi" (PBS 356). Ponge's physical appreciation of the materials and the act of writing means that for him all writing is profoundly erotic, irrespective of its subject. It is in this sense that he referred even to Descartes' Discours de la Méthode as an erotic text.

The pen and the ink are seen as extensions of Ponge's own body (he describes the factory chimney as a pen and a penis (Pièces 122)) and it is only through the act of writing that the object concerned can be fecundated. At the end of his poem on the sun, Ponge promises, "J'y enfoncerai mon porte-plume et t'inonderai de mon encre opaline par le côté droit" (Pièces 165). Ponge's account of literary
pleasure is strewn with the vocabulary of physical, not intellectual enjoyment ("jouir", "jaillir", "satisfaction"). The slow courtship revealed through all the stages of his text reaches its summit in the Objeu, and Ponge defines this, the literary orgasm resulting from the coupling of words and objects, as the moment when "La Vérité [...] jubile"; "C'est l'afflux des speratozoides dans la fente féminine ouverte et accueillante, en état de rut, en état de vide" (PM 244).

Fautrier's intense involvement in the act of painting is also physical. It is an act in which "le corps tout entier - c'est-à-dire (n'est-ce pas?) Body and Soul - se trouve impliqué; dans une présence, une proximité - plus qu'une proximité - inéluctable" (FBS 354). The description of his technique is dynamic and aggressive (particularly in 'Nouvelles notes') and a strange contrast with the surface prettiness of the finished works. Ponge points to a fundamental characteristic of Fautrier as "L'énergie dans la volupté" (NN 252), and shares his impetuous "rage de l'expression", as certain titles ('Prénésie de détails', 'Note hâtive', 'Bloc fougueusement équarri') deliberately suggest. The violence and ruthlessness of Fautrier's creative act, in which "L'exécution devra être rapide et intense" (OT 34) was shown to be 'equivalent' to the hostage killings. It may also be seen as proportionate to the heat and ruthlessness of a certain type of sexual possession. A dose of brutality is required for this artist to achieve his desired ends. Fautrier rids his subject of superfluity not with the painter's brush or with the knife Ponge mentions in the Otages text, but with a whip; "la nuance particulière de l'ensemble" is "dégorgée par le fouet qui chasse tout le reste", thus arriving at "la différence enfin, voulue avec passion, aimée et satisfaite, amenée à sa jubilation maxima" (NN 252). The same image of inflicted violence accounts for Fautrier's revolutionary use of paint: "Scandaleux, cinglant, Fautrier a donné un coup de fouet se lovant entre
les jambes de cette grosse jument paresseuse, la peinture à l'huile" (NN 256). Similarly, in the sexual imagery describing the technique of lithography in 'Matière et mémoire' Ponge comments that it is necessary to treat the lithographic stone harshly "pour lui faire avouer ses désirs, lui faire rendre son maximum" (AC 48).

Pleasure is, however, constantly tempered in Ponge. If he intends to consume his objects, this takes place not through "la goinfrerie et les saouleries des érotomanes" but through gradual, considered and considerate possession. Reason must always accompany pleasure, and indeed is a part of pleasure: "Pas d'illusions: il faut plaire (Jean Racine) et plaire commodément. Sans flatter cependant. Sans laisser d'illusions, quant au sérieux des choses et aux cruautés du destin" (NN 258). Limits and restraint are essential to Ponge's art, in which any extremity or violence of desire give way to calm, and to a harmonious fonctionnement. It is this control which Ponge stresses in all his work on Fautrier, praising the painter's contained fougue, his tight discipline and "formats commodes" (GF 200). If his work takes place in "Un bouillonnement perpétuel", it also takes place, like that of Racine, "dans les strictes limites de l'unité de temps et de lieu" (FBS 356) and "sans débordement hors de la casserole" (NN 264). His expressions are "paroxysantes, mais jusqu'au spasme résolutoires" (NN 255): "Fautrier était, à nos côtés, debout, maigre et tordu en torche, comme une flamme, toujours naturellement alimentée, souvent à son paroxysme. Mais, ce qui est admirable, c'est qu'il laisse une série d'œuvres parfaitement circonscrites, bouclées dans leur perfection, où n'apparaît aucun désordre mais, au contraire, une sorte de grâce" (NN 260).

In the mixture of horror and beauty, then, Ponge brings out the latter in Fautrier, stressing the "Beauté Adolescente" above the "enfer des passions". After Fautrier has ravaged his prey, "Ces nids dévastés, ces foyers
assouplis du saccage et de la dévoration (de la peinture) vont faire nos délices (pâtisserie de l'avenue de Villiers) pendant des siècles" (NN 254). Ponge's Fautrier is a powerful antidote to more sombre interpretations of the painter's work which stress his tragic and pitiful side. As Marcel Spada comments when comparing manifestations of the erotic impulse in Ponge and Bataille, "La sombre ardeur dialectique du prophète de l'Eros noir" is replaced in Ponge with "un Eros de la jubilation et surtout un Eros géniteur".60

It is an effort for Ponge to stress this aspect of Fautrier's work in the case of the hostages; to insist that Fautrier produces jouissance not "à propos de la souffrance", but "d'une harmonie de couleurs [...] d'un accord de couleurs et de lignes (de formes) qui correspond à quelque constante du goùt" (OT 10). In following texts, however, Ponge returns more easily to his own elected Fautrier, a Fautrier who refuses to dwell on death, but chooses the power of reproduction and perpetuation, and whose eroticism is, despite its darker side, jubilant rather than morbid.

**Paroles À propos des Nus de Fautrier**

The paradigms around which Ponge's elliptical essay is built - in particular paradigms of water and flower imagery - have a long history in his work, and it is through tracing this history that their appropriateness to Fautrier's nudes becomes clear. Firstly, however, here is a rough description of the text's method and 'plot'.

The first part of Ponge's text on the nudes is dense and hermetic, taking place 'under the rose' ("Sous le sceau de la rose, motus" (NUS 137)) pledging itself to secrecy and
yielding little other information beyond this pledge. The brief opening paragraphs prepare the reader for what is to come. Firstly a typically dense introductory phrase, which is then followed by a clearer explanation of the type of expression Ponge has elected:

Voici donc les métamorphoses aperçues dans le bassin d'une source, plutôt bourge cachée d'ailleurs.

Paroles à propos de Fautrier, comme notre naturel d'ailleurs nous y porte, tout ce qui se pouvait d'intelligent ayant été dit, nous nous rapprocherons de là bétesse (NUS 137).

The first paragraph would appear, ironically, to be envisaging the nude as a baigneuse in a conventional bosky grove, but the tableau is developed no further. Breaking down the initial phrase, we see that it carries early suggestions of the recurring image groups mentioned above: water imagery ("le bassin d'une source") and floral imagery ("bourge cachée" suggests "bourgeon", a bud), natural elements which Ponge consistently puts to erotic use. It is self-referential since it incorporates not only the idea of metamorphosis, but an example of it ("bourge cachée"), and of the fluid nature of words here, the anagrams and echoes of which Ponge makes full use. The inclusion of "cachée" begins the running play on notions of the hidden and the revealed. The "source" of this essay (Fautrier) is largely concealed under the flow of Ponge's prose; we are afforded only dim and brief glimpses, evocative suggestions of a veiled erotic subject. Ponge's text moves in waves not towards, but over the "bassin d'une source", and each wave "montre à quitter la place où surgit la sorge agitation de sa promesse" (NUS 137). The juxtaposition of "montrer" and "quitter" here is one of several instances in which the reader is presented with closure signals before anything has been directly revealed. The play on the word "source" is used in a similar manner ("Mais quelle source, nous dira-t-on? [...] Quelle source? Motus" (NUS 137)) the word "Motus"
(mots tus) pointing to the text's unspoken centre. The patterns suggesting metamorphosis and concealment do apply, obscurely, to Fautrier's non representational nudes as well as to this text itself ("Voici" holds this twofold reference together) although that is scant information to hold on to in a critical introduction.

The second paragraph promises an insubstantial and playful text. Ponge's particular brand of "bêtise" here results from the rules of adéquation which, as usual, demand obedience to Fautrier's own expression and particularly, in this case, to his ellipses. Despite his effervescence, Fautrier is the painter who has "refusé de plus en plus de choses", "réduit au minimum la concession à la peinture traditionnelle" (OT 40). Ponge praises his "ellipses grandioses et gracieuses" (GF 199), "ellipses avantageuses" (NN 260), and explains "Il nous semble, sans nous expliquer pourquoi, qu'il s'agisse d'un manque - mais alors bien sûr, d'un manque de manques, d'une absence d'éléments diminuants" (NN 262).

Ponge has described in his more accessible passages on Fautrier the type of plenitude, the lavish yet evasive style which the painter appears to require: "Quelque chose nous oblige, parlant de lui, à l'hyperbole"; "Bref, nous voici réduits à une sorte de silence hyperbolique: ce qui ressemble beaucoup à de sa peinture" (NN 262). Thus the "déchirure" and the "entaille érotique" Ponge detects in the drawings of nudes (FBS 354) apply also to his own text where the feminine "Paroles" burst like bubbles to leave an orifice, constantly fissuring the text. Their opening is described here as "Encore une métaphore pour le rut du corps féminin" (NUS 138).

This section is succeeded by a series of images appropriate to the sinuous shapes of Fautrier's nudes: "les sentiers de campagne autour d'une contrescarpe"; "les circonvallations sinueuses autour d'une forteresse à la Vauban"; "l'océan" which, like "la méduse" "fait [...] une
révérence extatique à tous ses bords" (NUS 138). These all contribute to the semes of circularity on which the text is based, not only in its recurring images but also in the persistent recurrence of the letter 'O', remarkably frequent throughout, both within other words and, unusually for Ponge, independently from them as an exclamation. More importantly, all are images for a confluence of words towards an unspoken, unattainable centre: a fortification, a fortress, the depths of the ocean. The last of these images is again an example of Ponge's persistent refusals to attack the nub of his text:

Voici, ma Conchita, aux lèvres de ta conque, c'est-à-dire à l'endroit où nos vagues déferlent, une belle occasion d'en finir.

The above gives way to a brief succession of playful self-referential images in which the "Paroles à propos des Nus de Fautrier" are addressed or described directly, giving indications as to the text's nature and function. "Paroles, crevez ainsi comme des bulles"; "Paroles plus près de la fleur que du signe"; "Et vous, Paroles, dans de beaux draps"; "O Paroles, draps neufs pour la postérité" (NUS 138). Ponge's playful "dans de beaux draps" (in a fine mess) is in keeping with the text's deliberate confusion and with its erotic theme. Between these 'sheets', several acts of copulation take place: copulation between painting and writing ("Peinture, te voici donc à la noce") between all the merged erotic themes, between this and other texts (including those of other writers which provide the essay with its sumptuous cultural evocations, and those of Ponge, since certain paragraphs here are enfants d'un autre lit).

The next section is one of unashamed and unannounced pilfering. It involves, in rich combination, images of flowers, of the ocean, and of religious architecture (the Sistine Chapel mentioned here will shortly be followed up with a scandalously erotic description of Notre-Dame). The whole of Ponge's text is an unpolished collage of incomplete
and juxtaposed fragments; unacknowledged alexandrines from Malherbe and morsels of Baudelaire are fluidly woven into and swallowed up by the prose, along with quotations from Ponge's flower poems, water poems, and from his previous text on Fautrier. This central section in particular is an opulent confluence of quotations, and the "mosaiques romaines" mentioned here are a mise en abyme of Ponge's technique, for which he congratulates himself: "une forte imagination reconstructive nous permet [...] de fondre ensemble les souvenirs de notre érudition" (NUS 139).

The quotations from Malherbe's Pièces à Alcandre and Sonnet à Caliste are introduced by and interspersed with comments from Ponge:

Ah quelle sourcilleuse rose! Quelle source, nous dira-t-on?
Que d'épines, amour, accompagnent tes roses!
Ceints d'épines, nous avouerons que voici l'Eros du XXe siècle.
Le baume est dans sa bouche et les roses dehors.
Nous reconnaissons ton image, ô Beauté, dans le visage du vieil Océan, cerclé d'ondes concentriques à ses rides, dans les mosaiques romaines.

Beauté, mon beau souci de qui l'âme incertaine a, comme l'océan, son flux et son reflux, songez à vous résoudre à soulager ma peine où je vais me résoudre à ne le souffrir plus (NUS 139).

The second and fourth lines and the whole of the last paragraph (in which the alexandrines are combined into a single prose paragraph) are lifted from Malherbe. Ponge returns to the 'source' which is in question throughout the text, which gives "sourcilleuse" (haughty) and which takes us once again, via water imagery, to the idea of a hidden source. Here this refers not only to Fautrier's nudes but also to the various unacknowledged quotations from diverse sources, and it is left to the reader to deduce which passages belong to Ponge and which are derived from another source. The lines from Malherbe add reinforcement to the text's association of Beauty with flowers and with the ocean. Their main thrust is to suggest an amorous quest thwarted by the inaccessibility, the thorniness of its
target, and as such they provide a metaphor for the reader's activity. The reference to a Twentieth century Eros leads Ponge to the following, which incorporates a sumptuous quotation from Baudelaire's *L'Idéal*:

Voici donc les peintures de voûte d'une Sixtine consacrée à l'Eros de notre temps.

Anges lourds, anges radieux, portez mon âme au fond des cieux, ou plutôt écrasez-la contre ces voûtes, peintes des images de la géante qui tord paisiblement dans une pose étrange ses appâts faconnés aux bouches des Titans (*NUS* 139).

This is the closest Ponge ever gets to a direct description of the appearance, mood and effect of Fautrier's nudes. Interestingly, Baudelaire's poem is not fully exploited as a mode of enchâinement, since its appropriateness extends to a shared reference to Michelangelo ("Ou bien toi, grande Nuit, fille de Michel-Ange / Qui tors paisiblement ...etc"). A continual artistic cross-reference for Fautrier in Ponge's texts, Michelangelo naturally recurs here, his name expanding and opening into a formula for Fautrier's nudes: "O magnolia michelangiolesque" (*NUS* 139). The formula suggests magnificence, and contains the 'M' and 'O' which recur in the text. "Magnolia" enlaces 'manier' and 'lia', referring to Ponge's manipulation of words and cross references; "les chaînes de signifiants en expansion et en folie, en rut pour ainsi dire". "Michelangiolesque" contains the 'anges' of the Sistine Chapel, and follows on from the "Anges lourds, anges radieux" which have just been mentioned. This in turn gives rise to Ponge's poem on the magnolia (*Pièces* 51), quoted almost in its entirety and juxtaposed with a paragraph borrowed from his 'La Parole étouffée sous les Roses' (*Pièces* 126). The significance of Ponge's flower imagery will be discussed shortly.

Following the quotations from Ponge's flower poems, the text's final development drifts from the ocean to the Seine, and to the body of Notre-Dame ("nous savons bien que le nu est aussi une architecture" (*NUS* 140)). This is the final
substitution to which Ponge resorts in a text where the nude is never described as a nude, but tangentially, via images of fluid, of flowers, and of architecture, in a "Lasso des signifiants lancés à l'assaut des tableaux". We have seen that Ponge's text is an orgy of cross references bringing together numerous quotations in an erotic embrace, an atemporal merging between tradition and modernity. Like the painter, he irreverently breaks-up the former, tampering with it to make it appropriate for a text about Fautrier—about "l'Eros de notre temps". The nude is in fact not an architecture, not a mere study of form obeying a geometric scheme, but if convention chooses to describe it as such, then architecture may equally be described as a nude. Here in his most irreverent passage, rather than referring to the nude with veneration, Ponge refers to the sacred with full blown eroticism. He borrows terminology from religious architecture ("les piliers", "les ogives", "la rosace", "l'arcature", "le parvis", "l'abside") to describe one of the most revered ladies of France, Notre-Dame, anthropomorphically, as a nude; an animated female form succumbing to specifically designated female pleasures, and providing "encore une métaphore pour le rut du corps féminin":

Nous savons que le nu est aussi une architecture, mais nous connaissons le moment où l'orgue intérieur faisant tressaillir les piliers, et se bander les arcatures, les ogives s'entrouvrent, par où s'écoule le flot nuptial.

Scandale, la publicité Jésus ou Vénus?  
Non, le véritable scandale, c'est ta cathédrale, ô Jésus !  
Sous les tétons du ciel s'encorbelant aux deux tours, je ne sais quelle étreinte, autour de la rosace du nombril, soulève ces dernières, jusqu'à la troublante arcature de la gaine, entre les piliers.  
Voilà ce que tu laisses voir du parvis, Notre-Dame de Paris, tandis que vers ton abside, cambreée comme les reins d'une chatte, les marinsiers d'amont, à mains pleines, guident leur timon (NUS 140-1).
The atmosphere of hush and concealment prevalent throughout this oracular text, which is unusually strewn with exclamation marks, incantations and sighs ("O Bouches, os, oris, oracles, orifices"; "O Paroles"; "Ah quelle sourcilleuse rose!") is redolent of religious ecstasy, but contains a series of deliberate substitutions whereby eroticism replaces religion, Eros replaces Christ, and the virtue of 'Our Lady', the Virgin and Holy Mother (transformed here into Venus) is seriously compromised. This concluding combination of religious and erotic imagery is prepared for by mention of Michelangelo and the "Anges" of the Sistine Chapel, and by the statement that Fautrier's nudes are "les peintures de voûte d'une Sixtine consacrée à l'Eros de notre temps". It is also prepared for by Ponge's flower imagery. Ponge's erotic rose, no longer the allegorical emblem of innocent beauty, leads to suggestions of a crown of thorns in which Eros replaces Christ ("Ceints d'épines, nous avouerons que voici l'Eros du XXe siècle"), and also eventually to the Rose Window, the "rosace" of Notre-Dame. The description of the Cathedral provides another opportunity for Ponge to repeat the lush curvature of Fautrier's nudes; from the "nombril" of the circular Rose Window, to the "tétons" of the domed roof, and the apse, "cambrée comme les reins d'une chatte". The breast-like dome is, like the flower, a "gonflement": like the flower, it is made to open ("les ogives s'entrouvrent") to become, instead, the "tréfonds féminin".

This section is a humorously sensual, irreverent rebellion from a writer who properly belongs to a pre-Christian era. It is similar in tone and effect to the description of Ponge's horse in its stable: a "pontif! un pape qui montrerait d'abord, à tout venant, un splendide derrière de courtisane" (Pièces 129). Ponge states at the start of his previous text on Germaine Richier, written in the same year as the text on Fautrier's nudes, "La Nature, en français, est du féminin. (Et notez que ce féminin est
une bonne chose, car il nous permet de l'aimer; tandis que nous ne pouvons guère aimer Dieu, ce masculin; d'ailleurs trop évidemment une conception de l'homme") (AC 131). Thus religious ecstasy is replaced by sexual ecstasy: the pope becomes a "courtisane", and Notre-Dame, the house of God, becomes worthy of worship only through its transformation into a fecund and sensual female.

It is in the same spirit that Ponge deforms the sacred name of Jesus, forcing it to incorporate the letter 'O' which brings it, phonetically, closer to Eros, and wryly reduces it to the level of publicité, since Jesus is a brand name for a range of bras. (The reference to undergarments is continued with the "arcature de la gaine" mentioned later, the "gaine" being both an architectural term and a girdle). This perpetuates the rife profanities in Ponge's text, pilfering and breaking-up the artistically sacred, and introducing an erotic fissure into the religiously sacred. Michelangelo's name is fissured, Jesus' name is fissured, and the Holy Virgin is seen in the throes of erotic pleasure. Finally, the simultaneous inclusion and refusal of Jesus may have another function. Formentelli points out that Christ represents the intermediary par excellence, the "figure même de l'intercession". We have seen, however, that the figure of intermediary between his reader and the subject of his text is a position flouted by Ponge. Refusal of Christ may perhaps be equated with Ponge's own obstinate refusal to act as intermediary in this text. In any case, the text's closing image is a final reference to the reader's search for meaning and the bargemen from upstream, navigating the Seine (just as we navigate Ponge's fluid text) are significantly moving away from the "source".

To summarise, here is a critical text which, far from homing in on the paintings in question, deliberately disperses its energies. Ponge's comments do not attempt to approach the text's 'centre' (Fautrier's paintings), but radiate outwards towards other texts, in a rather
uninformative manner. It is fair to say that in any encounter with intertextuality, particularly of such a blatant nature, the reader feels entitled to expect clues or answers from the intertexts. Intertexts often work as hidden keys which, when detected, can justify apparently gratuitous developments, or elements which appear inexplicable and incompatible with their context. The intertext lends substance and depth, helping the whole to hang together and supplying connections which are not in the text itself. Here Ponge's weave of cross reference is used to propel his text forward, but there are no 'answers' provided by the intertexts and they cannot properly be said to supply his mosaique with a coherent structure. They simply serve to augment the basic reiterative pattern.

Before concluding, it is worth following Ponge's technique by making some of our own excursions into other texts; namely Ponge's own texts whose imagery or form may be said to feed this attempt to reproduce Fautrier's brand of eroticism.

**Flowers, water and soap**

"Paroles plus près de la fleur que du signe et de la substance que de l'esprit"

In his 'Note sur les Otages', Ponge informs us that "Avec Fautrier la "Beauté" revient" (OT 41), but the abstract "Beauté", a "sujet trop ravissant", is not easy to define. In Fautrier's case, Ponge generally turns to the flower for an image of Beauty. Thus the faces of the hostages are "si beaux, peints de couleurs si charmantes, si harmonieuses, si pareilles à la carnation rose, bleu, jaune, orange ou viride des fleurs" (OT 21). Fautrier's thick paint "affecte le plus souvent l'apparence de pétales superposés" (OT 33), and the contours of the flower provide an image of
Fautrier's contained fury, his transposition of violence into calm beauty: "Gêne et rage éclatent en bouquet suave" (OT 41). This is further developed in the later 'Fautrier d'un seul bloc fougueusement équarri': "Le flacon de la beauté a été, une fois de plus, débouché. Le pot aux roses de la beauté, découvert. Tout cela est de l'ordre de l'épanouissement, avec vaillance, vigueur et grâce; et se limite tout naturellement, donnant l'impression d'une nécessité à la fois satisfaite et contenue" (FFE 144).

With the Nudes, the floral imagery present in other texts on Fautrier reaches its summit, and the metaphor of the flower as encapsulating the essence of Beauty recurs. As in the case of Ponge's water imagery here, the floral imagery is based around other of Ponge's flower poems. 'Le Magnolia' is reproduced in its entirety, and juxtaposed with a paragraph plucked from 'La Parole étouffée sous les Roses'. These are presented without commentary on their appropriateness, and Ponge typically turns to the description of these substitute objects for Fautrier's painting with some relief:


Disons plutôt la bouleversante floraison nocturne (elle se reproduit tous les soirs) du magnolia féminin (NUS 139).

The ensuing description of the magnolia's opening includes gastronomic, visual, olfactory and tactile pleasures in a "comble de satisfaction" which is further developed in the paragraph from Ponge's poem on the rose. Like Fautrier's nudes, flowers evoke all the pleasures afforded by the female form and its lavish drapery rolled into one:

Une chair mélangée à ses robes, comme toute pétrie de satin: voilà la substance des fleurs.

Chacune à la fois robe et cuisse, sein et corsage aussi bien qu'on peut tenir entre deux doigts - enfin ! et manière pour telle: approcher, éloigner de sa narine, saisir, disposer, regarder, entr'ouvrir, délaisser et reprendre" (NUS 140).
A glance at Ponge's floral subjects outlines the appropriateness of their appearance here. The flower is not a particularly common subject for Ponge; absent from *Le Parti pris des choses*, yet dominating the first part of *La Rage de l'expression*, both its beauty and the extravagant rhetoric it generates are exploited to describe the nudes. Ponge's textual copulation with the flower is described in *'Le Magnolia'* (Pièces 51), *'Le Mimosa'* (TP 305), *'L'Oeillet'* (TP 289), *'La Parole étouffée sous les Roses'* (Pièces 126), *'Le Lilas'* (Pièces 119). These make clear that the flower is, for Ponge, the female par excellence. In touching the flower, the latent eroticism in his other work surfaces and is sustained. Of the mimosa, Ponge comments that as a child this flower of "extrême sensibilité* (TP 308), "glorieux et doux, caressant, sensible, tendre" (TP 310), marked his early awareness of sensuality; "Seul de toutes il me passionnait. Je doute si ce ne serait pas par le mimosa qu'a été éveillée ma sensualité, si elle ne s'est pas éveillée aux soleils du mimosa. Sur les ondes puissantes de son parfum je flottais, extasié" (TP 308). Their perfume is not described as delicate, but as a "parfum prodigieux" (TP 311), "ce violent parfum, presque animal, par quoi il semble que la fleur s'extravase" (TP 322).

Ponge is in general concerned not with the whole plant but with the bloom alone, the luxurious movement of the flower as it opens, the smells it exudes, the sensuous textures. Descriptions are a mixture of violence and tenderness, and are generally ecstatic and hyperbolic. The equation of the flower and the female form is clear in the poem on roses, whose opening makes Ponge's unabashed erotic enjoyment evident: "C'est trop d'appeler une fille Rose, car c'est la vouloir toujours nue ou en robe de bal, quand, parfumée par plusieurs danses, radieuse, émue, humide elle rougit, perlante, les joues en feu sous les lustres de cristal" (Pièces 126). The opening of flowers under the heat of the sun is described as a form of self-expression; a
voluntary erotic display of tender debauchery. The sun "les pénètre, les déshabille, les incite à se dénuder, puis les fait gonfler, bander, éclater; jouir, germer; faner, défaillir, et mourir" (Pièces 148). In response to this the rose "entr'ouvre les lèvres" (Pièces 127), the carnation, emerging from its "gland souple de feuilles" "Se déboutonne" (TP 299) in a luxurious display of petals which are, in all the flower poems, irresistible reminders of underwear. The magnolia's petals are "fraîche et satinée" (Pièces 51); the carnation displays a "luxe merveilleux du linge", "Satin humide satin cru"; "A les voir [on éprouve le plaisir] qu'on éprouve à voir la culotte, déchirée à belles dents, d'une fille jeune qui soigne son linge" (TP 295). The opening of flowers is described in orgiastic terms, each bloom of the mimosa, for example, arriving "Au paroxysme de sa propre jouissance" (TP 314). The opening of the magnolia used in this text is no less erotic, although slow and voluptuous; the magnolia "éclate au ralenti", and "à son épanouissement total, c'est un comble de satisfaction" (Pièces 51).

The flower as an image for Fautrier's painting has an extra dimension here, and permits Ponge to be more elliptical. It is chosen not only as an image for the substance of Fautrier's nudes, the paint surface, but also as an image for the substance and development of Ponge's own text, "Paroles plus près de la fleur que du signe". As has been stated it is not just the appearance of the flower but its opening, its development, which is brought into play. This 'paroxysm' of the flowers upon which Ponge dwells leads, through adéquation, to textual ecstasy and explosion; as he comments in the text on the nudes, "Il ne s'agit que de bouillonner et d'exploser selon un langage" (NUS 138). Here, encountering perhaps "des sujets trop ravissants", the sheer surplus of beauty ("C'est trop déjà qu'une rose, comme plusieurs assiettes devant le même convive superposées" (Pièces 126)) means that words need special manipulation, a fact which his title for the rose poem, 'La Parole étouffée
sous les Roses', accounts for. The erotically swollen flesh of a flower is an image for the expansion of a word, and our sensual appreciation of its rich and seductive substance. The rhetoric typically demanded by flowers is one of verbal profusion, of "efflorvescence et proconfusion" (Pièces 120), in which verbal overload and explosion is de rigueur. Again, take 'La Parole étouffée sous les Roses': "Oh l'infatuation des hélicoidogabalesques pétulves!" (Pièces 126). Here the extravagant "hélicoidogabalesques" suggests — along with the notion of the flower's spiral form which begins the word — 'coit', 'galbe', 'ballet', and 'arabesque'. "Pétulves" incorporates at once 'pétale' and 'vulve'. It is clear, then, that floral profusion and confusion leads to a similar performance from words, to a rich and bold display whose effusiveness encourages the playful breaking of rules. It also leads, however, to a perfectly contained work, again consistent with Fautrier's contained violence: "elle est violente (quoique bien tassée, assemblée dans des limites raisonnables)" (TP 294).

"Une source plutôt bourgeoise"

The water imagery, perhaps initially suggested by the wave-like curvature of Fautrier's paintings of nudes, is also a mise en abyme; a metaphor for the drifting signifiants and fluid movement of the text. It appears in the text on nudes in various forms, from the "Océan" (eau céans) and the "Mer" (mère), to the Seine and ultimately to the "flot nuptial" of the text's final paragraphs, fluid in its most erotic form.

Fluid is hard to describe, as is shown in 'De l'eau' (TP 68) and in 'Bords de mer' (TP 64), from which Ponge quotes directly here. It is a difficult challenge for a poet concerned with form. Of water, Ponge writes, "elle m'échappe, échappe à toute définition, mais laisse dans mon

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esprit et sur ce papier des traces, des taches informes" (TP 70). His attempts in the two water poems of Le Parti pris des choses involve the endowment of undifferentiated and ungraspable matter with form. Here he returns to water, an evasive subject, deliberately to disperse form. The reference to a hidden "source" is consistent with the secrecy of Ponge's water poems: "la qualité plus secrète" of water is "la saveur". The ocean "garde au fond de sa cuvette à demeure son infinie possession de courants" and is 'unreadable': "ce livre au fond n'a été lu" (TP 66-67). The hidden source means that only the peripheral waves generated by this centre offer themselves for description, which is therefore a description taking place in the absence of its intended subject: as Ponge comments of the sea, "à ses propres bords celle-ci semblera toujours absente" (TP 66). This text, like the sea, is "le profond et copieusement habité lieu commun de la matière liquide" (TP 66). Like water, it is "Joueuse" (TP 70).

In 'Bords de mer' Ponge describes the ocean thus:

Elle ne sort
jamais de ses bornes qu'un peu, met elle même un frein
à la fureur de ses flots, et comme la méduse qu'elle
abandonne aux pêcheurs pour image réduite ou échantillon d'elle-même, fait seulement une révérence extatique par tous ses bords (TP 66).

The presence of this poem in the text on Fautrier's nudes is appropriate for several reasons. Firstly, for its suggestion of contained fury (which is, in addition, described through a reference to Fautrier's literary equivalent, Racine). Secondly for its evasiveness, and thirdly for its graceful behaviour: the fureur contained in a "révérence extatique" is completely appropriate to Fautrier. It is clear in this text that the ocean is assimilated to the essence of Beauty: "Beauté [...] de qui l'Ame incertaine a, comme l'océan, son flux et son reflux"; "Nous reconnaissions ton image, à Beauté, dans le visage du vieil Océan, cerclée d'ondes
concentriques à ses rides, dans les mosaïques romaines" (NUS 139). The poem on the sea also involves a degree of erotic imagery; the sea is a "muscle énergique" (TP 65), a horizontal penetrated by the powerful verticals of the rock which "y plonge obliquement" (TP 64). Here the concentric expansion of waves so important in 'Bords de Mer' is repeated in Ponge's second reference to fluid:

Constatons-le : chaque onde, ici, en premier lieu sourcille, et montre à quitter la place où surgit la sourde agitation de sa promesse, une lenteur extrême dans l'assentiment (NUS 135).

This movement repeats that of the opening of flowers in a "gonflement muet" (NUS 138) whilst also describing, as has been suggested, the text's teasing but seductive recalcitrance. It also leads on to further images: that of the méduse borrowed from 'Bords de mer', and of the deliberately erotic conch shell which also repeats the shape of the waves, and which also forbids further exploration. If this wave-like shape is repeated in Fautrier's paintings and is a recurring paradigm in Ponge's text, it is because repetition is the 'rhetoric' proper to the ocean which "se répète flot par flot". Each word the ocean utters is described as a repeated, brief "parole" which expires at once, and tells us little about the heart of the ocean.

"Mille homonymes seigneurs ainsi sont admis le même jour à la présentation par la mer prolixe et prolifique en offres labiales à chacun de ses bords" (TP 65).

"Paroles crevez ainsi comme des bulles"

In his text on Malherbe Ponge defines "les paroles" (as opposed to "les mots") as insubstantial, a sort of residue: "Les paroles, ce sont évidemment la fumée, résidu du corps-du-désir qui a brûlé" (PN 182). In 'Caprices de la parole', he takes this further, commenting on how "J'avais compté
d'abord beaucoup sur les mots. Jusqu'à ce qu'une espèce de corps me sembla sortir plutôt de leurs lacunes. Celui-là, lorsque je l'eus reconnu, je le portai au jour" (TP 161).

Ponge's notion of the words in this text on Fautrier not as eternal inscription but as bubbles sends us to the dossier on Le Savon which first makes use of this image of verbal ebullience. There Ponge concludes that the "mots" and "figures" used to make his text 'equivalent' to the profusion of bubbles are "les signes et modes élues de la jubilation toute pure elle-même..." (SAV 121), and it is therefore significant that the image should recur in the text on the nudes.

For Ponge, bubbles imply exuberance; "L'emphase, l'enthousiasme, la volubilité" (SAV 23) which are the "principales vertus" (SAV 25) of soap. He describes the soap as an erotic partner, with "un certain enthousiasme à se déperdre, à se livrer" (SAV 35), and which "se donne entièrement, jubile, bafouille, etc. Ses caresses, embrassades, manifestations, paraissent devoir ne jamais finir" (SAV 55). The physical contact is specifically sexual: "Si je m'en frotte les mains, le savon écume, jubile..."; "plus il bave, plus sa rage devient volumineuse et nacrée..." (SAV 17). Significantly, at the end of the text Ponge defines this as an orgasm: "Quant au frottement lui-même, ne serait-ce pas un redoublement, une multiplication de la simple saisie, tout ainsi qu'une caresse, par exemple, doit se répéter, devenir insistantes pour produire tout son effet et aboutir enfin à quelque modification nerveuse, je veux dire à quelque spasme ou orgasme" (SAV 127).

The diaphanous and delicate substance of the bubbles is linked to that of the opening of flowers on which Ponge also relies here (the "lentes explosions à l'extrême ralenti" which he describes in Le Savon (SAV 118-9) repeat the opening of his 'Magnolia', like a bubble in syrup). It is also linked to the delicate colours and the curved forms
used by Fautrier, and to the nature of Ponge's own words.

Ponge speaks of the soap's "voiles, ses robes, ses écharpes de bal" (SAV 24) and the notion of a dance, "ballets de la rage et de l'extase", "Ballets de voiles, d'écharpes flottantes, tournoyantes, tourbillonnantes, se gonflant, retombant, s'enveloppant, se développant" (SAV 118) accounts for the text's liberty of development.

The bubble also forms a link with the water imagery of this text. A bubble is a temporary solidification, a spherical envelope of liquid which "englobe beaucoup d'air" (SAV 23), and which forms "avec l'air et l'eau des grappes explosives de raisins parfumés..." (SAV 17). Air, water and soap "se chevauchent, jouent à sauté-mouton" and the combinations they form are "emphatiques et légères" (SAV 27). Water is thus, in collusion with the soap, permitted to achieve "quelque miraculeux, éclatant, éphémère succès" (SAV 103) in its search for form.

Just as the plump curvature of the nudes and the movement of waves is catered for by the recurrence of the letter 'M' in this text, so the spherical shape and profusion of bubbles is imitated by the profusion of 'O's. 'Paroles à propos des nus de Fautrier' is "un texte qui fait eau / de toutes parts...". Through his lengthy manipulation of linguistic signs, Ponge seeks, in his first two texts on Fautrier, an iconic sign, a "sigle". In both cases the recurrence of 'O' is striking: "Otages", "Oblitérées", "Obnubilées", "Offusquées", followed by "O Paroles", "O magnolia michelangiolesque", "O Bouches, os, oris, oracles, orifices", "onde", "océan", "ogive", "O Jesos". But whereas the 'O' of the Otages was broken with a cross, the sign of suffering revealing how "l'homme anonyme remplace le Christ des tableaux" here it is unbroken, in a figure which is capable of referring to both emptiness and plenitude.

What, then, is the significance of the 'O'? Firstly its shape is consistent with suggestions of female roundness and orifices, with the ocean's "ondes concentriques", with the
Rose Window of Notre Dame (Littré: 'O' se dit d'une ouverture ronde [...] il se dit plus fréquemment de la rose ou fenêtre qui se trouve au-dessus du portail des anciennes églises), in brief with any roundness or any opening. Secondly the linguistic or numerical value of the 'O' must be considered. The 'O' is a vague and hyperbolic exclamation belonging to a lyrical outpouring and as such is a substitute for formulated expression. It has no single meaning but a plethora of meanings. As an utterance, then, it denotes plenitude. As a number it is, on the contrary, not plenitude but emptiness, zero. This too is appropriate, since this text takes place in the absence of Fautrier, having no specific content, but all erotic content. The 'O' is in keeping with the semes of circularity and of absence. In 'Le Soleil placé en abîme' the sun is equated by Ponge with the letter O, and is significantly described not as an object, not in terms of presence, but in terms of absence as "un trou" (Pièces 143). Gerard Farasse sums this up in his description of the letter 'O' as a "hiéroglyphe de l'écriture trouée, criblée, poreuse, sacrifielle, qui recense et dénombre tous les orifices du corps, toutes les limites traversées sans cesse".48

Most importantly for this text, the bubble is the sign of insubstantial and ephemeral rather than durable expression. "La nature même de mon sujet m'autorise à jouir moi-même et à te faire jouer de développements plus volumineux, mais légers et (comme il convient) éphémères" (SAV 33). It is less with the formation of bubbles that Ponge is concerned here than with their bursting, which he commands ("Paroles crevez ainsi comme des bulles"), hence increasing the lack of clarity and the "excès d'ellipse" which Camus criticised upon reading an early draft of Le Savon.47 It is a subject which authorises confusion: "Il y a plus à bafouiller qu'à dire touchant le savon" (SAV 27); "Saturés de notre sujet, pas un mot qui ne se développe en allusions diverses. Nous sommes devenus susceptibles d'une
succession indéfinie de bulles, que nous lâchons comme elles nous viennent" (SAV 103). Furthermore, bubbles prohibit any sustained development. Ponge must proceed "sans trop y toucher" (SAV 103), since "au moindre contact, et même au moindre souffle, ou regard critique" "elles exploseraient" (SAV 104). Therefore, "Les mieux réussies de nos bulles, les seules réussies sont sans doute les moins travaillées" (SAV 103), whilst "Les trop travaillées [...] éclatent et retombent en gouttes d'eau. Et vanité que de vouloir rien en refaire! Il n'y a qu'une seule solution: les remélanger dans la masse liquide, les y perdre sans aucun regret" (SAV 104).

This description accounts perfectly for the surfacing and reabsorption of phrases in the fluid medium of Ponge's text on the nudes. Whereas the text on soap, designed for a radio audience and hence forbidding "des expressions trop denses" (SAV 116), remains light and frothy, the density and complexity of Ponge's bubbles here means that they cannot be sustained, and burst immediately in "ballets de la dissolution". Thus the text, as communication, is a failure: "Il s'agit de défaites, bien sûr, plus encore que de victoires", but the defeats are "particulièrement mousseuses, ravies, pleines de délectation, de pourlèchements, d'enveloppements et développements abusifs - et finalement purificateurs" (SAV 119).

Formation of a bubble demands the presence of certain specific elements: water, air, soap, but not least, the author himself. Since bubbles are derived from the soap only by his activity, it is this activity which is all important. The "noyau central" (SAV 119) of Ponge's poem, then, is the bar of soap. In the text on Fautrier, it is the paintings of nudes. In both the note book and the critical essay, however, "il s'agit d'une création et non plus d'une explication" (SAV 105). What Ponge is concerned with in each case is not the description of the source from which the bubbles originate, but the voluptuous enjoyment of creating a verbal lather.
Fautrier, then, has provided two intense and very distinct challenges to Ponge the still life poet and tentative critic. These texts were chosen because they show Ponge's readiness to deal enthusiastically with subjects and forms of expression which were, at the time of writing, very different from his own. They were also chosen because like our next subject, Giacometti, they are unexpected: the Hostages by virtue of their subject matter, and both Nudes and Hostages by virtue of their painterly method.

The two parts of this chapter illustrate two critical extremes, two faces of Ponge: that of constraint and that of release. The Hostages reveal the Ponge who had sustained losses and lived through the dramatic and atrocious years of the War and Occupation. The essay is an endeavour which gives the lie to his popular image as 'chosiste' in a most resounding manner, and that only one year after Sartre's 1944 'L'Homme et les choses'. The Nudes reveal the Ponge of enigma and indirection, taking adéquation to its extreme limits and showing increased confidence in the liberty with which he approaches the critical function. We could say, in fact, that Ponge's approach in the Nudes is a mise en abyme of his approach to all works of art throughout L'Atelier contemporain since the latter are conspicuously absent, Indiscutables, objects of desire which remain seductive but unseducable and unattainable. Ponge does not debate or apologise for this 'failure' in his work on the Nudes, but actually takes it as a paradigm and builds his text around it. Stylistically, the Nudes show Ponge at his most hermetic and verbally obscure, whilst the Hostages reveal a Ponge at his most comprehensible, verbally lucid and discursive. It is an interesting paradox that the former results from difficulty of expression, and the latter from relative facility.

Finally, not only do we encounter the rather surprising subject of the Hostages, we also find Ponge electing a
painter whose work originates in Expressionism, that painterly mirror of the soul's deepest life, which distorts and exaggerates reality and which has always been the exception in French art, being rather more familiar to the German mind. An irrational genre in which the emotions are paramount, a genre concerned with feeling and mood rather than with the outer world of fact; how can it be that Ponge should devote himself to such a form of expression? One would more naturally link him to analytical Cubist still lifes than to Fautrier's turmoil, which appears, a priori, to run contrary to his frequently illustrated love of precision and formal detail. The exciting feature of this relationship, however, is the fertile middle ground on which poet and painter meet. Ponge recuperates Fautrier's frenzy by praising its liberty, but in the same breath revealing its control and measure and giving it a properly French emphasis. In addition, Ponge's support of Fautrier and of the Informel occurs at a period when his own work was becoming subject to greater freedom. Fautrier may be said, then, to be one of the forces which add an extra impetus to Ponge's own development of open texts, and to his notion of a vigorous creation sans repentirs.
NOTES

1. For a representative selection of these poems and a concise summary of the issues involved, see Ian Higgins, *Anthology of Second World War French Poetry*, Methuen (London, 1982).

2. The following is a list of all Ponge's texts on Fautrier (some of which are not included within *L'Atelier contemporain*) giving the original place of publication where possible:

'Fautrier à la Vallée-aux-Loups', *Le Spectateur des arts*, Premier cahier (December 1944), 21-22. This is a collection of essays on the theme of creation during the war, its first number published just four months after the Liberation of Paris.

'La Bataille contre l'horreur', *Confluences*, nouvelle série, no.5 (June-July 1945). This text, minus its title, serves as a prologue to Ponge's essay on Fautrier's *Otages* in *L'Atelier contemporain*.


'Fautrier d'un seul bloc grossièrement équarri', *Mercure de France*, no.1.154 (October 1959) (the title is altered in *L'Atelier contemporain* to 'Fautrier d'un seul bloc fougueusement équarri'). This essay was written as a preface to an exhibition of Fautrier's work in Düsseldorf for which Ponge gave an opening speech at the vernissage; *Jean Fautrier ('Fautrier - aus einem Block gehauen'*, Verlag Michelpresse (Düsseldorf, 1959).


'Nouvelles notes sur Fautrier, crayonnées hâtivement depuis sa mort', in *Hommage à Jean Fautrier*, Vie Salon grands et jeunes d'aujourd'hui, Musée d'art moderne de la ville de Paris (Paris, 5 October - 2 November 1964), non pag.

'Fautrier, Body and Soul', in *L'Atelier contemporain*, pp.353-57.

'Nouvel hommage d'un frère cadet Pas Vel Nefas survivant à son immortel frère aîné', in *Fautrier, L'attico-esse arte* (Rome, 25 October - 6 December 1980), pp.9-10. This was one of a collection of texts appearing in a finely produced catalogue for an exhibition of Fautrier's works in Rome.

References to these texts will be abbreviated as below and followed with a page number from *L'Atelier contemporain*, or from the original place of publication in the case of texts not included in the recueil:

FVL Fautrier à la Vallée-aux-Loups


5. As was often the case, it was Jean Paulhan who engineered the first meeting between Ponge and Fautrier; "Et si samedi Francis Ponge nous accompagnait, en seriez-vous ennuyées? Il voudrait écrire sur vous une étude ou un livre, et moi je l'y encourage. (C'est vraiment un grand écrivain)" (Jean Paulhan à travers ses peintres, Grand Palais, (1 February - 15 April 1974), p.74, letter no.65. The letter is undated).

6. See for example 'Esquisse d'une parabole' of 1921 (Lyres, pp.110-13), and 'Quatre satires' in *Douze petits écrits*, (Tome premier, pp.19-25). These were originally published as 'Trois satires' in *Nouvelle revue française*, no.117 (June 1923).

7. 'Entretien avec Francis Ponge', *Cahiers critiques de la littérature*, no.2 (December 1976), 4-32 (p.9)

8. *Le Savon*, Gallimard (Paris, 1967). Much of the text was written during the Occupation; 'L'Anthracite' (Pièces, pp.64-65); 'La Pomme de terre' (Pièces, pp.66-67). Originally printed in *Confluences* in 1943, this poem roused the indignation of the collaborationist press in the South.

9. For a discussion of Ponge's *contrebande*, see Ian Higgins, 'Shrimp, Plane and France: Ponge's Resistance Poetry', *French Studies*, 37, no.3 (July 1983), 310-25. Higgins studies the complex levels of meaning in Ponge's 'Le Platane' and the article contains useful information about which of Ponge's war time texts were simply making references to the circumstances of Occupation, which ones appeared in illegal Resistance publications, and which were published legally as *contrebande* Resistance poems.


11. 'La Famille du sage' of 1923, (Lyres, p.7), and 'La Dernière simplicité' of 1928, (Pièces, p.44).


the pseudonym Louis Maste; Luc Bérimont, 'Le Temps du beau plaisir', in La Huchê à pain, edited by A. Nicolas (Niort, 1943), p.33.


15. This is not the place to enter into the vexed problem of 'poetry of circumstance' nor to make rash pronouncements about the value of the commemorative poems written in France during this period. Such global judgements are in any case suspect and the only point to be made here concerns the problems which can arise when the function of poems as protest overrides their function as poems. Ponge's poetry of this period renders all such criticisms invalid since it both conveys and transcends the particular circumstances in which it was written. For the major accusations levelled against both the content and the form of Resistance poetry see Benjamin Péret, Le Dés honneur des poètes, Collection Libertés, Pauvert (Holland, 1965). This is a riposte to L'Honneur des poètes, a volume of Resistance poetry which was published clandestinely by Editions de Minuit in 1943.


17. I am indebted to Ian Higgins for this information on the origins of Frénaud's poems. Frénaud informed him of their connection with Fautrier in a letter of 1 August 1980.

18. 'La Libération des corps'; "Pitié pour les fusillés / emballés dans la fosse comme des anchois" (p.161).

19. 'Figures sur le navire', p.159.

20. 'Figures sur le navire', p.160.

21. 'Figures sur le navire', p.159.

22. 'La Libération des corps', p.162.

23. 'Entretien avec Francis Ponge', Cahiers critiques de la littérature, p.30.


25. Compare, for example, Emmanuel's 'Près de la fosse' in Tristesse à ma patrie, Editions de la revue Fontaine (Paris, 1946), p.96:

L'esprit se brise
À ces images trop exactes de la Mort
Et le poème hésite au bord du vide.


27. In slightly more light hearted vein, Ponge takes the wind as his subject for some notes begun in 1945. He expresses his distaste for the
subject which is present and absent at the same time, and comments \"L'art est de lui présenter quelque prise, de la lui mesurer et de l'utiliser en le défiant; c'est le jeu du navigateur à voiles\". See Francis Ponge, \emph{Paroles peintes \textquoteleft Du Vent\textquoteright}, edited by Odette Lazar, Vernet (Paris, 1975), non pag.

28. Ponge later describes Fautrier as a boxer, an unrelenting pugilist: \n\hspace{1em} J'aimais ce champion. J'allais le voir dans sa loge, après ses performances, ses montes victorieuses. \n\hspace{1em} Maigre dans son peignoir, ou son survêtement, comme le pape de Capodimonte (NN 257)

29. \lsquote Braque le réconciliateur\rs, in \emph{L'Atelier contemporain}, p.63.

30. \lsquote Entretien avec Francis Ponge\rs, \emph{Cahiers critiques de la littérature}, p.14.

31. Eliane Formentelli, \lsquote Ponge-Peinture\rs, in \emph{Des Mots et des couleurs}, edited by Philippe Bonnefis and Pierre Reboul, Université de Lille III (Lille, 1979), 173-220 (p.201).

32. Michelle Michel, \emph{Exposition Résistance - Déportation} (Création dans le bruit des armes), Musée de l'Ordre de la Libération (Paris, 24 April-20 June 1980), non pag.

33. Ponge's hand written notebook was exhibited at the \emph{Exposition Résistance - Déportation} (see note 32).

34. The artists who contributed to \emph{Vaincre}, Montagnac, Aujame, Goerg, Berthome-Saint-André, Ledureau, Pignon, were Resistance members, grouped around Fougeron. The presentation text for the catalogue, written by Bluard, did not appear in the final version since the \emph{agent de liaison} Mme. Annie Hervé was arrested whilst in possession of the manuscript. For a comprehensive study of this type of direct reference to the atrocities of the Second World War in art, see Janet Blatter and Sybil Milton, \emph{Art of the Holocaust}, Pan books (London, 1982).

35. Georges Limbour, \lsquote La Peinture et la guerre\rs, \emph{Le Spectateur des Arts}, Premier Cahier, René Drouin (Paris, December 1944), 9-13 (pp.9-10).


37. \lsquote Le Peintre sans privilèges\rs, p.366.

38. \lsquote Le Peintre sans privilèges\rs, p.368.

39. \lsquote Le Peintre sans privilèges\rs, p.368.

40. \lsquote Le Peintre sans privilèges\rs, p.368.

41. See \lsquote My Creative Method\rs (1947-48), \emph{Méthodes}, Gallimard (Paris, 1961), pp.10-43. Ponge firstly complains that \"En général on a donné de mon œuvre et de moi-même des explications d'ordre plutôt philosophiques
(méthaphysiques), et non tellement esthétiques ou à proprement parler littéraires (techniques)" (p.16). He goes on to comment that amongst his readers of Le Parti pris des Choses "il s'en est trouvé un petit nombre pour me demander des explications à son sujet, souhaitant surtout que je dévoile un peu ma méthode créative comme elles disent" (p.25).

42. Littre defines "catastase" thus: Terme de littérature ancienne. Partie d'une pièce de théâtre où le nœud de l'intrigue est dans toute sa force.

43. In Fautrier l'enragé: "Il y a je ne sais quoi d'injurieux [...] dans les toiles de Fautrier" (p.170); "Car enfin, avouons-le, c'est à nous qu'il en veut" (p.18).

44. In the catalogue where Nouvelles notes appears (see note 2), Ponge prefaces his text with the following image: "Le chardon paroxystique s'épanouit, plusieurs papillons noirs s'y précipitent, tout se réduit enfin en un liquide mousseux, de forte odeur végétale (de semence)"


55. Spada, Francis Ponge, p.20.


58. Marcel Spada comments of Ponge, "Je l'ai entendu dire [...] que toute œuvre, y compris le Discours de la Méthode, était érotique". See 'Sur les tablettes d'Eros Anteros: Ponge et Bataille', pp.163-64.


64. 'Le Lilas' is something of an exception. In the fashion of Mallarmé, Ponge expresses his disgust at the profuse outpouring of spring. It is perhaps also because the text was written in a war time context that the "boutons" of the plant are referred to as "hémorroides" and "varices" and that spring is described as "un phénomène congestif, d'aspect plutôt répugnant".


PONGE AND GIACOMETTI

If the mere existence of Ponge's art criticism can surprise the reader of his self-conscious descriptions of tiny portions of the material world, then the choice of somebody as temperamentally detached from Ponge as Giacometti is more surprising still. At first glance, this is surely the most unlikely alliance in the whole of L'Atelier contemporain. According to Richard Vernier, "In many and perhaps most cases, the relationship of a poet to pictorial art is one of specific affinities, as the 'other' is recognised, either in a given painting or in the manner of a painter, as the mirror of the self". With only one minor exception to thwart the general rule, the essays of L'Atelier contemporain may indeed be defined as quests for affinity. Ponge's instinctive sympathy is clearly a predictable motivating force in his approach to artists. His titles as well as his tone frequently underline the text's appreciative function, drawing attention to its own qualities as a celebratory gift ('Parade pour Jacques Hérod' (AC 116-17), 'Fanfare pour Jean Hélon' (AC 281-82), 'À la gloire de Fautrier' (AC 199-200)). Giacometti's subject, however, described by Ponge as "l'homme - et l'homme seul - réduit à un fil - dans le délabrement et la misère du monde - qui se cherche - à partir de rien" immediately points against any such affinity, suggesting instead that Giacometti's presence, by virtue of both his subject matter (the generic Man), and his inherently pessimistic cast of mind, is a unique and curious anomaly. The creative energies of writer and sculptor - the one a robust, humorous relish for life, the other a compulsive lament - appear irreconcilable. Giacometti has not a trace of the joie de vivre which Ponge appreciates in Kermadek or
Picasso, and not a whisper of the serenity he so admires in Braque.

When an essay on the Swiss sculptor was commissioned for Christian Zervos in 1951, Ponge nevertheless had reasons for accepting ("pour la commande, il faut que ce soit aussi une commande qui m'intéresse"), and his 'Reflexions sur les statuettes, figures et peintures de Giacometti' was published in Cahiers d'art in February 1952. It was followed in 1967 by publication of the more wide-ranging 'Joca Seria', Ponge's initial notebook of thoughts on Giacometti's stark vision of contemporary man, written from July to September 1951. 'Reflexions' is a judicious distillation of these jottings (six pages from thirty six), whittled down according to Ponge's desire for adéquation to Giacometti ("Son œuvre mérite qu'à son propos l'on soit bref (qu'on abrège)" (JS 186)). Following a pattern of publication which has become common in Ponge, the inclusive note book is published after the polished text, as a work with its own intrinsic value. These texts and the relationship between them will be discussed later. Our first question is why Ponge should have been sufficiently interested in Giacometti at this period (there are no subsequent writings on the sculptor) to devote to him what is in fact the longest essay in L'Atelier contemporain. To answer this question we must look more closely at Ponge's work on sculpture in general, at certain features of Giacometti's own work, and above all we must study the ways in which the texts on Giacometti are integrated with Ponge's struggle to capture man. They are an essential part of what the writer refers to as an 'epic' phase in his work, "un égarement (peut-être) passager" (JS 159), which finds him temporarily dabbling in foreign waters.

It is more than mere alliterative neatness which tempts one to refer to Ponge's contact with the creators of plastic art as 'Ponge and painters'. Whilst the various means of
expression explored in *L'Atelier contemporain* range from Karskaya's bizarre *Tapisseries* and Fiberworks to Ubac's *Ardoises taillées*, or the space age, perspex assemblages of Kosice, a basic brush and canvas remain of foremost importance to Ponge. Explored with verve as enterprises parallel to his own, and intimately associated with poetry in the development of *l'esprit nouveau*, paintings provide banners or flags, their great experimental potential placing them in the forefront of aesthetic progress through "le grand schisisme de la civilisation finissante". Ponge's more restrained appreciation and treatment of sculpture, through Marquet, Fenosa, Richier and Giacometti, reveals it as an essentially curious activity: "Comment peut-on être sculpteur? cela m'étonnera toujours" (*JS* 178). The world of sculpture, "le monde blafard du plâtre" is colourless and cold: "Moi, c'est le côté froid de la sculpture qui me gêne" (*JS* 174). It is remarkable therefore that Braque, Picasso or Fautrier, who produced much notable sculpture, are treated principally via their paintings and painterly techniques, while in 'Joca Seria' Ponge requests more paintings from Giacometti.

One factor which might explain Ponge's relative inattention to sculpture is its traditional status as the medium *par excellence* for the celebration of the human form. In a post-war climate however, such an enterprise takes on a different cast. Sculpture in this case is not so much a means of celebration, but of establishing new images of man from the wreckage. Surveying the atmosphere of post-war Paris via the plastic arts, the catalogue *Aftermath*, subtitled "France 1945-54, New Images of Man" charts this common endeavour, with Giacometti as a prominent figure readily seized upon by the art world in general, by Ponge and by Sartre, whose work on the sculptor will be examined later. For Ponge, Giacometti is "l'homme [...] cherchant un homme par (à travers) le plâtre" (*JS* 156). Sartre's first essay on Giacometti also begins with the suggestion that
sculpture is inseparable from this first pioneering act of creation; "pour la première fois l'idée vient à un homme de tailler un homme dans un bloc de pierre". It is clear that the cast of sculpture has been irrevocably altered. Here, the celebratory aspect once implied by the pedestal, the conferring of durability and permanence on perfection of form are replaced by the dramatisation of one moment in a quest, springing from man's deep uncertainty and unrest about his own nature and destiny.

Ponge's early essays in L'Atelier contemporain are intimately threaded to the experience of war, and his first two elected sculptors, Germaine Richier and Giacometti, present themselves as a natural sequel to Fautrier's Otages: from the disintegration of martyred bodies we progress to the building of a new man, a process in which Ponge also participates. There is an argument for viewing Richier and Giacometti, who each present a "hieratic and spiritualised denunciation of the human drama" as a pair here, if antithetical. Striking in both is the image of man stepping fresh from conflict, and displayed naked, directionless, bewildered by a sense of loss, and "réveillé par son propre orage". Giacometti "cherche une conception de l'homme" (JS 155). Richier too is concerned not with individuals but with the species ("c'est d'une Humanité (mais de rêve et en bronze) qu'il s'agit"). Her work, however, is in some senses a counterpoint to Giacometti's: "(L'homme de G. Richier, sorte de King-Kong (jamais plus sauvage) réveillé dans la forêt actuelle (primitive) par l'orage actuel (primitif) [...] a maigri... (nouvelles désillusions depuis 1944)" (JS 159). Antithetical in mood and visual impact, Richier’s furious behemoths (two of the most celebrated are craggy, pot-bellied figures named after forces of nature - L'Ouragon and L'Orage) emerge with energetic, post-holocaust rage, in monstrous form; a "King-Kong", a "Frankenstein", suggests Ponge, their robust vigour enjoying a positive response in his essays, whose emphasis falls on birth and
fruition. Richier is intimately associated with the forces and resourcefulness of Nature; she is an earth mother, a cosmic midwife, and her work is a "festin".14

Giacometti, on the other hand, is the exception amongst all Ponge's chosen sculptors, since his work is melancholic, suggestive of the alienation of man and nature and of the frailty of existence. Fenosa and Germaine Richier both manifest imaginative combinations of human and natural forms, so that the former represents a series of lush metamorphoses between, for example, female and flower,15 and more importantly, the latter initiates Ponge's fervently desired equalising "prochaine étreinte"16 between man and nature. The sculptures of Muriel Marquet are made "pour un monde enfin comme nous l'espérons, un peu plus respirable que le nôtre",17 and yet Ponge elects to speak most volubly on the sculptor whose statues emerge like shadowy figures from Belsen or Auschwitz, and whose work represents not the birth of form but the obsessive disintegration and collapse of form.

To pass from Germaine Richier to Giacometti is, then, to pass from positive to negative, from birth to entropy, and into the sickroom of post-war French art. Here Buffet's stripped-down, angular figures and still lifes convalesce beside Gruber's spare portraits of naked people in wretched or desolate surroundings, their attitudes connotative of the deepest despair. Giacometti's presence in this reigning vogue of misérabilisme was of capital importance. When the sculptor arrived from Switzerland in 1945, his paintings, drawings and sculptures seemed to reflect the grim mood of Existentialist post-war Paris. If, as Ponge suggests, paintings in general are the flags of the intellectual offensive, then Giacometti's archetypal figure was doubtless the Existentialist icon. The destabilising power of the sculptor's imagery had an impact fit to rival that of Pascal: man was once again shown as a thinking reed in awe
of his own contingency and finitude and condemned to shuffle
between two infinities.

What, more exactly, awaited the novice spectator at a
Giacometti exhibition? Astonished by the frailty and
fleshlessness of grouped or solitary figures, hesitating on
heavy plinths, with their vague air of menace and aura of
timeless tragedy, the first comment might be that they are
as distant from familiar classical sculptural antecedents as
one could imagine. Pre-Renaissance in inspiration, with the
queer elongation of Byzantine paintings, they obey
revolutionary sculptural rules, devised as a result of
Giacometti's obsessively 'shrinking' and 'fragmenting'
vision of the world. For the larger part, the statues
resemble one another: the arms straight, fists closed, one
foot advanced with the obsessive repetition of the same
impassive stature Giacometti so admired in ancient Egyptian
statues. The Egyptian statue, however, was advancing — a
symbol of omnipotence and supreme certainty — whereas here
it could equally be retreating, or simply hesitating,
believing by space. The temptation is to describe these
figurines in negative terms: purposeless, fleshless,
colourless, irresolute, diminished, valueless, anonymous.
The paragon of animals with sheeny, marble skin, perfect
proportions and lush musculature, Michelangelo's virility,
Rodin's sensuality are exchanged for a strange geometry.
There is no curve on the insect-like forms, and their
surface is rough bronze, like some charred or corroded
substance. Man is whittled to such tiny proportions that, so
legend has it, Giacometti brought the fruits of his
creativity in Geneva back to Paris in six matchboxes.'

It is difficult to analyse why these figures have such
power. Each slight form is a bundle of enigmas with a scope
of reference way beyond itself. Is it advancing or
retreating, hostile or afraid, terrorising or terrorised? A
pulsation between these polarities is noted by critics.
Sometimes more explicit enigma finds favour. What, for
example, has caused the apparently imminent collapse of L'Homme qui chavire? More importantly, what does the early, much celebrated surrealist L'Objet invisible - a masked figure, privy to some terrible secret - hold between its cupped hands? Its fistfuls of space, heavy with metaphysical significance, are the key to Giacometti's power, for they are later unleashed to envelop all his statues. The relationship between vast space and minimal form assumes paramount importance, and emptiness, or what one critic refers to as "negative space", accounts for a great part of Giacometti's effect and significance. Just as drawings are, for Giacometti, exercises in subtraction so that a portrait of Matisse, a Parisian café, or a sculptural sketch of Quatre femmes sur un socle, are over half way towards total disintegration, so in sculpture there are paradoxical energies at work to produce fragmented contours and to introduce so much space that the statues are as transparent and lacking in density as the drawings themselves. In the drawings, nervous, sketchy lines around the contours of objects are the antithesis of Picasso's deft, energetic statements, and 'riggings' provided by a plethora of perspectival lines only just manage to hold the objects down and endow them with tenuous form. The sculptural equivalent of this is disproportionately heavy feet and pedestals. Only these offset the overriding fragility and keep the figures earth-bound.

If we look at the major writers who are temperamentally drawn to write about Giacometti, it is notable that from Sartre through Bonnefoy, Dupin, Du Bouchet and Genet, all have an 'enigma-based' approach to the figurines as keys to things beyond the known, beyond the physical. Their significance lies outside themselves in the Existentialist void, or in an attractive but permanently unattainable ailleurs whose invisible truths they have glimpsed or intuited and for which they are constantly on watch. For the metaphysically orientated poets who founded the review
L’Éphémère in 1967 and who, after Sartre, took Giacometti as their emblem, the purpose of his skeletal statues - "Poussières à face d'homme" as Du Bouchet puts it - is to remind us of their near non-existence. Calling beyond the reach of the human senses, these 'dog whistles' of the sculptural world could all, according to Genet, be entitled L'Objet invisible. Exceptional in their startling other-worldliness, "A côté d'elles, comme les statues de Rodin ou celles de Maillol sont prêtes de roter, puis de dormir".

In general, then, critics delight in this tour de force in which sculpture and drawing rely on the surrounding void for their effect until the paradox approaches in which the void has the lion's share of significance. For Ponge the attraction of the metaphysical is distinctly less alluring. Vulnerability and instability are what he seeks to avoid, and Giacometti's world amounts to an un-Pongean celebration of insubstantiality, an unhealthy indulgence in morbid meditations on exile, alienation, solitude and death. Ponge's response to open space is antithetical to that of Giacometti, and is best defined as agoraphobic. His objects are isolated in a vacuum so the text may concentrate on drawing out their uniqueness. Density, physicality and solidity are the hallmarks of his universe, and his choice and treatment of subjects is specifically designed to exclude the void. Where Ponge takes a pebble or an orange in his hands to steady himself over the abyss of the absurd, Giacometti's figure in L'Objet invisible cradles "the immaterial and ubiquitous presence of the forces of death and nothingness".

Ponge, however, in an era where the 'virus' of Existentialism was as willingly and self-indulgently contracted as Nineteenth Century Romantic ailments, remains unmoved by such anguished responses to man's position. He detects a self-indulgent sensuality in the fleshlessness of Giacometti's statues, which flatters certain narcissistic and self-dramatising tendencies inherent in man's nature.
Amongst these are a fundamental masochism allied to man's love of power as a concept whether he is wielding or submitting to it ("L'Homme a toujours adoré ce qui le minimise, ce qui l'inquiète, ce qui donne à quelque parti ou seigneur prise et droit sur lui" (JS 161)) and the Robinson Crusoe syndrome; ("l'idée de la liberté, de la solitude aux prises avec le monde (Robinson) il l'aime aussi et s'en exalte" (JS 162)).

To refer to this period of Ponge's work as one manifesting "hesitation" with the question of the Absurd (the word is Gavronsky's), before he moves on to a more pertinent emphasis with the later Braque essays is, therefore, slightly misleading. If Ponge is hesitant in this matter it is not over his unshakeable and essentially positive personal response to absurdity, but over the best form, the right opportunity, the right kind of text in which to confront the issue. Giacometti assists Ponge with a number of thorns in his side. Whilst the essays on artists are generally important in helping Ponge to resolve his enduring problems with people, 'Réflexions' and 'Joca Seria' play a specific role in his more direct attempt to ease man into an inevitable renaissance. They provide solutions to problems inherent in a number of contemporary texts to which they are strongly allied, inserting themselves forcefully in Ponge's creative development as an ideal opportunity to express certain well-digested problems which had not yet been given satisfactory airing in textual form. Giacometti, then, far from striking a 'false' note in the scheme of L'Atelier contemporain, slots into Ponge's work as neatly as the missing piece of a jigsaw.

*L'Homme*

Ironically, whilst Sartre was describing Ponge's people as petrified participants in a "grand rêve nécrologique", 27

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attempts were already underway to achieve a more complete and supple "définition-description" of humanity through two companion texts which perpetuate Ponge's grapple with man as a subject, 'Notes premières de l''Homme'' of 1943-44,27 and 'L'Homme à grands traits' of 1945-51.28 The generic Homme is approached as a vital, though a priori unsympathetic and troublesome project, necessitated by the pressure of contemporary events. Ponge cannot ignore the need to delineate new contours for a species whose image has suffered such grave erosion. The revolution in man's conception of himself is seen by Ponge as having reached a crux, and he proposes to speed-up the advent of the new Man, setting out the basic facts which can still be safely asserted between relics of past beliefs and an uncertain future. That Ponge participates in this common ontological reassessment by writing directly about man is perhaps a measure of the task's momentousness.

It is clear, then, that Ponge's question at this stage is not whether to speak directly about man, but how. What images are valid and useful to a being "qui se cherche - à partir de rien" (JS 155), and whose need for self-examination is further exacerbated by the death of his largest ever creation (a demise axiomatic in Ponge), an onlooking God. Suffering now the "devoir douloureux d'être sujet", according to Sartre, man "tord le cou pour essayer de se voir",30 while for Ponge, typically with greater emphasis on the coincidence of project and realisation, on self mastery, "C'est l'Homme qui est le but (Homme enfin devenu centaure à force de se chevaucher lui-même)" (TP 215). One more major (and again ultimately optimistic) outline of the urgency he senses reads as follows: "Il [L'Homme] se forge dans la tuerie actuelle (ou plutôt c'est sa dernière épreuve, son dernier feu de forge après des siècles d'une longue ferronnerie)" (TP 248). Here, using the potential of the reflexive 'se forger', Ponge suggests the suffering and purificatory effects of fire, a certain
stability after cooling and the Promethean ability of man to recreate himself, whilst the emerging idea of a metallic statue seems already to reach out prophetically to Giacometti. The aim of writer and sculptor, for the time being, coincide.

Both Ponge's texts on man 'spill over' into the work on Giacometti. To understand how, it is important to study their nature and to ask how far their aim to provide the ultimate textual definition of man was realised. That their project was both absorbing and problematic is suggested firstly by the time span it covers (a period of eight years) and secondly by the dichotomy between Ponge's initial rejection of man as an inimical subject and the heroically over-ambitious and enthusiastic flourishes which outline his subsequent declaration of intent. Ponge anticipates the achievement of a unique literary feat, "un sobre portrait de l'homme. Simple et complet. Voilà ce qui me tente. Il faudra dire tout en un petit volume... Allons! A nous deux!" (TP 243). The text is to contain "toute la morale, tout l'humanisme, tout le principe d'une société parfaite. Voilà ce que je vais tenter avec L'Homme" (TP 217).

It is 'Pages bis' (1941-43) - notes constituting a response to the absurdity of the human condition as described in Camus' manuscript for Le Mythe de Sisyphe - which contains the first mention of Ponge's desire to achieve a "définition-description" of man. Hence 'Pages bis' serves as a preface for these texts whilst explaining their genesis and dramatising Ponge's initially ambiguous attitude towards them. The suggestion is that the work is already underway, but the latter stages of the essay make its fruition appear more important and give it the necessary impetus, so that 'Pages bis', immediately preceding 'Notes premières' in Proèmes, appears as an interlinked prologue. Ponge's strong need to redefine man is sharpened and shaped by Camus' tract, his blueprint for the new man mapped out in direct opposition to the Camusian individual, "celui qui a
la nostalgie de l'un, qui exige une explication claire, sous menace de se suicider" (TP 209). Ponge's slogan, "ÊTRE RÉSOLUMENT" (TP 229) is against resignation and inertia, in favour of open-eyed acceptance of human contingency and finiteness. His overriding guideline, "Rien qui flatte le masochisme humain" (TP 205) suggests a sane and healthy alternative viewpoint accepting the absurd but denying its tragic coefficient, encouraging acceptance of the simple fact that the world is irreducible to human reasoning.

At first Ponge approaches his project with alloyed enthusiasm and irritation that a certain "L..." with a taste for the epic (in direct contrast to the fabular which tops Ponge's personal hierarchy of genres) "A semblé souhaiter que j'aboutisse dans mon travail de L'Homme" (TP 231). He even appears close to abandoning it ("cela m'agace un peu cette façon de me lancer l'homme dans les jambes [...] l'homme est en réalité le contraire de mon sujet" (TP 231)), but is reconciled by the idea of approaching an epic subject in fabular form. At this point, Ponge is clearly straddled between the closed text and the notebook, feeling towards more open forms but uncertain of their validity, so whilst the oblique texts of Le Parti pris des choses may, he fears, be overly discrete, the texts of Proèmes have an uncertain status as inferior stop-gaps between 'proper' texts, "menstrues [...] saignées critiques" (TP 230), they provide mere indications of potential creative fertility as opposed to the dense and controlled fabric of his other texts. 'Pages bis' itself is unsatisfactory to Ponge for several reasons; firstly because it is a discursive text using language more limply than is customary in Ponge, and secondly because it is occupied with the direct expression of abstract concepts, leading to an excess of seriousness ("Je m'y montre trop sérieux, trop shinssèhre..." (TP 230-31)) rather than to the "ton plaisant" of the texts through which his philosophy seeps more subtly. The response to the rhetorical question "si je dois exprimer cela
philosophiquement" (TP 225) is unequivocal and the plans for the text on man which are to boil down and incorporate the ideas expressed more loosely here, gradually shed the philosophical cast of their titles. 'La Résolution humaine' becomes 'Humain, résolument humain', then 'Homme résolument' (TP 229) or simply the plain 'L'Homme' (TP 217). This is finally modified to incorporate not an indication of philosophical emphasis, but of the text's provisional, exploratory form and innovative endeavour: 'Notes premières de l'"Homme"'. This title foregrounds Ponge's formal dilemma. The project for 'L'Homme' coming in the wake of his resolve to publish "des relations d'échecs de description" (TP 206) as the only realistic alternative to silence (self-expression and even description have been declared impossible at this time) reads like a remnant of the urge towards textual perfection, completion and polish. The notes are clearly not intended to be self-sufficient, but are important in the degree to which they bring the proposed book - an exhaustive, brief, definitive definition of the generic Homme - closer to realisation. Ponge's outline for his project on man promises the usual multiple perspective and detached attitude of Pongeans description ("le prendre de haut sous plusieurs éclairages de tous les points de vue concevables" (TP 242)), and the analogy borrowed from plastic art is that of taking man and sculpting him: "en dresser enfin une statue solide; sobre et simple" (TP 242) making use of the statue as a prime illustration of completion and fixity (this point will be returned to later).

Ponge's blueprint for "l'homme nouveau" (TP 210) gives a clue to the tone of his work on Giacometti. Two ruling concepts which delineate the new man are that of effortless equilibrium and of man as a creative force. Arising in contradistinction to the Camusian man with his insatiable "nostalgie d'absolu" (TP 244), Ponge's man has digested and gone beyond the fact of the absurd; it is no longer a
stumbling block in his response to the world because he does not choose to perceive it as tragic. Man's "faculté de vivre dans le relatif" (TP 245) and "entre deux infinis" (TP 244) (an early nod to Ponge's philosophical arch enemy, Pascal) means he is constantly fluctuating and vibrating between a series of opposite forces, not terrified by the unknown but as buoyant and resilient as a water imp: "Entre deux infinis et des milliards de possibles, un ludion" (TP 244). Man is alternately elevated as a "dieu qui se méconnait" (TP 238), then demoted to his long ignored place as one of nature's "coagulations fréquentes" (TP 246), and Ponge's changing perspective - now crowning man, now pulling the carpet from under his feet - is therapeutic.

The first and one of the most outstanding of Ponge's definitions is of "l'homme religieux de son propre pouvoir" (TP 237), acknowledging that the need for God is essentially man-created, and directing thwarted religious energy inwards so that man perceives of himself as the only creative being with the ability to recreate the world. All the more striking for being written during the war years, the portrait of man which emerges from these robust, optimistic paragraphs is energetic, vigorous and assertive; "l'homme est intrépidité et progrès. Il va de l'avant avec gaieté, enthousiasme, courage. Il a le sentiment d'avoir essentiellement quelque chose à découvrir" (TP 241).

The introductory paragraphs of Ponge's second attempt to capture this elusive subject pause to assess previous achievements, revealing dissatisfaction with the first text and uneasiness and indecisiveness about the second (Méthodes 161). Any pleasure occasioned by Paulhan's reception of 'Notes premières' ("étonnament simpliste" is his description, "enchanté" his response) is offset by Ponge's nagging feeling that he has only touched the tip of the iceberg. Man as a subject haunts the author, impelling him to pursue insights more varied, imaginative and profound in this final five part text, going beyond the "grandes lignes"
already laid down in paragraphs which merely tickle the subject: "Cela me confirme dans mon propos" he says of Paulhan's response, "Il n'y a plus qu'à perséverer". Yet this uncomplicated, evident style of description is not to be sacrificed in his more comprehensive, definitive survey. Caught in a paradoxical quest for exhaustiveness in an inexhaustible subject, Ponge appears confused about the issue of closure. His "est-ce cela doit suffire?", is followed by the inevitable, "je n'ai pas encore tout dit, assez dit". He is trapped in a dilemma between the acceptance of relative success and a textual absolute - an impossible paradise on the page.

The four remaining sections of 'L'Homme à grands traits' return to a more divisive series of descriptions on separate aspects, abandoning attempts at global definitions and the result is fragmentation; a disjointed collection of ideas on our desire for symmetry and perfection of form, on perspective, on our carelessness of that cumbersome nuisance "le corps", "cette grande excroissance indolore" (Méthodes 186), and finally on a semi-scientific description of the mouth (of particular importance in Ponge) and its functions. Invigorating and witty though it may be, this wandering text ultimately contributes little to the first which, in terms of an absolute and complete definition of man (as opposed to man in fragments) has in fact gone as far as Ponge can. The most sensible answer to the question "Ou bien est-ce que cela doit suffire?" could well be affirmative. The comparative richness of 'Notes premières' is revealed in its sudden admission of defeat in the last stages as the overwhelming variety and complexity of the chosen subject and its extreme importance defy the kind of controlled definition Ponge is aiming to produce. Man as a subject is "beaucoup trop imposant [...] trop touchant et trop vaste"; there are "trop de choses à en dire", man "m'impose trop de respect [...] me décourage" (TP 246). Ponge's frustration springs from the late realisation that his text has
inevitably evolved towards a discovery which thwarts its own project as initially expressed. His evolutive view of man renders the very undertaking of a closed and complete "petit livre" paradoxical and precludes the possibility of *adéquation* in such a format not simply by its diminutive size, but by the unavoidable existence of a final page. The generic *Man* is forever beyond definition except as a being constantly coming into definition — a fact which is ultimately his definition, and which this open text, having failed in its quest for exhaustive description, has as its trump card. "Non pas vois (ci) l'homme, mais veuille l'homme" (*TP* 248), not a description — which is fundamentally backward looking, implying as it does pre-existing entities to be conveyed through language — but a heuristic text, and an invitation to participate in a project. The success of this text is in its admission of failure, its closure in its opening to the future. The last word on *Man* also proves beyond question that the shape of Ponge's work on people is dictated by his strong desire to avoid petrifaction, since it provides a definitive formula about man's energetic recreation of himself: "L'homme est à venir. L'homme est l'avenir de l'homme" (*TP* 248). Here, as throughout, Ponge illustrates the liberty and responsibility which Existentialism had placed on everyone's doorstep as an extremely positive phenomenon.  

The potential for a text on *man* was, then, a lively question for Ponge at this period, but the project for a book is ultimately abortive. The factors explained above must be borne in mind if we are to appreciate the attractiveness and functional opportunities offered by Giacometti's sculpted figures, since Giacometti achieved what Ponge in his two texts on *L'Homme* could not. Ponge accepts that Giacometti's minimal sculptures have held this elusive subject captive, overcome the problem of divisibility and achieved unity in a concrete formula, reducing the ultimate in complexity to an undifferentiated...
slip of pure existence whose linguistic equivalent is the neutral, universal pronoun "Je". Hence the congratulatory note in the final paragraph of 'Réflexions': "Merci! Car grâce à vous nous le tenons ce pourceau de l'intelligence, l'homme, ce sceptre, ce fil! Notre dernier dieu" (R 98). This achievement provides an opportunity for Ponge to return to his abandoned subject on a more satisfactory footing and to respond to the problems of the absurd through a dense, 'poetic' text rather than an abstract, discursive one. Because it re-introduces a third party it also offers the missing distance which, in Ponge, permits of control. Just as in the art criticism in general portraiture is effected more easily through the inclusion of the artist's works, so that man and work become inseparable, each a function of the other, so these texts may be described as Ponge on Giacometti on Man; the introduction of another focus between Ponge and his troublesome subject is a liberating element. "La difficulté", he discovered in 'Notes premières', "est dans le recul à prendre. Il faut s'en détacher, gagner assez de recul et pas trop" (TP 242). Remembering also that the unsatisfactory nature of 'Pages bis' occasioned Ponge's desire for a descriptive text through which he could give full expression to his own particular brand of optimistic humanism, Giacometti's provision not of abstract theories, as in Camus' Le Mythe de Sisyphe, but of an object or group of objects, is welcome. The subject is still L'Homme, but the insubstantiality of ideas is exchanged for substantial, tangible figures - a small, well defined centre satisfying Ponge's permanent preference for indirect statements, for putting the undertones of language to maximum use, for speaking about one thing in terms of another, and drawing together a multitude of threads with economy. Giacometti, in effect, removes Ponge's stumbling block, allowing him to continue with his comments on Man. It is clear, then, that Ponge will be doing far more than just introducing Giacometti's work in his essays.
Corrective criticism

If we are to draw out the full significance of Ponge's unique response to Giacometti's man, we must take into account not only the sculptor's work per se but the image of his work which emerged from other writings—particularly from those of Jean-Paul Sartre. We might say that Sartre, Ponge and Giacometti form a triangle here, with Sartre at the apex, delivering first versions of both Ponge and Giacometti through persuasive pioneering essays which remain fundamental to our understanding of each: 'L'Homme et les choses' of 1944 and 'La Recherche de l'absolu' of 1948. Sartre's essay on Giacometti which binds the sculptor so closely to his own preoccupations is still dealing, in the same vocabulary, with issues which arose in the essay on Ponge concerning the treatment of man in art and the hazards of petrifaction. Both Sartre's essays contain elements which Ponge clearly desires to resist or correct. Since both writers are taking a common subject in this case, it is an ideal opportunity for Ponge to make an oblique reply, not only by pursuing his treatment of man in art, but also by setting his personal, healthy response to the absurdity of the human condition in opposition to that of Giacometti and, by implication, that of Sartre.

Sartre's title, 'La Recherche de l'absolu', instantly sets his Giacometti apart from Ponge's, and an early comment in 'Joca seria' as Ponge sifts through his recent, barely digested impressions of Giacometti, reveals not only that Sartre's work formed part of his research, but that he is specifically setting out to write an alternative version, for "Ce n'est pas l'article de Sartre (La Recherche de l'Absolu) qui aidera Giacometti et son homme, à mourir et à renaitre..." (JS 160). That Ponge should also include a casual reference to Sartre in his finished text, 'Réflexions', is further proof that he had kept the 1948
essay in mind. For this reason, it is worth looking briefly at Sartre's Giacometti.

In parts 'La Recherche de l'absolu' could be mistaken for extracts from the pages of L'Être et le néant. The sculptor is absorbed into a powerfully expressed philosophical universe as a perfect emblem for Sartre's major preoccupations, which makes it difficult to establish how far the essay is an appropriation, an a posteriori verbal creation of Giacometti's intentions and effects. Was Sartre launching Giacometti or pulling him along in his wake? There was certainly a profound sympathy between the two. Simone de Beauvoir's account of their first and subsequent meetings in Parisian cafés in the early forties describes an instinctive rapport in which Sartre "discerne chez le sculpteur suisse une entreprise parallèle à la sienne", and Sartre was perhaps better qualified than anyone to interpret Giacometti's personal ambitions. However, Giacometti's prolonged absence from the forefront of the artistic scene (the 1948 exhibition was his first for fifteen years), combined with the extremely different genius of the new work beside his earlier Surrealist objects, make of him a virgin artist, and seen through Sartre's essay the 1948 exhibition becomes something of a co-exhibition, with concepts and situations elaborated in recent writings receiving concrete illustrations in bronze. The total isolation of the figures, the sense of loss they emit, and often their air of quietly absorbing some startling realisation which has stopped them in their tracks - all suggest the discovery of an alien environment and of terror at the conditions of their own minimal and totally free existence. The desire, yet hostility inherent in human 'contact', which only increases man's solitude (several figures on the same plinth can appear more lonely than one) provide concretions of the tensions brilliantly explored in Huis clos. The highest achievement in this gathering and representation of Sartrean energies is, of course, to have
made the néant itself accessible, and the final touch which rounds off the image of Giacometti's world as a perfect portion of Sartrean Existentialism is the portrayal of the sculptor himself as a Roquentinian type hero beset by images of collapse, formlessness, disintegration, and by the "gouffre à son côté". Magnified, mythologised and dramatised, Giacometti suffers from a "terreur du vide" so great that it forces him to edge along walls in a destabilised world whose floating objects are separated by layers of space.

Now let us return for a moment to Sartre's Ponge, and recall his suggestion that in refusing to differentiate between the human and the inanimate, Ponge's man "se transforme en statue; tout est fini, il est de la nature du roc et du galet, la stupéfaction de la pierre paralyse ses bras et ses jambes". Here the image of the statue epitomises a failed, essentially inhuman representation of the human form. Interestingly, Sartre has chosen sculpture as the ultimate example of irreconcilability between an art form and its subject, devoted to a representation of humanity for which it is by nature hopelessly ill-equipped. Each of Ponge's independent paragraphs is "une statue ensorcelée; nous avons affaire à des marbres hantés par la vie. Ces paragraphes visités perpétuellement par le souvenir d'autres paragraphes qui ne peuvent s'organiser avec eux". Sartre repeatedly refers to sculpture of human beings as a paradoxical combination of subject and alien material, an absurdly ambitious project quite incapable of capturing the nature of existence and doomed to failure. If Existentialism may be defined as "une critique de l'être conçu comme substance éternelle", it would seem that the unalterable eternity of marble or bronze is antipathetic to the most basic premiss of the philosophy.

A further sculptural hazard, and one which Sartre criticised in Ponge, is an unwitting, but all too common exchange of unity for fragmentation - what we may call the
'Arcimboldi syndrome'. Sartre describes previous sculptures as conglomerations of separately conceived, heterogeneous bits and pieces, with relentless attention to each limb, nose, or blank, staring eye costing the unity of the whole; "Un mort sur un cheval mort", he comments, "cela ne fait même pas la moitié d'un vivant". Faced with a dull, intractable "rocher", a "simple grumeau d'espace", it requires nothing less than a magician's skill to overcome the problems facing Sartre's Giacometti: "Il faut qu'il inscrive le mouvement dans la totale immobilité." Above all he must discover "Comment faire un homme avec de la pierre sans le pétifier," Yet for Sartre, Giacometti overcomes the matter/subject conflict, exploding past restrictions with a single blow, achieving unity where there was division, and grace and movement where there was only inertia and petrifaction. The solution is afforded by his experimental laws of perspective and his use of distance as a "pressoir" to create "un espace imaginaire et sans parties", involving a reversal of painterly and sculptural rules. A Giacometti figure will be set at a specific distance ("c'est à vingt pas de moi qu'il existe une fois pour toutes") however near we may approach. Like people seen from a distance the sculptures are no longer a multiplicity of parts but a "surgissement instantané", "présence pure", their separate parts intuited rather than receiving individual statement. Search for a feature you believed to be there, says Sartre, and it disappears, although the question remains whether this is a glorious triumph or a rather facile sleight of hand (Ponge, troubled as to the reasons for their success, suggests the extreme tininess and thinness of the figurines could be the only reason we respond to them as "saisissantes" (JS 166)).

Interestingly, whereas Ponge's images for Giacometti are rooted in the concrete, Sartre's endeavour is to release them from their concrete status and hence to reveal how they achieve the impossible of conveying man's finitude. Sartre
favours plaster because it is more malleable, nearer to the néant than bronze. The white dust around the atelier is described as 'space dust', the plaster itself as "l'envers impalpable" of Giacometti's movements, and the results "seuls à garder, entre toutes les sculptures que je connais, la grâce inouïe de sembler périssables". How paradoxical it seems that, according to Sartre's assessment, Ponge should fall a prey to the sculptural pitfalls of fragmentation and petrifaction whilst Giacometti, a petrifier by nature, has attributed to him the Orphean ability to endow inert matter with movement and life. Giacometti, then, achieves in bronze what Ponge could not in language, which by virtue of its fluid, multi-layered nature is better equipped than any art form to describe human beings in all their complexity. For Sartre, Ponge and Giacometti are poles apart in their treatment of people - the one providing verbal concretions, the other miraculously introducing fluidity into the concrete.

What both Sartre and Ponge find of particular value in the statues is their concise representation of the existence which, in Existentialism, precedes essence; or rather, of post-war man, whose essence at this stage is simply to exist. Denuded and isolated figures evoke the individual's utter freedom, but is the upshot of the immense creative responsibility thrust upon him to be an exhilarated optimism or anguish, self pity and inactivity? When, in October 1945 - the year which saw the beginning of the vogue of Existentialism - Sartre made his famous speech L'Existentialisme est un humanisme at the Club Maintenant in Paris, his aim was not simply to elucidate the bases of Existentialism, but largely to provide a clearer definition and to defend it against certain criticisms. The term, claimed Sartre, had been submitted to such a wide range of uses that it had lost all meaning in the mire of diluted versions. His essay follows a list of accusations, viewed by him as popular misconceptions and dealt with methodically.
Both aesthetically and morally, "on assimile laideur à existentialisme", while accusing the philosophy and its adherents "de mettre l'accent sur le mauvais côté de la vie humaine", "de souligner l'ignominie humaine", "d'avoir négligé un certain nombre de beautés riantes, le côté lumineux de la nature humaine". Existentialism is inadequate because fundamentally lacking in any common structure to unite man (the Christian complaint), and finally, it instigates a despairing quietism which precludes the possibility of action and is therefore to be seen as a contemplative luxury (the Communist complaint). Sartre's plea within this text may be for a reading of Existentialism as an optimistic humanism, with man as a permanent project surging towards the future in a constant process of self-definition, but his celebration of Giacometti's world has repercussions for man which are far from positive and his defence of Existentialism as optimistic is poorly served by his attentive alliance to the sculptor. Giacometti's L'Homme qui chavire for example, or the statues which take hesitant steps or stand petrified can hardly be said to be surging forwards. Sharp visual encapsulations of the most paralysing response to absurdity would be a better description, and while Sartre's essays appear to describe the sculptures, paintings and aesthetic innovations of Giacometti brilliantly, they still highlight the negative, life-denying energies of Giacometti's art, which associate him with the grimmer interpretations of Sartrean themes. The "longue silhouette indistincte qui marche à l'horizon" is viewed not so much in encouraging terms as a tabula rasa with enormous potential, but as an ultimately fragmented being in the process of dying rather than of formation - an idea encouraged by Sartre's emphasis on the void. Poised "à mi-chemin entre le néant et l'être" the drawings and sculptures alike slide towards the former, each fine chiseling and, paradoxically, each mark on the paper, is "un commencement de négation, le passage de l'être au non-
Sartre's Giacometti is a stark and miserable statement of encroaching entropy; it represents the problems of the individual's discovery that he is free, but goes no way towards a solution - simply towards dissolution.

Naturally, Ponge sees Sartre's interpretation as hampering and restrictive. Its inherent pessimism runs counter to his optimistic concept of art's high moral and practical function, which is to make life worth living, to ensure balance and mental health, a kind of "hygiène". In his essay on Fautrier's Otages Ponge had already declared himself an enemy of anything which lures the human mind into tragic realms, and it is perhaps significant that in 1951 Ponge was writing not only his text on Giacometti, but also his first notes on Eugène de Kermadek, a "peintre de luxe, sain, racé" and "héroïque", whose work epitomises the health-giving equilibrium art can make accessible to us. Kermadek's bright, vigorous world with its washed-clean surfaces and primary colours is an exemplary counterpoint to Giacometti, and Ponge is impelled by a desire to re-direct the sculptor's energies. On one occasion he suggests "Giacometti, faites des bustes, des portraits, faites des natures mortes!" (JS 160), and on another proposes the mischievous commission, "demander à Giacometti de sculpter une femme obèse" (JS 174). His response to implicit images of death in the sculptor shows that he also wishes to re-direct existing interpretations; he is positively jubilant about the prospects such a death will make possible:

Voilà qui est fait pour me réjouir.
C'est une confirmation pour moi (JS 156).

The two very different treatments of Giacometti represented by Sartre and Ponge also point to more general questions concerning the nature, potential, and proper role of art criticism. It is clear from the above that the ultimate significance of a work of art may by far exceed the original motives for its genesis, and that we cannot talk
about Giacometti without saying whose Giacometti we mean. In other words, description is always interpretation. It is the critic who blows the interpretative breath of life into the statues, providing the tools with which we 'read' the interplay of space, form, and gesture, and Ponge's work on Giacometti is shaped by an acute awareness of the critic's power to manipulate our visual experience and our emotional and intellectual response. New art forms require new ways of writing and a different relationship between art and explanatory text. Ponge fittingly participates in an ongoing assessment of accompanying writings and their increasingly adventurous, varied relationships to works of art. Whereas Sartre's interpretation of Giacometti is sealed, Ponge's is open, not binding the sculptor so tightly within a single system of belief, and as usual, advertising his presence in a tone at times unashamedly subjective. Ponge typically throws the role of the critic and the extent of his power into question, not offering a wholesale appropriation of Giacometti, but setting alternative interpretations side by side and leaving gaps for the reader to do his own thinking. Whereas Sartre produces essays on Giacometti, Ponge produces texts. He is less in the business of interpreting Giacometti than of putting forward thoughts which may transform him. In conversation with Sollers, Ponge agrees that the first approach is proper to philosophers, the second to artists (EBS 96), and further comments made at the 1977 Colloque de Cerisy reveal his keenness to distinguish his approach from the former: "Les choses se passent tout à fait différemment pour ce qu'on peut appeler, en gros, un artiste, que pour un philosophe, un analyste. L'analyse, qu'est-ce que c'est? Je ne sais pas. Moi-même je n'analyse jamais. Quand je parle d'un peintre [...] je n'analyse pas; j'ai reçu, je suis imprégné d'une couche de sédiments, d'impressions qui sont probablement parfaitement arbitraires, qui ne valent que pour moi [...] et j'essaie d'être honnête avec cette idée profonde". 

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Ponge is, of course, not above using the artist as a pretext and some of his critical paragraphs have the ring of manifestos; the difference lies in his open admission of the fact. The term "prétexte" is first introduced in an essay on Germaine Richier, but the concept of embarking upon one project only to fulfil another is perhaps never so apt as in Ponge's work on Giacometti. If the sculptor is so much more of a "prétexte" than other artists in L'Ate11er contemporain it is largely because he is instrumental in allowing Ponge to put forward a positive version of a despairing vision. Ponge's thinking about the interaction of art and society is an unfuddled view of a symbiotic relationship in which the plastic form is at once "signe" and "signal", and hence to a large degree reinforces the Wildean paradox that life imitates art. Given the impact of Giacometti's frail figures, the critical reception and interpretation they receive is a major motivating force for Ponge who sets out, as he did in 'Pages bis' to redress the balance, and adopts his preferred position of resistance, consistent with his sustained function as an independent literary guerilla, remaining outside mainstream philosophies or creative groups. Here as elsewhere Ponge resists obliquely, and with his own idiosyncratic weapons.

The Giacometti essays illustrate, then, a further possible use of criticism: criticism as resistance, not only to the challenge presented to language by the artist and his work, but also to more pessimistic presentations of the absurd and its consequences. Using this piece as a valuable public forum, Ponge produces an interpretation of Giacometti which remains a robust, materialistic challenge to other major versions then and since. Like all his texts on objects, Ponge's work on Giacometti is fundamentally, and above all, a corrective.
Ponge's title 'Joca Seria' is taken from Cicero: "les choses sérieuses et celles qui ne le sont pas, c'est à dire toute chose, tout" is his explanatory note (JS 153). The title therefore points at once to the various tones and to the form of the text. 'Joca Seria' is an inclusive notebook, a diary of twenty eight dated entries written in a sustained period of meditation on Giacometti's man, which lasts from 30 July to 4 September 1951.

Through these jottings, definitive formulae and a combative procedure for the required brief text on Giacometti gradually emerge. Isolated phrases and brief debates are toyed with, developed, nuanced or abandoned. Ponge occasionally halts the flow of his text to make notes on how he should proceed, and pauses to analyse the importance of this work and its place in his larger creative scheme. 'Joca Seria' also has a stimulating double-edged approach to Giacometti, being by turns light-hearted and serious. The title takes account of the fluctuation between a whimsical, naive approach to the sculptor, and a periodic exploration of more solemn issues. It points, in addition, to the gravity of what appears to be jovial. Parts of Ponge's text may indeed be playful, but this is not gratuitous play; it is a winning jocularity deliberately offset against Giacometti's sombreness.

Whilst Ponge respects Giacometti, stresses his authenticity and looks for points of fraternity, it is nevertheless clear from the outset that he cannot be coupled with the sculptor in the same way as Sartre. Giacometti is a problematic subject and as Ponge gathers and clarifies his reasons for undertaking this work, there seems to be a certain amount of indecisiveness about what to do with him. On the third day of writing (2 août) Giacometti is apparently rejected and criticised. Here three types of
creator are outlined: "ceux qui envisagent d'abord l'individu (l'homme), le ressentent, le décrivent tel qu'ils le ressentent (les philosophes)" (JS 157). These include Sartre, Camus, Nietzsche, Michaux, Char and Giacometti, unceremoniously lumped together as purveyors of ideas. The second group in what is effectively a hierarchy, are "ceux qui s'écrivent en chœur: allons aux choses (Husserl) ou à la terre (Nietzsche)" (JS 158). Finally we have "ceux qui plongent vraiment dans le monde, dans la nature, dans la terre: moi d'abord" (JS 158). The emphasis is on energy and action rather than theorising, and Giacometti is portrayed as an artist antipathetic to Ponge's own creative drive and world view. Two notes later, and on the same day of writing, this is resolved as Ponge now sees a way forward through Giacometti, and a method of integrating this work within his larger creative scheme: "Me placer au niveau de la mort de Dieu, et de l'amincissement, extrême amaigrissement de l'individu (homme); de la destruction (et refonte) des valeurs" (JS 159).

Ponge's play on notions of destruction followed by creation allow him to move from rejection to celebration of Giacometti's man. The sculptor's tragic representation of a generation half in love with its own plight is recuperated by viewing this as a turning point; a low ebb heralding a new era. Perhaps the most telling cross-reference in 'Joca Seria' is therefore Ponge's election of a moment in Romeo and Juliette where adolescent beauty and love are about to triumph over the oppression of an old order. Under disguise (the mask of an appreciative art critic) Ponge approaches Giacometti like Romeo at the Capulet feast as a revolutionary from within, a subtle enemy in the camp (JS 161). "Il faut se rendre sympathique à l'adversaire" comments Ponge in his 'Note hâtive à la gloire de Groethuysen' of 1948; "on le diminue ainsi [...] il sera en état de moindre résistance au moment décisif" (Lyres 43).
Ponge’s treatment of Giacometti is, then, acknowledgement and denial at once. "J’ai fait mon Giacometti", he comments later, "avec le pour et le contre". He repeatedly toys with uncongenial readings of the works then replaces them with his own images, and the notebook can be read as a series of corrective movements, a deliberate exercise in the accumulation of contrasting views. Ponge outlines his stance on absurdity which he takes seriously, but which he has digested and transcended. He analyses the present chaos in many passages, but provides an extreme and exciting answer to contemporary incertitude and confusion; man’s "bûcher de contradictions" (JS 188) must not only be recognised and analysed but dismissed:

Dieu mort, les valeurs détruites,
Restait à trouver l’homme et à le détruire (JS 187).

It is important to remember that this is not a stance Ponge reaches whilst writing ‘Joca Seria’ but one which existed long before the notebook was begun. The only issue for Ponge is how to find the best, the most persuasive images to liberate Giacometti’s man and give him a positive gloss. The death of man means that "le monde va renaitre", which allows Ponge to concentrate on genesis and remain aloof from morbid speculation on man’s destiny, placing himself, as Greene comments "too far beyond Giacometti’s dazzling recording of Romanticism’s final spasm to feel the pathos of that effort." There is only one cure for the starvation of these emaciated figures: "L’homme ne se nourrir ("Renaissance") que par l’oubli de soi-même" (JS 160). The accumulation of images found for the statues therefore constitute not only recognition of their common interpretation, but also point against our identification with them as mirror images of our spiritual plight, and are one of Ponge’s principal tactics of resistance. As such, they deserve examination, but before pursuing the development of Ponge’s metaphors for the statues, an
uncharacteristic omission should be noted. The very project of *L'Atelier contemporain* is to uncover the creative methods of artists, to reveal their struggle to create but to let the finished work speak for itself. With little description or interpretation, a large proportion of Ponge's text is often given over to the creator's activity, and it is strange, therefore, that where Sartre, Genet and others take us into Giacometti's plaster-laden atelier, Ponge, who describes with such relish the thickly laden paints, the lithographic stones, slates, or sketches of other artists, and their gradual metamorphosis into the final product, never sets foot inside Giacometti's studio in 'Réflexions', and mentions the working process very little even in 'Joca Seria'. This makes the essays appear somewhat out of step with the principal preoccupations of *L'Atelier contemporain*. Here the finished object is no longer a simple trophy of the struggle to create (although Giacometti's struggle is in no way minimised by Ponge). Instead the principal problem which motivates this note book is a presentation of the completed product, our reception and possible reading of it. Just as Giacometti returns obsessively to the same reed-like figure, so does Ponge, and the resulting images, falling into positive and negative paradigms, reinforce the text's message. Ponge's interest, then, clearly lies in the crucial issue of the interpretation of Giacometti's work rather than in its production.

A second point is that Giacometti's diverse artistic activities fade into non-existence. There is no concern with his previous artistic development, nor any detailed description of particular works. Instead Ponge works around an "idée globale intime" of an elongated, petite shape, and it is around this nexus that his "raisons", dispersed in the texts on *L'Homme*, in 'Pages bis' and elsewhere, congregate in significant opposition. The reed-like figure is pervasive throughout 'Joca Seria', and the different meanings and faces it assumes are essential for Ponge's combative stance
in his dialogue with alternative images of the human condition. For greatest effect, then, the game is reduced to its simplest elements. The slender statuette is accepted as the totem of absurdist philosophy, and is used as a pawn in a tactical verbal contest.

Figures for figurines

"I (i), J (je), I (un) : un, simple, single, singularité" (JS 153). Ponge's opening utterance of 30 July is a list of unconnected interjections, obviously dictated not only by the significance but also by the shape of the thin, isolated figures Giacometti was producing in the late forties and early fifties. From this initial breaking of silence, the flow of the text commences with a sustained analysis of the contemporary position and status of the 'Je', the universal indicator of narcissism: "Cette entité mince et floue qui figure en tête de la plupart de nos phrases" (JS 188), "ce J [qui] est à l'origine de toutes les affirmations et pretentions" (JS 187), from "Je pense donc je suis", through "Je est un autre", to Giacometti's 'Je'. The 'J' will be likened to the figurines with their heavy feet and plinths, and from the start it is this shape, its peculiar nature and remarkable contemporary significance which dictates the text. Ponge begins and also ends 'Joca Seria' with discussion of the Je. On 4th September, the final day of writing, we are reminded that Giacometti is "le poète plastique du pronom personnel, de ce J" (JS 188), and that Ponge has a particular reason for linking Giacometti's archetypal shape with the letter 'J': "Pourquoi l'iconographie de Giacometti me plaît-elle si fort? Parce qu'après elle, je suppose qu'on sera près d'en avoir fini avec le Je" (JS 187).

As has been stated, Ponge is careful not to neglect the accepted view of the statues throughout his text. They
represent the "Précarité de l'individu réduit à lui-même dans le monde néant" (JS 157). Man is "Laminé de plus en plus par son désespoir, sa solitude, son sentiment exaspéré de la personne humaine, de la liberté, de etc" (JS 159). However, many of his images deliberately deflate this grandiose obsession and are comparatively down to earth or even humorous. Whereas in Sartre, Genet or the Ephemère poets the figures are invariably eaten away by the space which surrounds and dominates them, Ponge exchanges disintegration for formation, ignores the suggestive enigma of the surrounding void altogether and refuses to submit to the thrill of the common metaphysical frisson. His irrepressible urge for the concrete leads him instead to be fascinated by the "socle" and the disproportionately heavy feet which contrast with the fragility of the statues themselves and are indicative of the purely terrestrial nature of the human condition (JS 168). The metaphysical feel of the sculptures is shifted by finding meaning in the parergon as well as in the ergon, to stress a firmly earth-bound quality and restore a degree of corporality which other interpretations readily ignore. One interesting example of Ponge's deflationary tactics is his impression of a busy vernissage at the Galerie Maeght in 1951 which provides the image of a herd of bulls ruminating around a few spindly stalks of dried scrub, the latter totally obscured by the "troupeau de boeufs énormes" (JS 167). This points against identification — perhaps with a touch of wit — for the scrub is a deliberately un-lyrical version of Pascal's "roseau pensant", while the image of cattle precludes any temptation to sombre thoughts on man's spiritual destiny by drawing attention to his more grossly physical nature, all of which deprives us of the resemblance we may have sought and relished. Ponge's originality is to see the statues not as images of man or as metaphors of the human condition, but as what they actually are — small, thin inanimate objects. His second entry of the first day of
writing pursues the problem of interpretation: "Les statuettes et figurines de Giacometti [...] qu'en pourrait-on inférer, quant à la civilisation ou l'homme qui les produisit? Et d'abord qu'en dirait-on? Dans quelle catégorie d'objets les classerait-on?" (JS 155). His response to these questions about the Existentialist icon may be interpreted as bathetic: "l'on songerait d'abord à mettre leur extraordinaire élongation au compte d'une nécessité fonctionnelle: chenets, manches d'outils, épées. Ce serait alors des piquets métalliques ciselés" (JS 151). Once reified, the statues permit a gradual and subtle replacement of notions of instability and ephemerality with those of permanence, stability and occasionally genesis. Ponge often chooses to exchange the striking inevitability of our encounter with them, in which there is immediate identification of the self with the image, for whimsical or utilitarian images. They are metamorphosed principally into toys, tools or weapons - a variety of objects, generally man-made and functional, their respective uses falling into three categories: play and pleasure, building and supporting, and self-defence. The choice is between allowing oneself to be dominated by the powerfully disturbing influence of these spectres viewed as symbolic of humanity, or of dominating the spectre, capturing and turning it to use.

Dense clusters of metaphors for the elongated shape and the qualities Ponge wishes to be associated with it form richly suggestive moments within the text ("fuseaux, branches, fagots, chenets, barreaux, rampes, baguettes, bâtons, épées, pieux ou fusils de bronze, piquets, épieux" (JS 162); "Aiguilles [...] Aiguillettes [...] Sistres, triangles ou tympanons. Thyrse [...] Tige - Thyrse - Sistres, Tressé en Thyrse - Tomahawk - TomAok" (JS 181); "De la viande en petite brochette. Quenouilles. Quenelles. Spectres tombant en quenouilles" (JS 185)). The quick-fire transformations form a self-perpetuating chain, working by
free association and suggestivity. It must be mentioned that Ponge's metaphors are uniquely plural; the figurines are envisaged each time, under whatever form they appear, as a large group of mass produced objects, hence diminishing the tragic nature of a solitary figure lost in space.

Beginning with Ponge's more whimsical images, the "impression recue chez Rudier (le fondeur)" is of a collection of lead soldiers, of "l'industrie du jouet". This is followed by mention of "marionnettes" (JS 172), and "jonchets" (spillikins) (JS 174) - all of them to be toyed with or manipulated. On some occasions they are merely "insectes" (JS 174), "sculptures d'insectes sociaux (termites, fourmis)" (JS 168), "les nymphes" (JS 173), or, perpetuating the running metaphor of reproduction, "l'oeuf, le cocon" (JS 167). There is in addition rather black whimsy in the image of human beings as edible matter, with the irresistible charred kebabs - "rognons en brochette" (JS 185), or with "quenelles" (seasoned balls of pounded flesh).

The vegetation metaphor is used both to portray the figurines as fuel (stalks of dried grass or dead wood for burning; "fuseaux, branches, fagots, chalumeaux" (JS 162)) and to suggest the organically fruitful ("Epis ou étamines" (JS 180)).

The next, larger groups concern tools, supports and weapons. Normally, as Sartre points out, man-made objects in Ponge are divested of their "significations pratiques", appearing strange and new because washed of the utilitarian aspect which usually clouds our response to them. Ponge writes "grattant leur vernis de significations utilitaires". Here on the contrary, the "signification pratique" is imposed upon aesthetic objects which are intentionally metamorphosed into a series of utilitarian objects. Again Ponge illustrates how the statues are objects made by man, for man's practical use. The functions of his chosen tools are connotative of building and stability. They are tough, durable and functional: "Piquets métalliques.
ciselés" (JS 155); "manches d'outils" (JS 105); "Aiguilles" (JS 181); "rampes", "barreaux" (JS 162).

Supports include those fitting into a navigational metaphor, which perpetuates the theme of survival through chaos. The figures are rigged-out, "grées. Dans le juste appareil" (JS 180), or are "pantagnières" - ropes which hold the masts steady during storms. More important still is the imagery of weaponry, a list including "pieux ou fusils de bronze" (JS 162), "lances verticales" (JS 175) "Massettes" (JS 179), "Tomahawk - Tomàck" (JS 181), "épieux" (JS 162), and above all, the sword: "épées" (JS 155, 162). Finally, from the sword as the symbol of personal power, we move through the idea of the shepherd's "houlette" (JS 180, 190), also linked to kingship and leadership in general, and through this, to pomp, ceremonial and accompanying music. The statues are seen as ancient instruments, life-enhancing, graceful and aesthetic. "Sceptres, Thyrses" (JS 181); "cordes tendues" (JS 175); "Sistres, triangles, tympanone" (JS 181). From toy and tool through to sword and sceptre, Ponge's images are themselves an arms cache, "une masse d'armes ou un pantagnière" (JS 181) in which positive paradigms of stability, solidity, building, fertility, and pleasure are stored against more negative ideas.

The single most obvious combative device is that of transformations through which Ponge's intent to perform a shift from one view of Giacometti to another, implicit in the game of accumulating metaphors, is made more blatant. Thus, about half way through 'Joca Seria' comes "Apparitions transmuées en pantagnières" (JS 180), followed by "spectres tombant en quenouilles" (JS 185), bathetically reducing spirit to matter. Not only do the sculptures have their substantiality heightened as opposed to their fragility, but we are also made aware of the power of language in doing this. Ostentatious word play is responsible for several of the transformations in order that a simultaneous point may be made about how shifts in language affect our perception.
and interpretation of reality; that is, reality is a linguistically created phenomenon. What concerns Ponge is the "moment où les apparences prennent le caractère à la fois d'apparitions et d'appareils" (JS 180). The Sartrean apparition and the Pongian device are both to be maintained in 'Réflexions' and the summit of the transformational pattern occurs in "D'un spectre faire un sceptre" (JS 181). This slight yet radical anagrammatical shift encapsulates Ponge's endeavour to show Giacometti's work in a positive light through his text, as well as providing a textual equivalent of Giacometti's achievement in giving concrete form to apparitions.

Ponge's images, then, are almost exclusively of lifeless objects - and particularly heavy objects in wood, metal or on occasions, provocatively, of stone ("stalagmites / stalactites") (JS 175). This is in stark opposition to Sartre, whose principal argument concerning Giacometti's contribution to sculpture is, as we have seen, that he has overcome the heaviness and divisibility of matter, producing statues which convey lightness of movement, unity of being, and a unique quality of ephemerality. Whereas Sartre points towards the depetrification of a naturally petrified art form, Ponge points to its inevitable petrifaction, its 'objectness'. Sartre is at pains to distinguish human beings from objects, into whose static ranks sculpture had so far compelled them to sink. Ponge's view of the statues remains a denial of this elevation of Giacometti's matter to something almost human, and the direct reference to Sartre's essay which he tactically maintains in 'Réflexions' is in fact a cool mis-quotation, in keeping with the essay's general tone of good humoured, nonchalant provocation. This is how Sartre describes Giacometti's sculptural hurdle: "A present, voici la matière; un rocher, simple grumeau d'espace. Avec de l'espace, il faut donc que Giacometti fasse un homme, il faut qu'il inscrive le mouvement dans la totale immobilité, l'unité dans la multiplicité infinie, 

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l'absolu dans la relativité pure, l'avenir dans le présent éternel, le bavardage des signes dans le silence obstiné des choses. Entre la matière et le modèle l'écart paraît impossible à combler". In using the phrase "grumeau d'espace", Sartre is in fact referring not to the sculptures but to unredeemed matter set in opposition to them. Ponge's adoption and corruption of the term reveals how the two are praising Giacometti for different things; Sartre for his triumphant feat of making inert matter almost human, Ponge for his reduction of humanity to "concrétions" (JS 175), which borrow qualities from the groups of objects suggested in 'Joca Seria'.

A further point highlights Ponge's ideas on art criticism. His own essay is, despite its subjectivity, actually self-effacing and unobtrusive by comparison with that of Sartre. Whereas Sartre's essay could be read and understood by a reader unfamiliar with Giacometti (i.e. read in place of Giacometti), Ponge's cannot be appreciated divorced from the sculptures. If the figurines are kebabs, the text, Ponge suggests self-denigratingly, is the accompanying salad. This characteristic humour gives the reader hints on how to proceed; being but a little paltry garnish, criticism must not be mistaken for the meat (salad can be, and often is, abandoned on the side of the plate). "Salade" also refers neatly to the volume of 'Joca Seria', to the lack of sustained, serious argument and the juxtaposition of isolated paragraphs from different sources (Malherbe, Sartre, Pascal), tossed together then arranged and 'dressed' in 'Réflexions'. A salad is also a tangle or muddle, from which the reader picks out what he wants. Giacometti is not petrified into a single interpretation here, but the reader emerges with an overall feel of his work, and with hints as to possible readings.

The substance of Ponge's "salade" is taken from many and various sources, all part of the "phase épique" (JS 159)
to which this text belongs. 'Joca Seria' reaches out to Ponge's own voice in other texts of the same year with which there is significant overlap, and is also suffused with references to a chorus of other voices, contemporary and otherwise, which feed his argument on the position of post-war man. The entries of 2 and 3 August in which Ponge distinguishes himself from philosophers have already been discussed. They are followed by his decision as to the correct attitude and tone, or combination of tones, for his final text: "Ce n'est pas l'ironie qui convient envers de tels artistes (poètes et peintres métaphysiciens)"; "Notre attitude est plus difficile, plus profonde, nous devons assumer à la fois l'inspiration et les censure(s) ne pas choisir entre Horace et Artaud), être à la fois Pascal et Malherbe" (JS 160). It is not surprising to find Pascal mentioned here, since much of the imagery Ponge has already used for Giacometti's statues is an echo of Pascal's own powerful imagery for the human condition (Giacometti is, in fact, Pascal without the paria). Nor is it surprising to find reference to Malherbe, the father of French Classicism, Ponge's universal corrective and panacea. Malherbe is never far away from Ponge's mind but at this period he is particularly preoccupied with the poet since his 'epic' biography / autobiography and "Grand testament" Pour un Malherbe, was also begun in 1951 ('Joca Seria' is composed between 30 July and 4 September 1951 and the first two parts of Pour un Malherbe between 21 June and 11 October 1951). There is considerable overlap between the texts. In Pour un Malherbe Ponge again proposes to discuss "Sartre et Camus, par rapport à moi" (PM 22). The principal theme of 'Joca Seria' is also outlined ("Oui, nous travaillons à une nouvelle conception de l'homme par l'homme, mais non selon la vieille idée d'une suprématie ou prééminence quelconque de l'homme sur les autres espèces") (PM 147), and Malherbe is seen as an antidote to the "honteuse anarchie où nous nous trouvons", the "chaos dans lequel nous sommes et dont
nous avons à sortir" (PM 14). Pascal and Malherbe, the arch enemy and the mentor, are often returned to in Ponge where they are represented as an antithetical pair, and the stark polarities they represent are particularly important in this discussion of man. In 'Notes premières de l"Homme"' Ponge states "Il faut que je relise Pascal", naturally "(pour le démolir)" (TP 245), and while there is a Pascalian persuasiveness to the overall movement of Ponge's argument in 'Joca Seria', its thrust is naturally against Pascal. To mention Pascal is to evoke "cette planche pourrie. Ce géomètre accidenté, ce monstre, cet enfant prodige tombé sur sa grosse tête ("joie! joie! pleurs de joie!") (PM 30). To mention Malherbe is, on the contrary, to evoke all the qualities Ponge finds of contemporary value in the poet's work and personality: "Pas embarrasé par les sentiments, l'imagination ni aucune idéologie. Très terre à terre, mais une parfaite dignité" (PM 14).

Malherbe arrives late in this text, however, and the quotation elected by Ponge, which is to be retained in 'Réflexions', does not appear until the final significant entry of "4 Septembre, Crépuscule du soir", where the text's argument is accelerated and many of the themes and images drawn together. This is surprising since many of the themes of Ponge's notebook could well have arisen from rather than preceded the choice of the verse. It is also surprising that Ponge does not labour the applicability of the whole poem. For the moment, however, comments on this will be limited to the significance of Malherbe's appearance. In Pour un Malherbe, Ponge comments on the two duties he feels incumbent upon himself as a writer: "Le maintien est donc l'un des devoirs qui s'imposent à nous; l'autre étant la création de valeurs nouvelles" (PM 25). In this endeavour, past works offer "l'exemple d'une perfection (selon certains points de vue) que nous mettrions infiniment plus longtemps à retrouver de nous-mêmes" (PM 35). Ponge goes on to suggest that the principal use of such touchstones is "l'affutage de
nos censure; "Nos scrupules nous sont donnés peut-être antérieurement même à nos audaces. Toute une série d'entre eux peuvent être représentées pour nous par une œuvre, ou seulement un nom: Malherbe, Cézanne... L'on gagne ainsi du temps (Socles d'attributs). L'on n'a pas toujours toutes ses raisons présentes. Eh bien, cela en tient lieu" (PM 36).

A final source of elliptical reference which enriches Ponge's "salade" is the realm of ancient myth. Oddly enough, in his writings on Braque Ponge mentions nothing of the painter's extensive truck with mythology, yet by the end of 'Joca Seria' he has developed a combination of myths for Giacometti which will serve in 'Réflexions' and become intimately linked both with the verse from Malherbe and with the fictional elements which constitute Giacometti's 'biography'. This entire web of images can be traced back to one factual detail; Giacometti's Swiss origin. This provides the starting point for a series of fanciful equations which rely on the trappings Ponge associates with the locality: mountains, rocks, goats, shepherds and shepherd's crooks, pine trees and meadows. Various permutations of these are used to 'describe' Giacometti, his family and his art. Thus Giacometti's father, an Impressionist painter, is a meadow of flowers or a rainbow, in contrast to Giacometti himself who, like his mother, is a "rocher", and whose actual physical characteristics permit this suggestion ("Giacometti est étonnamment gris, et caverneux, crevassé, ridé, et hirsute, et large") (JS 176). Giacometti's brothers are fir trees, while his favourite model Annette is a frail "chèvre", both of which are compared with the "rocher".

Giacometti's family history (the odd coupling of his parents, of the colourful vegetal world with rock and the consequent production of a boulder and two fir trees) points to a recurrent antithesis in Ponge; that of the organically fruitful versus the petrified. Comparing the heavy feet of Giacometti's statues with roots, he comments that "Les pieds des végétaux, chaussés à l'extrême poulaine, sont beaucoup
plus habiles (à se diviser, par exemple, du fait de leur immobilité (racines). Nous sommes, (paradoxalement) beaucoup plus immobiles. Nous ne prenons pas racines. C'est du poids mort (pierre qui roule n'amasse pas mousse)** (JS 169). This antithesis allows Ponge to turn to use an important axiom of his own universe; that the petrified is jealous of the organic (JS 177). Thus Giacometti, "Un rocher dans sa stupeur, sa rugosité grise, sa dureté" is "jaloux de la terre végétale où prennent naissance (ou prennent forme) les arbres". His obsessive ambition, to create several of the "arbres grêles qui naissent et qui forment près de lui", is unrealistic: "ce n'est pas des rochers que naissent les pins. C'est des pins eux-mêmes, et de la terre avoisinante, où ils se nourrissent". If Ponge prefers to deal with the vegetal it is because of the inability of rock to reproduce, and hence its tendency to throw us towards death. It is for this reason that Giacometti's world, where each object is "serrée et étique; dure comme une vieille pomme sans raison sur une table branlante dans un atelier délabré" (JS 156) is associated with rock. It is a world which leads only to slow destruction.**2

From Ponge's own myth, we turn to his glancing references to ancient myth, the first of which concerns the cyclops Polyphemus (on 8, 25 and 28 August) who provides a further image for the sculptor: "Il y a en lui du Polyphème"; "C'est un cyclope qui ne sculpterait que des chèvres, qui aime les rochers, les nymphes et les chèvres. Confond nymphes et chèvres, dans les éboulis de rochers" (JS 172-73). This perpetuates the contrast between "rocher" and "chèvre" (Giacometti and Annette) and on 28 August gives the equation Giacometti = rocher = Polyphème; Annette = chèvre / nymph = Galatée, the most beautiful of the Néréides and beloved of Polyphemus. Galatea, however, spurned the cyclops and preferred the young shepherd, Acis. Apart from this there is no reference to myth until the last entry of 'Joca Seria' which sees a sudden surge of mythological references
interwoven with Ponge's chosen stanza from Malherbe. The various themes of these myths include unrequited love and sexual betrayal (Polyphemus and Galatea; the betrayal of Cybele by Atys), an unfulfilled yearning which points to the avowed inaccessibility of Giacometti's desired goals. A further theme is repression, punishment and suffering (Polyphemus crushing Acis under a rock; Cybele changing Atys into a pine tree, Ulysses' blinding of Polyphemus, and the metamorphosis of Ulysses' companions into swine). After mention of the latter myth, Ponge begins once again to take the side of Giacometti / Polyphemus rather than stressing his existence as a repressive and tragic force: "Nous prendrons bien plutôt le parti du cyclope (sans nous laisser pour autant crever l'ceil)" (JS 189).

This decision is followed by the stanza from Malherbe which helps to organise these myths, hints that suffering and repression may be resolved, and leads to the use of Astrée, "la Vierge du Zodiaque, fille de Jupiter et de Thémis [...] représentée ordinairement des épis dans une main, et une palme ou une balance dans l'autre" (JS 189). This in turn leads to Jupiter, father of Astrée, and to the equation Giacometti = Jupiter, holding the foudre / houlette / sceptre in his hand and performing a beneficial metamorphosis by transforming apparitions into "une sorte particulière de houlettes" (JS 190). All these myths are obscurely linked, although Ponge appears content to mix them and let them surface at random. Jupiter, for example, was the son of Cybele and the father of Astrée, and had his thunderbolts forged by the cyclops, although Ponge does not mention these facts.

Amongst this rich combination of references, Ponge is aware of the need for a process of selection. Both entries of 30 August commence "Qu'allons-nous choisir de dire à propos de Giacometti et de son oeuvre?" (JS 179) and on 4 September, Ponge is still meditating, "Pour Giacometti, que choisir de dire?" (JS 186). Finally it is decided that a
short, concentrated text with one overriding message is in
order. In this entry Ponge comments "Son œuvre mérite qu'à
son propos l'on soit bref (qu'on abrège)", and previously
(on 31 August) the adéquation of his final text is outlined
with particular clarity: "Il faudrait n'avoir qu'une chose à
dire et la serrer de près (à la fois la tenir à distance et
la serrer de près)" (JS 181). The single thing Ponge has to
relate is the transformation from perturbed uncertainty to
triumphant self-possession, which is typically accounted for
in the images found for the figurines: "D'UN SPECTRE FAIRE
UN SCEPTRE" (JS 181). This is what governs the choice of
images and the overall architecture of 'Réflexions'.

Réflexions sur les Statuettes, Figures et Peintures
d'Alberto Giacometti

'Reflexions sur les Statuettes, Figures et Peintures
d'Alberto Giacometti' has a surface air of casualness, but
is in fact a meticulously plotted, tripartite text in which
every element selected from 'Joca Seria' is a carefully
placed device. Each 'movement' of the essay has its own
distinctive mood, according to the challenges Ponge sets
himself in 'Joca Seria': "assumer à la fois l'inspiration et
les censures"; "Il faudrait être Pascal et Malherbe à la
fois" (JS 160), which purport to juxtapose irreconcilable
views. Malherbe (Ponge's 'ancestor') appears in the essay's
first section, and Pascal (Giacometti's 'ancestor') in its
last. The whole is a complex weave of images discovered in
'Joca Seria' and since it is stripped down from these more
self-explanatory notes much remains elliptical.

Firstly the title itself requires comment. Ponge's
texts are generally as much about language and the act of
inscription as anything else, and suggestions of this are
often incorporated in his titles which refer to the texts
themselves as concrete phenomena rather than to their argument. In *L'Atelier contemporain* references to the physical act of writing — be it energetic, hurried or casual — are frequent: 'Notes', 'prose', 'phrase', 'paroles', 'textes' (suggesting the act of weaving) is the list of such examples in the *recueil*. The word 'Réflexions' however, also present in the subtitle of 'Pages bis' ('Réflexions en lisant l'essai sur l'absurde') emphasises the non-concrete nature of writing and uncharacteristically announces the following text as a compilation of thoughts rather than an arrangement of signs. It is more explicitly ideological, implying a degree of abstraction or meditation usually given a back seat by Ponge, and is an odd reversal of his chosen hierarchy between thought and language. In general Ponge's efforts attempt to break free from the notion that thought precedes expression and the *signifiant* is often foregrounded more than the *signifié* in his work. Ponge's title here is perhaps a concession made to the "mésalliance" he feels obliged to undergo in the third part of his essay, where he takes account of the philosophical treatments Giacometti's figurines have attracted and temporarily imitates them. The title also raises certain expectations only to thwart them in the first section, which is non-discursive, poetic in nature, and which speaks about Giacometti himself rather than giving separate treatment to the "statuettes", "figures" and "peintures" as promised.

Ponge's critical essays frequently begin with paragraphs of great impact, and if Giacometti's statues are "saisissantes", then so is Ponge's opening gambit:

Voici le moment, je crois, d'interroquer notre génération en lui proposant une vérité saisissante — la plus émouvante pour elle à concevoir — dont nous dûmes pourtant attendre qu'elle la produise strictement d'elle-même. La moindre statuette de Giacometti nous en fournit le gage formel: pour qu'une telle génération — la nôtre — montre ainsi en gloire ses étamines, il faut qu'elle soit à l'heure de son complet épanouissement...

(R 93).
Ponge chooses to begin not with the common stock of images for Giacometti but by generating immediate interest through the sudden surge into our consciousness of a positive voice which counteracts the sculptor's inherent pessimism and stresses the ripeness of the present moment. Immediately accepting Giacometti's work as the symbol of a generation, this paragraph presents the symbiosis between artist and society, between private obsession and the larger urges of the zeitgeist, with the paradox that the public, without realising it, has itself been partially responsible for creating Giacometti's man, and that the time is now propitious for the collective creators to ponder over the significance of their creation. This is a common theme in Ponge: artists are continually presented as receptors and filters of the consciousness of a generation, yet the true applicability of their works to contemporary society is seldom understood.

The "vérité" Ponge proposes in this paragraph is a supremely optimistic one. He opts for immediate celebration of the near annihilation of man in Giacometti's sculpture, and takes the word 'génération' as a hint of our 'being made'. The essay instantly refers us to the birth of form and begins at once to reject nihilistic implications by turning to use a favourite organic metaphor of the flowering, fruition and reproduction of plants. The floral metaphor is one we would barely expect to encounter in an essay on Giacometti, and the term "épanouissement" is particularly striking. Not only does it suggest blossoming, plenitude and radiance but also, figuratively, joyfulness and good humour. No longer symptomatic of a weary age and of man's uncertain condition, but fertility symbols, Giacometti's dark, filiform figures are the stamen in the flower of modern civilisation. They are to ensure rebirth after the withering of the bloom, and are to become the plastic proof or guarantee of Ponge's "Vérité". The 'i' or
'J' shape is first used, then, to open the network of flower and plant imagery, a leitmotif which is put to many uses and which helps to give the whole text a positive gloss. Flowers are deliberately placed in opposition to stone (the sculptor is again described as a "rocher" (R 93)), and Ponge surrounds Giacometti with them, from the image of his father as a "champ de fleurs", to calculated mention of the Existentialist haunt, the Café de Flore.

Following the introductory paragraph, part one is largely given over to the mythical portrayal of Giacometti. Discussion of the sculptor's origins, rise to greatness, the nature of his creative urge, his relationship to his work as well as his physical portrait are validated by Ponge's theory that both man and work are created during the artistic process, and are inseparable, to be expressed as functions of each other. (In 'Joca Seria' "L'Oeuvre de Giacometti" is defined by Ponge as "l'homme [...] son comportement [...] sa vie [...] et [les] productions qui en résultent" (JS 163)). The portrait which emerges is a rich combination of elements which were dispersed throughout 'Joca Seria'. There the running theme of Giacometti as Polyphemus was developed and Ponge toyed with images of the sculptor as a bear, a clown or even Quasimodo. He also included the sort of potted life history the reader might expect to find in any monograph on the sculptor: the date and place of his birth, details of his family, his physical resemblance to his mother, his youthful attempts at sculpting or painting, and his entry in the Ecole des Beaux-Arts in Geneva in 1919.

In 'Réflexions' the combination of actual and fictional levels is more surprising and the portrait is at once fanciful and amusingly apt. It relies heavily on the mythological figures which pervade Ponge's treatment of Giacometti and is itself a modern exercise in mythopoeia. It is, furthermore, radically different in tone from the dramatic profile of Giacometti we find in Sartre. Ponge's
portraiture commences abruptly half way through paragraph two when, following a few factual biographical details which help to account for Giacometti's temperament, he embarks upon the mythologising of the sculptor's origins without announcing a shift of register. He commences with the charming reification of the whole Giacometti family: in Switzerland, early in the Twentieth Century, a female rock and a male meadow of flowers (sculpture and painting) produce three sons, a rock and two pine trees. Thus Ponge begins by deliberately weaving his material on the pattern of ancient myths, whose conventions legitimise such metamorphoses. It might be added that the reification of Giacometti's family and the deliberate petrification of the sculptor himself is a subtle joke given that the issue of petrification is viewed by Ponge, Sartre and Giacometti alike as a crucial one in the representation of humanity. In any case, such straight-faced introduction of myth amongst factual data surprises because it indicates that these naïve, imaginative details have equal veracity.

Paragraph three follows Giacometti to the Académie and outlines his passionate desire for a single, inaccessible artistic goal, the description of which is couched in terms of courtship: "passionnément sensible [...] désirait [...] une telle ardeur [...] un tel respect [...] de tels scrupules [...] tourment" (R 94). In Ponge the artist is commonly represented as suitor, his thwarted attempts at capture and possession being described as "L'absurde de l'expression" (R 94). Here, the repetition of superlatives indicates the pitch of tension Giacometti's craft reaches, whilst providing, through the ideas of passion and obsession, an early introduction to one of Ponge's chosen myths for the sculptor - Polyphemus' obsessive but unrequited love for the nymph Galatea.

It is in paragraphs seven and eight that Giacometti's mythical persona is more fully elaborated:
Comme tout berger de montagne Giacometti, sujet aux apparitions, n'a de cesse au cours de la même nuit qu'il ne les ait transformées en houlettes. Peut-être, comme Jupiter, pour tenir la foudre en son poing ?
L'opération - pourtant d'autant moins facile qu'elle porte sur la plus petite chose, ce nœud : il ne s'agit de rien d'autre en somme que de faire d'un SPECTRE un SCEPTRE - ne nécessite sans doute qu'un travail mental énorme, et un canif (R 95).

Images for the sculptor are in part dictated by the concrete images Ponge elects for his figurines: the "houlette" and the "sceptre". These are typically constructive replacements for the "apparition" and the "spectre", symbols of strength and leadership rather than of loss. They are also metonyms for the king and the shepherd (Littré: "Depuis le sceptre jusqu'à l'houlette = depuis les rois jusqu'aux bergers"), figures with which Giacometti is alternately equated. Firstly, Giacometti's rural background is seized upon to provide the analogy which links his statues to the "houlette" mentioned in Ponge's previous quotation from Malherbe ("Houlette de Louis, houlette de Marie"). This is then pursued to reveal Giacometti as a "berger", suffering from ghostly visions in the dark, and engaging in frenzied nocturnal activity to convert them at once into something substantial (note also that this perpetuates the theme of the suitor or lover, which was the role of the shepherd in pastoral poetry). It is the metonymic "houlette" which, by virtue of its royal implications, provides the necessary link for the appearance of Jupiter, king of the gods. Appropriate to both shepherd and king, it also has religious connotations (a bishop's crook) all of which contribute to Ponge's own idea of the artist's multiple responsibility.

The following paragraph encapsulates Giacometti's creative process which Ponge characterises as a delicate tour de force. It is not clear, however, given the somewhat contradictory statements contained above, whether he is principally praising or minimising Giacometti's achievement.
Set against the "travail mental énorme" and suggestion of difficulty are "rien d'autre", and "ne nécessite [...] que", and Ponge's mimetic rendering of Giacometti's feat shows how the mere shifting of two consonants is enough to change our perspective of a "SPECTRE" to a "SCEPTRE". Similarly, Giacometti is associated with both shepherd and god, the bathetic and the magnificent, combining crude rusticity and godlike power.

In paragraph eight the legend is placed in its Parisian context:

Bergers au petit jour se trouvent changés en rochers... Et c'est pourquoi sans doute l'on voit souvent, dans le quartier du café de Flore, se promener ce rocher, large et hirsute figure grise, marquée encore des stigmates de son tourment de la nuit: terrifié encore par ces frêles et menaçantes silhouettes d'arbres grêles autour de lui, ou de ces chèvres. Oui, du sculpteur à ses statuettes, le rapport est le même en effet, que d'un cyclope à une nymphe (maigre), de Polyphème à Galatée: désir en surplomb, lorgnette abrupte - colossale différence de proportions (R 95).

St. Germain des Prés and the Café de Flore, favourite haunts of the Existentialists and legends in their own right, partake of the mythical aura lent to the whole paragraph. They are the stage for a new creation of man through the theories of Sartre and the sculptures of this bizarre, legendary figure, steeped in the folk history of his bucolic origins (see "village de montagne" and "au coeur rude de L'Europe" (R 93)) with which the Parisian chic co­exists. Elements of both are linked by the several connotations of "Flore" and "Stigmata", which keep Ponge's vegetation metaphor flourishing. The latter brings to mind Giacometti's suffering for his art as well as referring to parts of a flower, while the former incorporates the idea of Parisian café life and its rich exchange of ideas with the mythical figure of Flora who, appropriately associated with primitive central Italy, was the goddess of budding and springtime.
An air of magic and mystery surrounds Giacometti's nocturnal transformation into artist/shepherd, and his dawn metamorphosis into a rock. It has already been stated that the craggy, grey physical appearance of the sculptor invites the image of an ambulatory boulder, whilst suggesting cliched anthropomorphic characteristics of courage, strength and isolation, all reinforced by the semi-religious idea of the artist as martyr, carrying with him the torment of his nightmarish mountain vision. From victim to aggressor, however, Giacometti is suddenly shown as the most renowned of all the cyclops, Polyphemus, the son of Poseidon who lived in a cave close to Etna and fed off human flesh. Ponge does not labour the appropriateness of the figure of Polyphemus, but for anyone familiar with Greek mythology ('Joca Seria' takes such knowledge for granted: "On sait qu'Atys trompa Cybèle", "On sait que Polyphème eut son œil unique crevé par Ulysse" (JS 189)) such a silence merely enhances the joke of an image which, while none too flattering, is irresistibly apt in all its ramifications. In 'Réflexions' its two most celebrated episodes (Polyphemus' thwarted love for Galatea the Nereid, and his entrapment of Ulysses and his men in his cavern) are used to structure Ponge's text. In Homer, the cyclops were "enormous giants as big as mountains, and their single eye, under a bushy eyebrow, glittered menacingly"; "given to a pastoral existence, they were gross and ill-mannered, living in isolated caverns, slaughtering and devouring any who approached their shores"; "some made the vast bellows roar, others, furiously raising one by one their heavy hammers, struck great blows at the molten bronze and iron they drew from the furnace". Thus Giacometti, misanthropic, solitary (and, incidentally, physically large) retreats to his sparse atelier in the early evening and spends the night victimising his frail creations, feeding off human flesh (hence the thinness of the statues). His one eye is the image for artistic obsession and concentration, and the
massive difference of proportion between Giacometti and his statues is suggested by the cyclops and nymph analogy. Giacometti's sudden, dominating gaze freezes the nymph, but he is at once victimiser and victimised; at once the cyclops whose daily gift of a bear or an elephant was repulsed by Galatea, and the shepherd, Acis, whom she favoured, and with whom she was crushed to death under a rock by Polyphemus himself; a destructive potential which was inherent in Giacometti's work.

The single eye of the cyclops is not only the image for single mindedness; it is also a humorous suggestion of severe limitations, and on two occasions the terror engendered in Giacometti by his vision of man is revealed to be the result of defective vision. Absurdly enough, it is shadows of saplings and goats which terrify him in the dark (this makes his terror unfounded and slightly ridiculous) and the single eye of Polyphemus suggests the intensity of Giacometti's unrelieved penchant for tragedy, and his lack of humour - a fundamental imbalance. Eventually Polyphemus "eut l'œil crevé par Ulysse, qu'il avait gardé prisonnier" (JS 189). The dangers involved in treating man as a direct subject have already been discussed; like Ulysses, he may blind us.

Not surprisingly, Giacometti was nettled by Ponge's portrait: "Giacometti a commencé par être très fâché, très fâché que je dise qu'il allait au Flore, qu'il était Suisse... il m'a écrit une lettre où il était très fâché". Such anodyne details are, however, equally in evidence in Sartre's essay, and Ponge's text is undeniably far less revealing than some of Genet's work, which includes several less than delicate biographical details. It was doubtless the jocular tone of Ponge's portraiture which displeased the sculptor.

Thus Ponge's text combines ancient myth, modern legend, and Ponge's own imaginary myths, adding status, but also humour to the latter by association and integration with the
former. But why does Ponge's recourse to myth extend to the creation of a new myth about Giacometti himself, and why is the use of a mythical mode appropriate here? Firstly, mythogenesis generally serves to elevate the subject around which it is woven. It is commonly associated with major enigmas such as the origins and death of man, and with explanations or conjectures about the supernatural. It also lends simple, dramatic, memorable form to major events in human history. Ponge's use of the mythical mode could indeed have served to indicate that Giacometti's postwar re-making of man is an issue worthy of such grand proportions, were it not for the distinctly mischievous nature of this particular myth-making exercise, which seems to run counter to the usual function of myth.

Secondly, Ponge is engaged throughout L'Atelier contemporain in writing the legend of certain major contemporary figures, in a sustained appreciation of the supreme importance of artists in a godless world. The creator is different from and superior to ordinary men, and is therefore often magnified as an exemplary being, a great sufferer, living with intensity, with immense creative force which may ultimately consume him. This image receives its fullest, most serious and energetic expression in the portrait of Fautrier, Braque's rhythm of creation being not frenzied but sustained and leisurely, and Giacometti's sacrifice being at once acknowledged, but tinged with humour. It seems, then, that the upshot of this use of myth is to lighten our view of the sculptor. Ponge will not allow Giacometti the full tragic magnificence of a Fautrier, and if the myth woven around him is a real and genuine appreciation, it is at the same time deliberately married with a hyperbolic humour and light heartedness which neither the sculptor's person nor his work appear to invite.

The remaining paragraphs in part one are all based on positive images derived from the spindle shape of the
statuettes. Firstly the imagery of plant growth points to their fertility. Through phrases rife with botanical terminology ("tiges", "caducus", "latéral", "se flétrissent", "pointe", "bouton", "faite", "turion" (R 94)) the respective values of various contemporary works of art are discussed in terms of vegetation. Giacometti's durability is stressed in opposition to other colourful, voluminous, but ephemeral artistic expressions which Ponge refers to as deciduous and which, having perished, are now described as mere bundles of twigs: "des fagots pour chauffer la marmite des rustres" (R 94). Just as in Ponge, the pip is the most important part of the orange, so the discretely developing but fertile "turion" ("Pousse qui s'allonge beaucoup avant de produire des feuilles" (Littre)) takes precedence here, constituting a decisive assertion of Giacometti's permanent value and reminding us that his statues are fertile and embryonic in Ponge's eyes. Towards the end of this paragraph a rather lyrical navigational image points to the future function of Giacometti's works:

Plus tard
ils feront des mâts de navire, - et longtemps, dans les nuits de l'avenir, c'est d'eux que dépendra le balancement des étoiles (R 94).

Here the traditional metaphor of life as an ocean and of the stars as a means of guidance through chaos receives a new twist. The term "balancement", referring to the rocking of a boat or the trimming of sails is used, in this instance, for the stars. It is the works of art - the ship's masts - which provide fixed points, whilst the stars are re-arranged according to their stability. Ships are no longer dependent upon stars, but stars on ships. Again, human destiny is self-forged, not pre-determined or dictated by any external sign, or force.

Typically Ponge balances references to the future with a reference from the past through the carefully placed but unelucidated Malherbe quotation. This eulogy is appropriate
for several reasons and whereas it appeared in 'Joca Seria' as a late trouvaille, its role in 'Réflexions' is more carefully integrated. Here Giacometti becomes a Berger, and the ship's mast a houlette:

Pourquoi devenir sculpteur? Bergers, vous allez nous le dire:

Houlette de Louis, houlette de Marie,
Dont le fatal appui met notre bergerie
Hors du pouvoir des loups,
Vous placer dans les cieux en la même contrée
Des balances d'Astrée,
Est-ce un prix de vertu qui soit digne de vous? (R 94-5).

It has already been suggested that any quotation from Malherbe, independent of its content, is itself a phenomenon synonymous with stability in Ponge - a sort of cultural guyrope. There is also the immediately available content of the stanza to consider. This serves to link images of leadership dispersed throughout 'Réflexions': the shepherd, monarch and artist, each ideally having a role as protector and guide. Malherbe provides a transition from the lowly to the elevated, from the mere shepherd and his crook to the mythical monarch Jupiter and his thunderbolt. The verse, therefore, is also mimetic of Ponge's passage from the relatively banal to the mythological in his treatment of Giacometti ("Vous placer dans les cieux"). It also serves, neatly, to cast doubt on such an elevation due to the stanza's final, provocative question. Finally, the attributes of Astrée also make a convenient appearance, given the obvious division of Ponge's text which displays "le pour et le contre" concerning Giacometti and weighs different approaches to his work.

There is another similarity between Ponge's text and Malherbe's poem. This, the opening stanza from Malherbe's 'Récit d'un berger au ballet de Madame Princesse d'Espagne' of 1627 is, like Ponge's piece, a texte de circonstance, requested for the coming alliance of France and Spain. Like Malherbe, Ponge refers to specific issues through metaphors.
and relies heavily on mythological figures. Here it is likely that Ponge had certain features of the remainder of Malherbe's 'Récit d'un berger' in mind, largely for its overriding celebratory atmosphere, its dismissal of "nos maux passés", its affirmation of prevailing peace ("Où ne voit-on la paix, comme un roc affermé"), which sets "nos Gérions" (Spanish giants) against Ceres, the goddess of fruitfulness. Still more important is the heralding of an even more harmonious era (stanza X), and particularly the penultimate stanzas (XI and XII) in which eleven future tenses provide a powerful prediction of an idyllic existence; "Un siècle renaîtra comblé d'heur et de joie".

The lasting grandeur of France appears incontrovertible, given the sheer force of Malherbe's optimistic vision:

Et les perles sans nombre
Germeront dans la Seine au milieu des graviers

Ponge, in the previous paragraph, has used similarly forceful, lyrical techniques to ensure a positive future and suggest emphatically that stability may be built out of chaos. Furthermore, Malherbe's stanza displays a certain aloofness from its chosen subject. It constitutes a celebration of the poetic excellence which eternalises the event ("Vous placer dans les cieux"), rather than the event itself, which is elevated above its purely contemporary significance by the poetry, yet which is largely incidental, a pretext. While Ponge is obviously concerned as to how the reader interprets Giacometti's work, the calculated workings of 'Réflexions' may also be said to reveal the same kind of detachment.

The essay's middle section interrupts this concentrated weave of metaphor with the familiar Pongean performance of openly discussing his critical methodology. Factors proper to 'Joca Seria' are thus incorporated into the final version, and this reflective interlude divides two differing
approaches to the statues. It acknowledges the subjective nature of Ponge's initial approach, introduces the essay's latter section and, as rapidly becomes clear, draws the reader's attention to the possibility of different approaches and the validity of each. Questioning the best way of presenting Giacometti and his work, Ponge reveals that he is impelled by the desire to achieve a multiple and complex act of adéquation, and to exchange description for mimetism, repeating aspects of Giacometti's work through the very structure of the text. The opening paragraph commences with the guideline for adéquation which Ponge had decided upon in 'Joca Seria'; that is, Giacometti's obsessive repetition of a single sculptural statement and the fixed distance at which his statues are maintained: "Pour parler de Giacometti et de son oeuvre, il fallait attendre de n'avoir plus qu'une chose à dire, à la fois la tenir à distance et la serrer de près" (R 95). The economy, indirectness and single-minded thrust of Ponge's text are all explained by this desire for equivalence, and the writer treats his main idea (the transformation of SPECTRE to SCEPTRE) with the same intensity as the sculptor treats his model. Giacometti's work also dictates the modest dimensions of this essay and the extreme abbreviation from 'Joca Seria': "L'oeuvre d'ailleurs mérite qu'à son propos l'on abrège. Quitte à faire rouler autour d'elle, pour la tenir seule, quelques gros rochers, par jalouïe" (R 96). In both form and tone this is at the opposite pole from Ponge's raw and rambling text on Fautrier's Otages which involves us in a series of dilemmas and their tentative resolution. Here we witness a careful juxtaposition of condensed paragraphs, "gros rochers" akin to those contained in the more polished texts of Le Parti pris des choses ("Giacometti mérite un texte bref. Tels ceux que j'écrivais jadis (et que je suis encore capable d'écrire, personne n'en doute)" (JS 185)). Adéquation serves more than a ludic function in this instance, however. Binding his work more inevitably with
Giacometti's statues through all the linguistic and figurative means possible is one way of making Ponge's vision appear appropriate. One could have anticipated a hesitant, fractured, anguished text, but Ponge includes only a paragraph or two written in this style, as an exercise and a concession to the sculptor's popular image.

Ponge's questions in this section ("Pourquoi donc fus-je tenté d'en parler subjectivement?"; "Pourquoi [...] pensais-je ne pouvoir trop m'en séparer?" (R 96)) are asked on behalf of a hypothetically baffled reader. This kind of aside is Ponge's compromise with the reader who may have difficulty in understanding such idiosyncratic, indirectly communicative critical paragraphs. His debate about the appeal Giacometti's statues hold for him (Why the instinctive identification, despite rational dissociation? Why the conviction that the statues evoke a similar response in all observers?) is never resolved, and this is an intentional ploy. When Ponge attempts to change tactics and speak more directly about the statues, he deliberately allows these attempts to fail. The 'answers' to his questions are another example of adéquation, of the text which 'fait ce qu'il dit'. The statues' appeal remains on a subconscious level, frustrating attempts to verbalise their power, so that the words here simply imitate the search for utterance: "Peut-être l'ai-je compris... La raison m'en est apparue comme en songe, et voici... Ah! je crois que je la tiens! mais elle reste toujours à distance! Pourrons-nous l'approcher un peu? Nos raisons, à partir d'ici, seront nécessairement un peu floues..." (R 96). These "raisons floues" are a stark contrast to the "gros rochers" and mark the centre of the essay, heralding a change of tone and tactic as Ponge's "mésalliance" with philosophy commences. The "Corps à corps journalier, ou [...] mariage" (PM 267) generally provided by Ponge's lengthy courting of his chosen subjects is here exchanged for self-abasement, or marriage beneath his station.
The following paragraph begins to contrast different possible approaches - clearly one of the thematic threads of Ponge's text. "D'aucuns y voient des 'grumeaux d'espace...'' (R 96) is, as Ponge's footnote reminds us, a reference to Sartre's oxymoronic formula in his essay on Giacometti's paintings. This is given no further discussion, but is immediately displaced as Ponge becomes irresistibly drawn by the analogy of little kidneys skewered as kebabs (an image of reduction through burning which will be further employed). Ponge's mock chastisement concerning the unseemly nature of this image ("Assez là-dessus, je vous en conjure! Vous me fâcheriez!") is cancelled-out by the image's very presence in the text. The paragraph is principally indicative of his reluctance to change tactics and to submit, however briefly, to an un-seductive mode of expression which compels him to rub shoulders with alien theorists:

Ne nous mésallions qu'à la philosophie...
La mode au surplus le légitime et l'époque le justifie (R 96).

Consistent with the split in interpretation of Giacometti, then, the third part of 'Réflexions' provides a different kind of adéquation as Ponge reluctantly brings his comments into line with the demands of contemporary philosophy. The metaphysical flavour, sobriety and stylistic fragmentation which temporarily hold sway in this final section show Ponge engaged in a mock endeavour to introduce a higher seriousness and subjugate his critical caprices. We therefore find a description more readily identifiable as Giacometti's man, which brings the precariousness of the human condition to centre stage. Here metaphors for Giacometti and his work give way to a description of Giacometti's work as metaphor and Ponge provides as powerful a version of the anguished response evoked by Giacometti as we are likely to find:
Qu'est-ce donc qui nous crucifie? Et de qui donc pouvons-nous dire, comme Pascal de Jésus, qu'il ne cessera d'être en croix tant que durera le monde, qu'on ne peut penser qu'à cela?

L'Homme... La Personne humaine... La Personne libre... Le JE... À la fois bourreau et victime... À la fois chasseur et gibier...

L'homme - et l'homme seul - réduit à un fil - dans le délabrement et la misère du monde - qui se cherche - à partir de rien (R 97).

For a brief period Ponge has allowed space to seep into his text, and this is the kind of *adéquation* we might have expected throughout, were he not attempting to give an alternative reading of the statues. Each section of the second paragraph surges then dies away in ellipses, denied syntactical connection and hence steeped in solitude. The same starting point is returned to on four occasions, communication being limited to brief shots all at the same goal (attempts at verbal capture of 'Everyman'). Separation is emphasised by the recurring direct article and capitalisation for each isolated description, which results in a stuttering reiteration of the bare fact of existence before moving on to describe man's embodiment of paradoxes. The prose, as well as the figurines, appears "Exténué, mince, étique, nu" (R 97), but the breakdown of speech holds sway only briefly. To construct the entire text along the same faltering, fragmentary lines as Giacometti's statues would be to acquiesce in a world view with a totally different emphasis. Hence the final paragraph is peppered with hyphens, not ellipses, the capital letters disappear and the sentence is a syntactic whole, each element connected to the last.

In the absence of Christ, man has made a religion of his own suffering, and these paragraphs outline the terms of a modern mass-crucifixion. The ruling voice here is Pascal and in accordance with this choice, man is viewed in an age old perspective of multiple contradictions: "Bourreau et
victime", "chasseur et gibier", "pourceau de l'intelligence", "fil et sceptre", "homme et dieu". Pascalian duality remains, but divine explanation and resolution are eliminated, and Ponge's "La Personne Libre..." represents the so called 'terrifying' recognition of total liberty from divine intervention. Here, Ponge is engaged in a re-definition of religion and a re-direction of thwarted religious energy. Man himself is responsible for the creation of the "JE"; human nature is man-made, suffering is viewed within an entirely human scheme and the "bourreau-victime" tortures himself through his own self-image.

Man is, then, metaphorically thin and weak, aimlessly wandering in an absurd universe. Ponge, however, is prompt to reveal this crisis in man's conception of man as a beginning, not only an end; as favourable, not simply tragic. The grand pathos of a dramatic and funereal moment is indeed stressed with the terms "hiératique" and "suprême", and with the sense of impending collapse conveyed by the whole. Ponge's text therefore encourages, and in part performs, a celebratory death ceremony.

From the "bûcher de contradictions" which is man's funeral pyre, it is only a short step back to the 'banned' image of kebabs, which irrepressibly rears its head again as Pascal's crucifixion is exchanged for a burning at the stake or a literal grilling. Hence the return of Ponge's subjective approach - its value and appropriateness verified - and the reconciliation of the philosophical slant with this. Man's values drip like fat around him, fuelling the self-generated flames in which he burns, a process accelerated periodically by creative individuals. Ponge names Baudelaire, Nietzsche, and sculpture from the Greeks through Laurens and Maillol, again suggesting that this art form is an ideal concrete image for the re-formation of man and the suffering this involves. Ponge stresses the heat required in working with metal ("l'homme a bien fondu au
bûcher!"; "l'homme sur son trottoir comme une toile brulante" (P 97)). The possessive ("son bûcher", "son trottoir") reasserts man's complete responsibility. Values are arbitrary, detachable, combustible, leaving fleshless slips of existence. Giacometti's man is the last step in this melting of values and therefore the first in re-establishing his understanding of himself in a correct perspective.

The positioning of sections in 'Réflexions' in no way implies, therefore, that the former part of the essay is being replaced by something more pertinent. Ponge's temporary position as purveyor of accepted notions of Giacometti is merely a grudging concession to the sculptor's adoptive philosophical relatives, and the essay's final note is congratulatory and triumphant, celebrating the dominance and capture of man, an untenable "fantôme impérieux" (P 98) irresistibly commanding attention, yet vague and elusive. This is the latest addition to a chain of observations on the "Je" from confident Cartesianism ("Je pense donc je suis") through the Rimbaudian schism ("Je est un autre"), to Ponge's own chain of Pascalian paradoxes ("pourceau de l'intelligence"; "l'homme" and "dernier dieu"; the "sceptre" and the "fil"). Typically, the individual is ultimately reduced to a linguistic sign; like the first person pronoun, Giacometti's is the most vague and universal, as well as the most particular iconography possible. With their "pied monstrueux" and slender "jambage" (significantly an architectural term connotative of support as well as the downstroke of a letter) the statuettes make of Giacometti "le sculpteur du premier pronom personnel" - of the JE.

Ponge concludes his essay by returning to Polyphemus, supplying the missing episode in which the cyclops has his eye put out by Ulysses, but re-writing the flight from Polyphemus' cave to suit his own version of the Odyssey. In legend the battle of wits was won by Ulysses, who made Polyphemus drunk, blinded him with a sharp, burning stake and escaped by assuming the name of "Personne". For Ponge's
purposes, Ulysses remains imprisoned with his companions, no longer escaping the common fate, and watched over incessantly by a massive eye. Giacometti / Polyphemus has captured and retained the elusive and cunning Ulysses, hero and king of Ithaca, who must be observed until death, and herein lies an exemplary lesson in self-awareness. 'Joca Seria', explaining the legend's significance in greater detail, showed Ponge's identification with the cyclops; "Non, nous ne 'choisirons pas Ulysse!' Nous prendrons plutôt le parti du Cyclope (sans nous laisser pour autant crever l'œil)" (JS 189). The italicised 'nous' suggests a parti pris common to a whole generation. Ponge encourages this ability to look upon our 'plight' with objectivity and to be, rather than "Ce je qui ne peut se contempler" (JS 187), both Polyphemus and Ulysses at once. The difficulties in writing about man are reaffirmed; as a subject, his previous tendency was to blind and escape us. The implications are that Giacometti has broken this pattern. "PERSONNE", the name elected by Ulysses in his escape, is significantly ambiguous, signifying, according to its grammatical context, either an unidentified human presence or an absence, while evoking simultaneously the notion of masks or disguises (the latin Persona refers to theatrical masks or rôles). Man's essence remains elusive - still to be created - although his existence may be repeatedly confirmed. He is entrapped in the cavern so that Polyphemus may watch the gradual shedding of the masks he has assumed through history; this is his "Agonie", and would-be captors must be endlessly alert ("surveiller", "prendre garde") to prevent further trickery. The stress, then, is on observation, and the death of the fixed persona. At once cyclops (captor) and expiring hero (captive), man watches himself become through a necessary process of destruction:

Dieu mort,
les valeurs détruites,
Restait à trouver l'homme et à le détruire (JS 187).
At the end of 'Réflexions' then, Ponge rejoices both at man's emaciation and his emancipation. After the death of the "JE" as we knew it, as anything but a project, this egocentric, Romantically introverted inhabitant of a man-centred universe "ne pourra plus nous crever les yeux" (R 98).

A question of form

"L'oeuvre d'ailleurs mérite qu'à son propos l'on abrège". This observation maintained in 'Réflexions' alerts the reader to Ponge's desire for adéquation and to his careful consideration not only of the content, but of the most appropriate form for his work on the sculptor. The text on Giacometti is the only one within L'Atelier contemporain to exist in two forms and to represent the shift which had taken place in Ponge's formal preference between the tight texts of Le Parti pris des choses and those of Proèmes and La Rage de l'expression. Ponge's work on Giacometti's man, like his work on the generic L'Homme, slots nicely into the thick of his formal dilemma between the provisional and the closed, 'Réflexions' and 'Joca Beria' epitomising the two kinds of text and the former being specifically likened by Ponge to the mode of Le Parti pris des choses. The co-existence of bijou and brouillon invites comparison and highlights the implications of each approach, encouraging us to consider Ponge's reasons for shifting and to examine Giacometti in the light of these reasons. Issues are raised, then by the adéquation existing between these companion texts which attain full significance not in isolation but when contrasted with one another. Formal variation is far from innocent and is enlisted here for specific reasons. It is therefore on a discussion of form that I would like to conclude.
Firstly, why did Ponge feel it appropriate in his work on Giacometti to return to a mode of writing which he had outgrown and which was antipathetic to his present creative drive? An obvious point is that sculpture procédés by sacrifice and that since the composing of 'Réflexions' involved extensive reduction, the texts present adéquation of the sculptural act of whittling, of which Giacometti provides a reductio ad absurdum, erasure on occasions being so extensive as to suggest destruction of the work of art; "(Un dernier coup de canif et puis plus rien (rêve anarchiste))" (JS 156). It is also true that Ponge's early texts typically imitated sculptural perfection, striving towards the lapidary and escaping the haphazard, provisional and contingent nature of the spoken word. As these 'sculpted' texts give way to the fluidity of écriture en acte, however, the references to sculpture shift in emphasis, expressing dissatisfaction with its completeness and permanence, its petrifaction. If the notion of sculpture is retained, it is in order that these qualities may be specifically resisted. Ponge prefers to introduce precariousness, variations and movement, and in his later borrowings from this medium we have, for example, the deliberately rough-hewn 'Fautrier d'un seul bloc fougueusement équarri' (AC 142-46), 'Ce petit plâtre inachevé à la gloire de Fenosa en avril 1965' (AC 268-74), and in 1951 the unshaped mass of 'Malherbe d'un seul bloc à peine dégrossi'. It is also notable that Ponge's enthusiasm for Michelangelo's Esclaves stems from the fact that they are unfinished, that they retain a tension between the original mass of stone and the finished piece. They are thus much more than sculptures, being about the act of sculpture itself. 'Joca Seria' is similarly not whittled but fleshy and un-contoured - or rather, we can detect the emergence of contours, of form, still contained within the block of the text.
The positioning of 'Joca Seria' also deserves comment. While on a simpler level it corresponds to Ponge's aforesaid intention of arranging all the texts in *L'Atelier contemporain* in the order of their first publication,\(^7\) it is nonetheless a thought provoking inversion, reminding us that Ponge's rhythm of publication deliberately throws us backwards and represents a gradual process of revelation and uncovering.\(^7\) 'Joca Seria' does not only follow 'Réflexions' but paradoxically usurps it. 'Réflexions', the rectified version of an unformed mass, is fleshed back out again so the *brouillon* comes to be viewed as the definitive version. Consistent with the conviction to which Ponge gave voice in 'Pages bis' (which is a *paler* between the two modes) "Je suis persuadé qu'il faut écrire en dessous de sa puissance" (TP 222), the parent text is resuscitated to perform the paradoxical task of correcting 'Réflexions' of its perfections as a process of pruning is exchanged for the reintroduction of stumblings, lacunae, repetitions and variations: "Nous aimons ajouter de l'imperfection" (JS 182). Selectivity is exchanged for inclusiveness, and the rhythms of creation are in evidence.

Ponge's type of "dandysme", however, "qui consiste à s'ôter de la perfection" can result in forgetting "les vrais caractères de la perfection" (JS 182) and present a danger to personal integrity. On the one hand happy to proclaim that "je bétifie volontiers à longueur de journée" (JS 182), Ponge also wants to reproduce the determination, economy and single-minded thrust of Giacometti's work to show he still has Giacometti's "grande assurance de sa ressource, et domination des choses" (JS 183). Clearly, then, Ponge's formal regression in 'Réflexions' is similar in kind and in motivation to another such regression, 'L'Abricot'. The latter is a brief exercise in concision which serves as proof that Ponge is still capable of assembling a text "bouclé à double tour", that his notebooks in no way amount to complacency and are not indicative of feeble creative
powers. This, however, is not the whole story, and Giacometti's nostalgia for the perfect work of art had an undeniably destructive element. Giacometti is "Un drôle de maçon, de plâtrier, qui ne construit rien. Qui démolit plutôt" (JS 172), and his very form is associated with man's spiritual emaciation. It is notable that whereas Sartre views Giacometti's "Recherche de l'absolu" as unreservedly heroic, and as the marvellous unity of his life, the sculptor's enduring nostalgia is, for Ponge, synonymous with a kind of "mauvaise foi", an inability to exist in the relative, a "souci ontologique" and "sentiment religieux" (TP 223), which is linked to sculpture by use of the same pejorative epithet, "vicieux". An anecdote from 'Joca Seria' makes their respective positions clear. A propos of Artaud, Giacometti expresses admiration for the finished portraits, whereas Ponge states "Moi, je pensais surtout aux dessins en marge des manuscrits (sortes d'accès de rage) trouvant parfois le papier" (JS 165). On a more profound level, then, it is clear that for Ponge the difference between the closed and open texts represents the difference between the rejection and the 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.

In 1951 Ponge is in fact meditating a great deal on chaos. The term appears in Pour un Maîtrise and punctuates 'Joca Seria' from the first day of writing. Early in 'Joca Seria' (the second entry of 2 août) Ponge accepts that we are ruled by chaos, and compares various types of chaos: that of society, of the individual, and of Nature. Society is defined as a "chaos-ruche: camp de concentration, four crématoire, chambre à gaz, prison et charnier"; man as
"chaos-minceur extrême" and Nature as "chaos-matière épaisse", "Chaos-nourricier", "Chaos de passé et avenir: de cimeti ère et germes, de cadavres en décomposition et vers (gaines d'énergie)" (JS 158). It is clear that chaos is inevitable, and that only one kind of chaos is salutary; that of Nature: "il faut y plonger" (JS 158). One point which is made by Ponge's election of textual 'chaos' is like that made by Pascal in suggesting the disorder of his Pensées would be a calculated disorder, as any profession to have attained order is presumptuous and artificial. In the same way (and Pascal's disjointed, persuasive paragraphs are in some ways comparable to those of Ponge) Ponge's voluntary refusal to impose order is largely a question of moral integrity, a stylistic option in harmony with a world view. It is certainly not adopted to court popularity, as Ponge himself makes clear. His swerve to brouillons is a calculated choice and a calculated risk; half-digested notes presented as having literary merit may not, he agrees, meet popular demand. Picasso may have preferred the texts of La Rage de l'expression but not the general public; "J'avais alors le goût pour moi, [Giacometti] l'a pour lui. Qu'il en profite..." (JS 186). The abiding concept of a finished work of art remains the same in the public eye. There may be difficulty in accepting the échecs and notebooks as equally valuable documents and therefore the early work is required to validate the later efforts (again, this explains Ponge's return in 'L'Abricot'); but this uncertainty of value is still preferable to "le goût (sordide) de jouer toujours le même rôle..." (JS 186) which Ponge detects in Giacometti.

The form of 'Joca Seria' is linked by Ponge to another text of 1951 which has not yet been mentioned, 'Les Hirondelles', written between April 1951 and April 1956 (Pièces 166-71). Associated with both is the rhetorical term "randon", a newly rejuvenated archaism which appears in the last six entries of the manuscript for 'Les Hirondelles, ou "dans le style des hirondelles" (rondons)" after being
firstly employed as a heading for certain entries in the manuscript of 'Joca Seria'. Thus on 31 August, entries for 'Joca Seria' are headed "Randon" and "Randon II", with the note "[C'est la première fois que j'emploie décidément cette expression, découverte d'ailleurs voici de nombreuses années]."

Why, then, does Ponge attribute significance to this term and employ it at this moment? Although it appears late in 'Les Hirondelles' (in the entries of 1956), it is clear that the "randon" is more intimately linked with this poem than with any other text, and some of our answers may be found here. 'Les Hirondelles' is one of Ponge's most dynamic poems, vibrant, exuberant, unrivalled for verbal virtuosity, and a 'definition' so far from petrifaction as to be its antithesis. Here, the term "randon" becomes specifically equated with the flight patterns of the swallows which interest Ponge more than the swallows themselves and which suggest a rhetorical form as the birds fill space with the giddying rhythms of their flight, or settle temporarily on the wires like so many words on a page, before launching off again to create a multitude of new signs on the open sky. It is significant that in electing objects for his poems (and the object in Ponge dictates the rhetorical form employed for its description), we have progressed from pebble to bird flight.

With the help of Littré, a brief exploration of this term which has been waiting to be put to significant use, reveals the following: "Terme vieilli. Course impétueuse, afflux impétueux". The word's etymological root is the same as that of "randonnée", a hunting term ("Tour, circuit, fait sur un même lieu par une bête qu'on a lancée"). Familiarly, "faire une longue randonnée" means "marcher longtemps sans s'arrêter" and the verb "randonner; courir rapidement" comes from "Randon (vivacité, violence)". The suggested origins of the word are German - either "rade" (rapide), or "rand" (bord, extrémité) "d'où, en provençal, randa - le bout d'une
chose, et à randa, près du bord, extrême, pressant". Hence mobility, precariousness, balance in the midst of chaos are keynotes of Ponge's open texts, along with speed, energy and length or volume.

There is a link between the birds, the way in which they invite language to work through *adéquation* and Ponge's approach to Giacometti - to the implications of his sculpture in aesthetic and in ethical terms. Abandoning the notion of perfection both in world and text, all objects and beings are seen by Ponge as 'errors' and imperfection is linked to wandering ('erreur', 'errer'). Physical movement is a metaphor for progressive, unending self-definition; we are "égarements", "errements", "erreurs", and "errants". "Errare humanum est"; the notions of erring and wandering are amongst Ponge's most jubilant words on the definition of man, for whom the swallow provides a valuable lesson in equilibrium: "tu vibres en te posant; tu clignotes de \( \text{l'aile. Maladroite au bord du toit, du fil, lorsque tu vas tomber tu te renvoles vite!} \) (Pièces 167).

Thus the nature of the open text echoes the nature of existence which is unfixed and proceeds by a series of mistakes and corrective movements. More than this, the text is also instrumental in man's attempts to know himself. Ponge's meticulous dating of the twenty eight entries of 'Joca Seria' (from "Paris 30 juillet 1951" to "4 septembre crépuscule du soir (Les Fleurys) 1951") emphasises that the world and the self are in flux, demanding constant redefinition and that self-situation is achieved through writing. "La voie frayée vers l'œuvre" is stressed and the text as well as man is "toujours à venir", "en avant de lui-même". The very form of Ponge's text, then, celebrates our relative being and refuses the tragedy of death or uncertainty. Man is a "projet", coming into being like the text: "il m'est arrivé d'écrire quelque part que la nature entière, y compris les hommes, n'est qu'une écriture, ce qui n'est d'ailleurs nullement désespérant". From his initial,
misguided desire to write "un sobre portrait de l'homme, simple et complet", he is now satisfied with the mere statement of existence provided in Giacometti's JE. Man "N'a plus de nom - qu'un pronom" (R 98). Pronouns, of course, designate beings by the idea of a relation to language, to the act of speech - whereas nouns designate them by the idea of their nature. Ponge's JE represents the beginning of utterance, a tabula rasa with no adjectives, no verbs, accepting joyously that we must start from zero and that the emaciation of Giacometti's figures is a positive illustration of this phenomenon, the first step to a crucial rebuilding process. The very form of 'Joca Seria' shows a lack of nostalgia for absolutes, stressing genesis and life's thrust towards definition, and by using this most open of textual forms for Giacometti, it would appear that 'Joca Seria' rather than 'Réflexions' constitutes Ponge's final answer to the sculptor's negative universe.

In conclusion, then, it is clear that Ponge writes about Giacometti not in spite of but because of the essentially negative images of humanity he provides. Giacometti is a figure we must come to terms with because he is representative of a contemporary malaise we must also come to terms with. After 'Pages bis', this corrective preface to one of the most disturbing artists of the post-war period perpetuates Ponge's staunch anti-absurdist campaign with subtle polemic. His obvious detachment from any quest for transcendence, his total lack of metaphysical orientation, his dismissal of nostalgia for absolutes and his celebration of the relative are particularly highlighted by their co-existence with alternative views, and appear as an exciting, uncompromising answer to contemporary incertitude and confusion. The only texts within L'Atelier contemporain which may be classed along with Ponge's hygienic texts on objects, 'Réflexions' and 'Joca Seria' are written to banish stale and stultifying concepts. They are
texts which "l'avent après lecture des grands métaphysicoliens" (TP 220). They are seized upon as an opportunity to answer Giacometti, to reaffirm the invalidity of Sartre's early criticisms concerning Ponge's urge to the "en soi" and to continue with comments on the position and nature of L'Homme. Interestingly, Ponge does not return to definitions of the generic Man after these texts. Giacometti's "possession idéale instantanée" which Ponge did not achieve in his own writings on L'Homme provides a short cut, and by the end of the text Ponge's urge for expression of man as a species, as direct rather than indirect subject of his texts, is exhausted. Nor are there any subsequent writings on Giacometti. It appears he has served his purpose and that 'Joca Seria' and 'Réflexions' are Ponge's final word on the work of this sculptor who had defined our universe in terms of separation, exile, and thwarted aspiration. Prior to these texts (in 'Pages bis') Ponge had stated "Je n'admet qu'on propose à l'homme que des objets de jouissance, d'exaltation, de rêveil" (TP 211): his achievement here is to make of Giacometti's archetypal sculpture just such an object.
NOTES


2. This exception comes with the text on Leonor Fini, a kind of feminine Balthus whose unhealthy, enigmatic and sensually decadent world is peopled with sphinx, griffins, and chimera in a vision which Genet qualified as "voluptueuse et saupoudrée d'arsenic" (Jean Genet, Lettre à Leonor Fini, Loyau (Paris, 1950)). Ponge's 'Pour l'un des "Portraits de famille" de Leonor Fini' commences by affirming a lack of affinity and by displaying a casual response which is doubtless far removed from Fini's desired effects:

Monstres qui n'êtes pas de ma spécialité
Ah Quel repos pour moi de vous considérer!
Votre complication pose moins de questions
Que la simplicité des objets de ce monde.


3. 'Réflexions sur les statuettes, figures et peintures de Giacometti', in L'Atelier contemporain, pp.93-98 (p.97). Further references to this essay will be given as R, followed by the page number.


5. Notes for 'Joca Seria' first appeared in Méditations, no.7 (Spring 1964), 5-47, then in Nouveau recueil, Gallimard (Paris, 1967), pp.53-96, and finally in L'Atelier contemporain, pp.153-90. Further references to this text will be given as JS followed by the relevant page number of L'Atelier contemporain.

6. This term in no way implies that Ponge has 'lost his way'. In a note of 26 July 1951 he affirms that "Un égarement définitif sera toujours pitoyable" whereas "Un égarement passager est pardonnable, et peut même être exemplaire, recommandé" (Francis Ponge: Pratiques d'écriture ou l'inachèvement perpétuel, Hermann (Paris, 1984), pp.97-98 (p.98)).

7. From 'Questions à Francis Ponge', in Colloque de Cerisy, p.382.


10. J.-P. Sartre, 'La Recherche de l'absolu', in Situations III, Gallimard (Paris, 1949), pp.289-305 (p.289). This was initially published
in *Les Temps modernes*, no.28 (January 1948), 1153-63. References will be to the text in *Situations III*.


12. 'SCVLPTVRE', p.100.


15. The attraction of Fenosa is doubtless that, like Michel Angelo's *Esclaves* his figures give the impression that they are on the brink of emerging from the sculptor's material. Often mythological in theme, they employ vegetal motifs - leaves, plants and woody structures from which human figures materialize as if from a pod or carapace which is on the point of splitting open. Fenosa's sculptures are, like Giacometti's, generally modest in size, but rather than provoking malaise they inspire human intimacy and confidence. (See *Fenosa: Sculptures*, Galerie Jacques Dubourg (12-29 May 1965) in which appears Ponge's text 'Ce petit plâtre inachevé à la gloire de Fenosa en avril 1965').


17. 'Muriel Marquet', in *L'Atelier Contemporain*, pp.276-77 (p.277).


19. *L'Objet invisible* of 1934 is subtitled 'Mains tenant le vide'.


21. The *Ephémère* review was founded in the spring of 1967 by Yves Bonnefoy and André Du Bouchet. Jacques Dupin was to join them later. The inaugural issue was devoted to Giacometti as was issue 18 and throughout the review's life (1967-1972, comprising 20 issues in all) each issue bore a Giacometti drawing of a standing nude.

One of the most thorough studies concerning literary responses to Giacometti is to be found in Robert V. Greene's *Six French Poets of our Time* (Princeton University Press, 1979). Greene develops the theme of Ponge's and of *Ephémère*'s essentially divergent philosophies as manifested in their response to Giacometti. Their respective treatments of the sculptor are placed in a wider context, since they point to a fissure between the two contemporary streams of modern French poetry which have evolved since 1910. These are epitomised by the Structuralist *Tel Quel* group on the one hand and on the other by the *Ephémère* group for whom poetry has a privileged status not as language but as "a way of acceding to a translingual, ineffable reality" (p.12).


24. All 'ungraspable' entities are described with distaste by Ponge and associated with a flabby use of language (the "floconnement adipeux d'un ciel nuageux" of his *Symphonie pastorale* is a good example (*Pièces*, p.51)). They may be counter-attacked only by viewing them as composites of solid or semi-solid portions, taken at significant points of transition or intersection. Thus 'Eclaircie en hiver' (*Pièces*, p.48) chooses a temporal axis in the long winter day, which is given substance by the image of a grape, its pulp bursting forth from its skin ("Le bleu renait du gris comme la pulpe éjectée d'un raisin noir"). The poem's visual and verbal texture offers a tight fabric in which emptiness can play no part.


29. Francis Ponge, 'L'Homme à grands traits', *Synthèses*, no.64 (September 1951), 14-18. This review is not predominantly literary. It has a strong political flavour and provides an interesting context for Ponge's text on *Man*. The "Esprit de Synthèses" as defined in the preface is to give an international perspective of the "nouvelle période de l'histoire [qui] a commencé" and the "nouvel humanisme [qui] s'impose". The aim is above all "de porter l'homme toujours plus loin dans la voie de son évolution et de son dépassement". References will be to 'L'Homme à grands traits' as it appears in *Méthodes*, pp.181-89.


32. J.-P. Sartre, 'L'Homme et les choses'. For a fuller discussion of Sartre's essay and a defence of Ponge see *Prolegomena*, pp.3-11.


38. Sartre makes use of this Sixteenth-Century painter to provide an image of the fragmentary treatments of humanity he detects in all painting: "Il est vrai que [les peintres] ne daignerent pas composer une tête humaine avec une citrouille, des tomates et des radis. Mais ne composent-ils pas chaque jour des visages avec une paire d'yeux, un nez, deux oreilles et trente-deux dents? Où est la différence?" ('Les Peintures de Giacometti', p.357).


41. Ibid, p.290.

42. Ibid, p.293.


44. Ibid, p.296.

45. Ibid, p.301.


47. See Jean Wahl, *Petite histoire de "L'Existentialisme"*, Editions Club Maintenant (Paris, 1947). Wahl notes that this philosophy was as lively a question in New York as in Paris, that Sartre had written an article for *Vogue* and that *Mademoiselle*, a journal aimed at young ladies of seventeen, had published an article on the subject. It is certainly rare to encounter philosophy on every street corner in this way.


49. Ibid, p.12.

50. 'La Recherche de l'absolu', pp.289-90.

51. Ibid, p.293.

52. 'Les Peintures de Giacometti', *Situations IV*, p.355.
53. 'Bugène de Kermadec', in L'Atelier contemporain, pp.201-16. Other texts which were being written or published at the same time include 'L’Homme à grands traits', 'Pour un Malherbe' and 'Les Hirondelles', all of which will be seen to play a part in Ponge's argument for a 'healthy' reading of Giacometti.

54. 'Questions à Francis Ponge', in Francis Ponge: Colloque de Cérisy, p.409.

55. 'SCVLPTVRE', p.101: "l'oeuvre ici choisie comme prétexte".

56. 'Braque, un méditatif à l'oeuvre', in L'Atelier contemporain, p.286.

57. 'Questions à Francis Ponge', p.426.


59. 'L'Homme et les choses', p.312.

60. Ibid, p. 313.

61. 'La Recherche de l'absolu', p.290.

62. Compare 'Le Galet'; "Dans un décor qui a renoncé à s'émouvoir, et songe seulement à tomber en ruines, le vie s'inquiète et s'agit de ne savoir que ressusciter" (Tome premier, p.110).

63. Ponge could have found another example of this in La Fontaine's 'L'Horoscope' which is a possible intertext:

Ce berger et ce roi sont sous même planète;  
l'un d'eux porte le sceptre et l'autre la houlette;  
Jupiter le voulait ainsi.


The entire theme of this poem is appropriate, dealing as it does with human destiny and taking a pragmatic stance concerning the possibility of predicting the future. La Fontaine's rejection of the new 'science' of astrology - a lively issue at the time of writing of his first fables - shows dismissal of such murky, superstitious meditations on our fate. Ponge also uses the figures of Jupiter and Astrée, and an image which suggests that our destiny does not depend on the stars, and which will be discussed later in this chapter.


65. It is interesting that in Ponge's 'Texte sur l'électricité' of 1954 which plays on notions of intellectual darkness and enlightenment the Cyclops are associated with an era of vague terrors, chaos, ignorance and doubt: "Nous voici donc revenus, dirai-je, à un temps tout pareil à celui des Cyclopes, bien au-delà de Thalès et d'Euclide, et presque au temps du Chaos". See Lyres, pp.72-108 (p.89).
66. See 'Questions à Francis Ponge', in Francis Ponge: Colloque de Cerisy, p.426. Ponge continue, "Alors je lui ai dit; écoutez, quand vous faites un portrait de quelqu'un ... Alors publions notre correspondance, c'est-à-dire vos reproches et ma réponse". Giacometti did in fact propose to illustrate Ponge's notes after he became reconciled to the latter's unorthodox approach: "Ensuite Giacometti m'a dit, quelque temps après; C'est vous qui avez raison; et pour finir, il voulait illustrer mes Notes sur Giacometti qui sont des brouillons du texte publié par Les Cahiers d'art et que j'ai publiées ensuite". Unfortunately the death of the sculptor meant that the project was never realised.

67. Jean Genet, L'Atelier d'Alberto Giacometti. Genet reports that Giacometti frequented brothels, refers to the sculptor's unsavoury encounters with a clochard and comments that "il doit exister un lien entre ces figures sévères et solitaires et le goût de Giacometti pour les putains".


69. As Jean Tortel comments, "Ponge est systématiquement modeste. Seulement il l'est à la façon de Malherbe qui ne revendiquait, mais combien hautement, que 'l'art de faire les couronnes' ('Francis Ponge et la formulation globale', in Francis Ponge cinq fois, Fata Morgana (Paris, 1984), pp.27-40 (p.30')). Ponge's own comments on Malherbe concur in this and typically double up as a description of his own procedure:

   Il a sa dignité, certes, son goût. Il connaît son pouvoir. Ses pièces ne sont jamais meilleures que lorsque la circonstance l'y oblige. Il est à la hauteur de la circonstance. L'objectif est chaque fois très précis.

   Il loue les grands, et il s'arrange, ce faisant, pour se louer lui-même et la poésie, pour faire triompher la langue et l'esprit.


70. This kind of adéquation is in fact visible in the Ephémère poets who illustrate the frailty of existence even through their mise en page, and whose deliberate fragmentation may be so extensive as to bring the text to the very brink of nothingness and silence. See Richard Stamelman, 'The Syntax of the Ephemeral [Bonnefoy, Dupin, Du Bouchet]', Dalhousie French Studies, 2 (October 1980), 101-17.

71. See 'Au Lecteur', in L'Atelier contemporain, p.VIII; "ces textes se trouvent reproduits grosso modo dans l'ordre chronologique de leur première publication".

72. For a study of Ponge's fluid strategy of publishing see Jean-Marie Gleize, 'La Poésie mise en orbite: Francis Ponge', in Poésie et figuration, Editions du Seuil (Paris, 1983), pp.157-91. This essay explores the results of Ponge's refusal to give his texts a definitive form or placement. Ponge's resuscitation of brouillons and his dismantling of previous recueils in order to create new groupings dependent on a new logic or theme are part of what Gleize refers to as
"la stratégie F.A. (formulation en acte)". This is shown to apply not only to the individual text but to Ponge's editorial plot as a whole in which nothing (apart from Le Parti pris des choses "qui semble fonctionner comme une sorte de noyau, ayant acquis une manière d'inaltérabilité compte tenu de son rôle "historique" (p. 175)) is inviolable. Each grouping and regrouping of texts represents a refusal of closure and a perpetual act of correction, and the utopic idea of life's works as a "monument" is neatly replaced by Gleize with the more appropriate "moviment" (p. 173).

73. Ponge's return to 'L'Abricot' is referred to in the final paragraph of an untitled text dated Paris, Samedi 20 Octobre 51. Here Ponge comments "Il faudra d'ailleurs que je montre bientôt que je suis encore capable d'un vrai parti pris des choses", and an up-dated post scriptum reads "(Je l'ai fait, en 1956-57, avec l'abricot)". See Francis Ponge: Pratiques d'écriture ou l'inachèvement perpétuel, Hermann (Paris, 1984), p. 75.

74. In 1960 Ponge's stress on the act of creation was justified in an exhibition, Exposition Francis Ponge: Une œuvre en cours, Bibliothèque Littéraire Jacques Doucet (14-25 June, 1960). This exhibition showed the manuscripts for 'L'Abricot', 'L'Hirondelle', and 'La Mouine'. See also Francis Ponge: Manuscrits - Livres - Peintures, Centre national d'art et de culture Georges Pompidou (Paris, 25 February - 4 April 1977). This catalogue accompanied the exhibition of Ponge's manuscripts, books, deluxe editions and paintings and sculptures from his favourite artists. In his preface for the 1960 exhibition, Octave Nadal encourages visitors to the exhibition to appreciate "les gestes du travail; notations, carnets d'esquisses, transcriptions successives, analyses, critiques, déchiffres et jusqu'au récit même de l'aventure créatrice." This is to be viewed not as a quirky experiment but as "Un nouveau genre dans nos lettres", a suggestion which is reaffirmed in 1984 by a more confident Ponge who feels the value of his broutilons has been fully proved: "il s'agit désormais, en effet, d'un nouveau genre d'écriture" ("Note pour l'éditeur", in Francis Ponge: Pratiques d'écriture ou l'inachèvement perpétuel, Hermann (Paris, 1984), p. 7).

75. See Exposition Francis Ponge: Une œuvre en cours.

76. The manuscript for 'Joca Seria' was exhibited in Francis Ponge: Manuscrits - Livres - Peintures. Details of this are on pp. 52-55 of the exhibition catalogue, following details of the manuscript for 'Les Hirondelles' (pp. 50-51).
Ponge and the object in art

In his studies of Fautrier and Giacometti, Ponge has been concerned with representations of humanity in the aftermath of war. A more characteristic emphasis comes with his texts on the object in art which take us to the heart of his own creative endeavour. From these emerges a coherent theory outlining the significance of the still life genre - and particularly the French still life tradition - in a contemporary perspective. Artists limiting themselves to the description of humble objects, typically deemed incapable of providing intellectual interest or moral instruction, were at one time met with prejudice, finding themselves obliged to explain and defend their choice as one which was no less valid than portraiture, history painting, or the depiction of any human affairs in art. Ponge is no exception here, and explanations or justifications of his 'parti pris des choses' are regularly included in his poetic as well as his theoretical texts. Whereas studies of lowly objects have long been considered a legitimate category in the case of the plastic arts, they remain something of a novelty in literature and recent writers of the still life (William Carlos Williams, Marianne Moore, Gertrude Stein, Pablo Neruda, Rainier Maria Rilke) could be counted on one hand. In France the relatively isolated voices of Guillevic and Ponge have emerged with no clearly traceable literary ancestry (although one could cite La Fontaine or Jules Renard's Histoires naturelles)¹ and the whole of this writerly concentration on objects could not yet be said to constitute an intelligible genre, except perhaps through its irresistible association with painting.² As Robert Kanters
explains the situation, "le peintre a conquis le droit à la nature morte que Ponge revendique avec insistance pour l'écrivain".

In *L'Atelier contemporain* Ponge elects two significant high points in the history of French still life painting — artists who share his own conviction that the study of humble objects is of essential value. One of these is Chardin, arguably the first to give respectability to the much maligned genre, and whose achievement was to establish still life as an independent category, thus paving the way for the abolition of the hierarchy of themes which had dominated the Salons. The other is Braque, Chardin's modern counterpart, to whom Ponge returns on seven occasions in *L'Atelier contemporain*. Through these essays Ponge helps to vivify the relatively sluggish response of art historians in tackling the history, evolution and significance of still life painting. With his lucid and forceful explanation of its importance, its relevance to a common ontological crisis in the wake of the absurd, and to present social unrest, Ponge restores a traditional genre to its full contemporary significance. Thus the work of the still life painter (and this includes Ponge himself; "je suis un peintre de natures mortes...") is placed at the summit of the hierarchy of genres. Whereas Chardin, despite Diderot's admiration, was destined to be viewed by his contemporaries as a master of technique whose incomprehensible choice was to work almost exclusively in a despised genre, Braque is the painter with the most important message for contemporary man, precisely because he is predominantly the painter of humble objects.

As Philippe Sollers suggests, paintings and painters are present in Ponge's work "comme un relais ou une méditation par rapport à l'ensemble" (*EPS* 88). The purpose of this chapter is to examine Ponge's treatment of Chardin and Braque, and his use of them as allies in his own 'parti pris des choses'. Ian Higgins points out that the text on Chardin "suggests many important comparisons and contrasts
between Ponge's poetry and the kind of still life he admires", and in the case of Braque the affinity between poet and painter is greater still. Each artist provides fresh opportunities for Ponge to sharpen the contours of his constantly reiterated manifesto, by describing equivalent endeavours in a different medium. Before analysing the critical texts in detail, however, it is useful to survey in brief the vacillating fortunes of the object in art and to give Ponge his place in the still life tradition.

Ponge is very much a visual artist; "les sens autres que la vue n'ont qu'une place restreinte dans votre travail de description" commented Camus in a letter concerning Le Parti pris des choses. Much of his elected iconography corresponds to the staple diet of generations of still life painters, and many poems appear to give glancing references to a painterly tradition. They include shellfish, fruits and vegetables, kitchen utensils (a favourite of Chardin), and often hint at gastronomic pleasure. There is also the occasional large composition to be found ('Plat de poissons frits', for example, is a clear attempt to 'paint' an entire Impressionist canvas and inject it with rigour). Equally telling is Ponge's lengthy study of a mere glass of water in 'Le Verre d'eau' (Méthodes 115-73). The combination of the glass ("capacité pure, existe à peine"), and the water ("liquide le plus répandu dans la nature, le plus commun; inodore, incolore, et sans saveur") is as tempting a challenge for Ponge as it is for Kermadec, whose lithographs accompany Ponge's text in an édition de luxe. It is precisely in confronting once again objects which have been painted thousands of times that the revolutionary artist can best indicate his new way of seeing, his personal idiom and message. In Ponge's case this deliberate choice of painterly subjects permits us to integrate him in a still life tradition as one of its most recent voices, one of the latest variations in visual descriptions of simple objects about which hundreds of truths remain to be discovered, and
a variation which corrects or completes the inadequacies inherent in the language of form and colour as opposed to the written word ("la principale damnation de la peinture", claims Ponge, "est [...] de tout dire en termes d'espace et de ne rien exprimer du temps, c'est-à-dire de la catégorie majeure, à quoi se rapporte la vie" (AC 241-42)).

Simple objects have always been present in art, but our relationship to them has changed beyond recognition. In his *L'Art moderne et l'objet* Roger Bordier traces this relationship, using as his principal leitmotif an object chosen by Ponge and Braque for their joint endeavour *Cinq sapates* a simple jug. Taking his cue from the re-written proverb "Tant va la cruche à l'art...", Bordier follows the peripeteia of the object through Impressionism, Cézanne's analytical simplifications, Cubist deformations, near or total disappearance in abstraction, and to *Nouvelle figuration*, which provides a complete swing of the pendulum by returning to a hard-edged, trompe-l'œil style. His conclusion is that art is destined to pirouette around the object; permanently enticing, inexhaustibly mysterious, and a touchstone to man's view of his environment and of himself. "Quoi qu'il en soit", he affirms, "on a toujours besoin de lui. Torturé, mis en pièces, autopsié, dissecé, découvert et redécouvert, démystifié, ou alors mystifié, ou encore respecté, élu sans exigences, entouré de soins discrets; peu importe, il est là bel et bien, résistant à tout, au scalpel, au bistouri, au microscope, à la pince-monsieur. Il veut bien tout ce qu'on veut, sûr de son immortalité avec une modestie surnaturelle, et du même coup une indifférence tout à fait naturelle. Rien à faire, il domine".

The very title given to this genre, *nature morte*, deserves comment, since it is as inapplicable as it is tenacious. Théophile Gautier had already complained of its inaccuracy, ("Il est une expression consacrée qui nous contrarie beaucoup et que nous sommes forcés d'employer, car
tout le monde la comprend: c'est celle de nature morte, - comme si la nature ne vivait pas toujours'"'), and Théodore Thoré, again underlining the travesty of this enforced term in a perspective reminiscent of Pongé's, comments "Tout communiqué avec tout et participe à la vie solidaire. Il n'y a pas de nature morte!". For Pongé, the original Seventeenth Century vie coye or vie silencieuse would seem more appropriate, as his criterion for choosing objects is not that of death and immobility, but that of silence; his mute objects turn to "l'espèce parolière" as ambassadors capable of delivering them from the state of "non remarque" (NMC 229) to which they are otherwise condemned. We will in fact see that an emphasis on movement, growth and metamorphosis in both Pongé's and Braque's descriptions of objects results in a nature vivante rather than a nature morte.

Given that the subject matter of the still life has remained constant from the painters of Pompei to Picasso, the genre offers a fertile ground for the study of developing painterly techniques, along with an account of man's changing relationship to his environment, and his shifting perception of his own place within it. These two aspects correspond to the esthétique and the éthique of the genre and of Pongé's own 'parti pris des choses'. On the one hand, objects provide pretexts to reveal painterly skill; they are 'neutral' subjects whose very neutrality recommended them to the most revolutionary artistic schools, so that the history of modern art's developing language is inseparable from that of still life painting. As the art historians Michel and Fabrice Faré remark, "étudier la Nature Morte conduit à considérer la peinture en son essence." Substitute 'la langue' for 'la peinture', and the same is true of Ponge's own still lifes. On the other hand, the history of still life painting can be read in a Pongean perspective as a story of the gradually crumbling empire of man over objects - part of an archaic and defunct
religious scheme in which objects were placed on the earth by God's decree for man to use. The confidence which led to the portrayal of objects as symbolic props or possessions tempts us to speak of the 'pornography' of objects in painting. Like women, objects have been an oppressed category represented only according to man's view of them, and only in recent years finding their own voice. There is a clear parallel in many meticulously arranged, cluttered and lavish compositions of crafted crystal or silverware, of exotic foods or fruits arranged on rich cloths and promising sensual pleasure. These often served to reveal the status of the owner who commissioned the painting; they were an implicit symbol of man's dominance, his power to obtain, to create, to discover, to own.

For Ponge, the object's imagined docility is a myth; "Le monde n'est pas ce chien qu'on aurait envoyé coucher et qui aurait obéi" (AC 116). Obedience is exchanged for the aggressiveness of an untamed fauve, which stares back at the artist with an enigmatic, independent gaze. In 'Parade pour Jacques Hérold' (AC 116-17) the artist is portrayed as a lion tamer in difficulty, with only tenuous dominance over objects which are endowed with independent life; "les choses sont en selle [...] et montent sur le genre humain de plus en plus"; "une fois déjà elles ont bondi, arrachant l'oreille de Van Gogh." This new perception of a potentially hostile environment is perhaps an inevitable consequence of our lack of confidence, our uncomfortable feeling of separateness and uniqueness in the face of the absurd. It receives one of its most forceful literary expressions through Sartre's protagonist of La Nausée, Antoine Roquentin, whose melancholy is engendered in part by the overwhelming alienation he feels from the concrete world, a world which suddenly appears to elude all the names and ideas by which its components were 'known' to him. Adding to this pattern we also have the impenetrable, unyielding collection of objects which refuse to offer
themselves as clues for the foxed heros of Robbe-Grillet's fictional universe. The differences in inspiration between descriptions such as these, and the meticulous yoking of objects as props in Balzacian and Naturalist fiction — whether for characterisation or as ironic suggestions of determinism — are obvious. Similarly, Cubism has been described as a result of "L'Inquiétude de l'esprit devant le secret des choses", while those poets of the still life who emerged at the turn of the century agree on something more akin to equality, wherein possession is replaced by the poet's consent and by his acknowledgement that the concrete world is most fruitfully observed when all our preconceived notions about it are abandoned. The global aim appears to be the reconciliation of man with his world, involving the recognition that "par son activité à le dominer, il [l'homme] risque de s'aliéner le monde" (Méthodes 202).

Hence objects are clearly instrumental in the regeneration of man. In an attempt to destroy his own past order and voluntarily suspend his systematising vision, he not only admits that objects cannot be appropriated, but invents the device of their insurrection. In art this involves, for example, the absence of single viewpoint perspective (a device which arranged the world in a 'logical' order of recession, dependent not so much on what actually existed but on what the eye of a human being, that god-like centre of the universe, could perceive at any one time), increasing frontalisation of objects, and an account of their strangeness rather than a reaffirmation of their familiarity. At the same time the human figure, the most perfect work of God on earth, was violated. Manet's fascinated attention to a cigar rather than to the gentleman smoking it was judged a scandal by conservative critics, and there was considerable fury at the hacked-up figures of Picasso's Demoiselles d'Avignon. Ponge also inverts the hierarchy of excellence with his provocative assertion that
man is in the natural world "comme un crapaud dans un diamant" (PM 71).

As has been suggested, one of Ponge's major concerns is that the use of objects in art should be seen to have not only aesthetic but also strong ethical importance, and it is the notion of the Vanitas which takes us to the heart of Ponge's existential basis for still life descriptions. Avoiding the specific symbolism of skulls, rosaries and timepieces, as well as the ostentatious and oppressive message of the original Flemish Vanitas works, Ponge points out that any representation of any object has a similar effect on the observer. This is a theme elaborated in the texts on both Chardin and Braque, and it constitutes a new seriousness in theoretical writings on the genre of still life. It is everyday objects we are now called upon to contemplate in the way we once meditated on religious icons; hence the exhibition entitled Mythologies quotidiennes organised in 1964 by the critic Gassiot-Talabot; hence the earlier suggestion of André Derain that the compotier had become "le Christ du dix-neuvième siècle", and hence Ponge's affirmation in his essays on Chardin and Braque that in the absence of other directions for our religious instincts, "nous commencons à ressentir religieusement la réalité quotidienne" (NMC 233).

A final point remains: it is worth considering that whatever reverence Ponge may have for the humble object and however novel his description of its relationship to himself, the external world is still employed in his work as a key to the condition of humanity. If objects 'revolt' it is still, paradoxically, the ruling class (man) which has to effect the revolution. Despite Ponge's attempt to represent "La nature hors-les-miroirs" (AC 55), 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, that neither orange nor sponge
could be properly said to have 'aspirations', and that the oyster's stubbornness is clearly a human invention. 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. 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, no less than that of a Balzac, a form of appropriation in sheep's clothing.

**De la nature morte et de Chardin**

"Entreprenez de traiter de la façon la plus banale le plus commun des sujets: c'est alors que paraitra votre génie" (NMC 233). Chardin's importance for Ponge lies in his astonishing craftsmanship and in his deliberately limited subject matter, his intense concentration on and affection for familiar domestic objects, expressed without drama or flourishes. The Twentieth Century can thus celebrate in Chardin something which had baffled his contemporaries. Whilst praising the artist's technical mastery as nothing short of miraculous, Diderot clearly saw his subject matter as inappropriate, and a serious flaw in an otherwise marvellous achievement; "si le sublime du technique n'y était pas", he comments, "l'idéal de Chardin serait misérable". He perceived greater merit in history painting than in genre painting, equating the former with poetry, with a "nature idéale et poétique", and the latter with prose, its creator a "pur et simple imitateur, copiste d'une nature commune". Nevertheless, we see in Chardin the determined election of a small range of simple subjects - "Les biens proches", as Ponge puts it, "cette fontaine de cuivre, ce mortier de bois, ces harengs saurs..." (NMC 232)
elevated far beyond their intrinsic or ordinary practical value. We also see the rejection of other subjects deemed, by neo-Classical aesthetics, to be more lofty; "Chardin ne s'en va pas vivre dans un monde de dieux ou de héros des anciennes mythologies ou de la religion" (NNC 232). Equally important are Chardin's avoidance of the risks pertaining to simple subjects, ("la médiocrité, la platitude; ou la mèvrerie, la préciosité" (NNC 232)) and his corresponding gain ("le génie de l'artiste apparait pour transfigurer la manière, change la langue, fait faire des pas à l'esprit, constitue un magnifique progrès" (NNC 233)). The relation to Ponge's "parti pris des choses égale compte tenu des mots" is evident.

What Chardin also gives Ponge the opportunity to express is his democratic idea of an art accessible to all. It has been said that Chardin "democratised still life [and] made it accessible to a wider range of admirers". In abstaining from the use of themes imposed by the ideology of the epoch, artists are, claims Ponge, "dans le fonds réellement vivant de ce temps, dans son état d'esprit officieux - compte non tenu de ses superstructures idéologiques", and therefore achieve "une bonne communion avec les non-artistes de leur temps" (NNC 233). Chardin, in a simple water fountain, captures with unostentatious eloquence "toutes les cuisses de nymphes, les uniformes des gardes-francaises, toutes les valeurs nobles et délicates du XVIIIe siècle. Et l'enthousiasme des Vestris" (NNC 234).

Chardin's choice and placement of objects was subtle; the overall atmosphere of his work was one of (deceptive) simplicity, spaciousness and repose. Careful consideration of objects was accompanied by a new, natural way of painting. Whereas the majority of his contemporaries attempted to create a precise, trompe-l'oeil illusion of nature without visible evidence of brushwork, Chardin rejected such meticulous and slavish rendering of detail. Shapes, colours and the relationships of objects to each
other appeared more important than precise description in what was largely an art of suggestion. In his finest still lifes Chardin concentrated on purely formal interests, dropping anecdotal or symbolic elements. This marks an early summit in the discovery of abstract rhythms and the subordination of subject matter to formal principles which more recently resulted in, for example, the still life paintings of Matisse and the Cubists, where structures and decorative rhythms finally reigned supreme. The application of Chardin's paint, remaining evident in the finished toiles, revealed spontaneity and what Ponge might call the mise en scène of his production, with some energetic brush strokes whose varying surface effects almost defied Diderot's descriptive ability. Thus Ponge's suggestion that the emphasis in art should more properly fall on the process of creation than on the finished product is satisfied by the seriousness and originality of Chardin the artisan. As is stressed in the case of the majority of creators treated by Ponge, "le moyen d'expression, la peinture, prend plus d'importance, est beaucoup plus mis en gloire non seulement que l'objet représenté (naturellement), mais encore que l'image elle-même. Il faut que le travail soit sensible et présent: là réside la valeur."

Ponge's text is probably the most revolutionary ever to accompany Chardin's paintings. It is differentiated from other texts of L'Atelier contemporain in several ways; in fact the reader may legitimately enquire what the place and function of an essay on an Eighteenth Century painter could be in a collection which purports to deal exclusively with the progress and achievements of contemporary art. Unusually, this is not a texte de commande solicited by one of the many artists Ponge frequented after the appearance of Le Parti pris des choses, and resulting from mutual admiration (a "parti pris réciproque" (AC VIII)). The essay is not complicated by personal knowledge of Chardin the man
and Ponge shows none of his usual scruples or hesitations about how best to proceed. This is the expression of a coherent and harmonious vision, suggested by and derived from Chardin's own vision, as poet and painter meet across the centuries. There is no detail concerning Chardin's life, nor does Ponge follow his favoured procedure of taking the reader behind the scenes to watch the artist at work in his studio. The usual motivation for writing, described in 'Au Lecteur' as "les choses émotifs ressentis au contact de cette espèce d'hommes, observés "à l'oeuvre" et dans leurs comportements quotidiens, tant éthiques qu'esthétiques" (AC VII), is absent. Furthermore, as it is not intended as an introduction to a monograph or an exhibition of Chardin's works, the function of the text is exceptional. Ponge is liberated from his role and responsibility as a useful guide and objective interpreter (obligations which he in any case casually flouts on many occasions) and as Warehime notes in her article on the essay, it is "silent about both man and genre at first. Chardin is not mentioned until approximately half way through the text". In its preparatory stages, manuscript headings ('Chardin', 'De Chardin et de la nature morte', and finally 'De la nature morte et de Chardin') shift the emphasis from the painter to Ponge's preferred genre, and although the text is clearly an acknowledgement of the debt Ponge and generations of painters owe to the French master, it is also a somewhat audacious up-dating and re-appropriation of his work which is used to illustrate Ponge's own 'parti pris des choses'. Whilst appearing, a priori, to lie outside the perimeter of a specifically contemporary quest ("Qui sommes-nous? Où allons-nous? Que faisons-nous? Que se passe-t-il, en somme, dans l'atelier contemporain?" (AC VIII)) Chardin is, nevertheless, called upon to assist in providing answers to these questions.

What Serge Gavronsky refers to as the question of "autoportraiture" in Ponge's art criticism inevitably arises here since Chardin's work is intrinsically bound to that of
Ponge and judged accordingly. Ponge’s peculiar mixture of deference and arrogance, of self-effacing and self-projecting modes complicates our response to his work on other creators, and in the case of Chardin in particular, it is tempting to ask whether the artist is less important than what Ponge does with him. In ‘Le Parnasse’, Ponge describes his relationship with Malherbe, Boileau and Mallarmé thus: “je leur reconnais à l'intérieur de moi une place” (TP 166), and it is this confrontation of two artists which provides the main centre of interest in Ponge’s text. It is true that ‘De la nature morte et de Chardin’ could legitimately exist as a manifesto without mentioning the painter at all; however, Chardin’s presence as occasional referent and illustrator is important for the complex functioning of the piece, particularly since a major aim appears to be a comparison between past and present still life painting. If Chardin struggled for recognition it was because his chosen subjects were considered unelevating and inappropriate; if the work of today’s still life painter is demanding, it is because tranquillising art, and the artist’s function as “réconciliateur provisoire” (AC 69) is more problematic than it was in Chardin’s period. This use of tradition as a point of reference does not result in Ponge’s “asserting his mastery over Chardin” as Warehime claims, since the ‘rivalry’ and ‘aggression’ she refers to are not at issue here. Ponge is simply noting his difference, his particularité, by reading Chardin through a modern perspective. Once again, according to Warehime, such a manifesto “breaks with the past to establish a new order; it seeks to change the priority of events in time by reassessing them in the light of a new hierarchy of values”. For Ponge this is not a break, but the recognition of a debt and a necessary re-ordering. Here is what he says about the value of his literary and artistic ancestors in a text on Braque; “les œuvres du passé, après tout, ne sont sans doute pas si satisfaisants. [...]
Simplement parce que le passé est le passé et qu'à chaque minute tout change. Que tout redevient pour chaque personne hétérogène. Que chaque personne remet tout en question" (AC 61).

Ponge's essay begins accordingly with two pages describing his own individual approach to objects. This is an account of Ponge's intimate relationship with the material world, written in the first person and outlining not Chardin's but his own creative techniques. Here the writer is a "bon chef d'orchestre" (NMC 228) constantly awake to the symphony of the humble objects which constitute his environment and permitting us to relish their solo performances. This is followed by two pages wherein Ponge examines the nature and effect of what we might call 'still life meditation', and its place in his daily round. There is a series of anecdotes in which physical or intellectual activity is stilled by the rewarding temptation to contemplate detail. A simple compotier, the texture of the fabric on a car seat, the wrist of the driver, a towel flung back onto the towel rail in the washroom of a restaurant; all these provide Ponge with pleasurable and rewarding encounters. Typically, then, still life is represented as an activity. It is not a static work of art but an act of meditation. Also typically, and not without humour, the practical value of developing such a faculty of concentration is outlined:

une telle
faculté de brusque accommodation de l'esprit peut présenter de réels avantages, en cas de soucis graves ou de douleurs physiques par exemple. Quand on souffre beaucoup d'une dent il est très recommandable de se féliciter dans le même temps de l'état excellent de telle autre partie de son corps.
Je jure que cela décongestionne (NMC 231).

Next Ponge moves towards a description of Chardin's achievement in particular, and an analysis of the still life as a "paysage métaphysique". In Chardin's homely, bourgeois
interiors as well as in Ponge's work, objects become "plus importants que notre regard". They offer the very essence of Chardin's era "dans le creux de la main" and "Sans théâtre", and they provide temporary serenity and equilibrium. Here the theme of the Vanitas returns; if death is unostentatiously present in "la pulsation normale du coeur" then "le fatal" is present in Chardin's quiet interiors: "Entre le paisible et le fatal, Chardin tient un méritoire équilibre" (NNC 234). Our fascination with still life objects is explained by our difference from them; by the fact that we experience ourselves as being "en trop dans la nature" (NNC 235), perpetual wanderers seeking our ultimate place of rest. The essay ends on a note of tranquil acceptance, which is fostered by Chardin's extremely understated vision of our mutual condition. For Ponge the trick of the greatest artists is to go beyond the overt message of the Vanitas, to have so thoroughly absorbed its message that a kind of indifference is attained: "Ce n'est qu'après ceux-là", he affirms, "qu'on peut tirer l'échelle" (NNC 236).

This, then, is the 'plot' of the text on Chardin as it appears in L'Atelier contemporain. Ponge's re-ordering of Chardin's works is, however, best revealed by a close reading of the text in its original, luxurious publication in Art de France. This is the only text of Ponge's recueil which is partially dependent on specific images. In general the texts of L'Atelier contemporain are not directly illustrated by the plates which they accompany in their original places of publication, but 'De la nature morte et de Chardin' is an exception to this rule. Here portions of the essay are subtly and provocatively juxtaposed with carefully selected reproductions from Chardin's paintings which complete and enhance its themes. It is this version which offers one of the clearest instances of simultaneous tribute and assimilation, or autoportraiture, to suit Ponge's own aesthetic and ethical standpoint.
Although at first glance Ponge's selection of plates appears innocent, their dispersal throughout the text, their combination with certain specially paginated sections, and above all the modifications to which they are submitted, require more careful scrutiny. As suggested, Ponge begins the text with several paragraphs outlining his own creative approach to the world of objects, for which he is indebted to photographic techniques:

il est en mon pouvoir de manier en moi certains engins ou dispositifs
Comparerables aux amplificateurs, sélecteurs, écrans, diaphragmes
Fort en usage, depuis quelque temps, dans certaines techniques (NMC 228).

This is applicable not only to methods employed in his Parti pris des choses (his 'Le Pain' (TP 51), 'La Mousse' (TP 63), or 'Rhum des fougères' (TP 40) are good examples of such shifting perspectives), but also to the transformation he has effected on Chardin's paintings. In the case of the long dead painter, Ponge treats his paintings, "organismes signifiants mais muets" (EPS 88) as he would any other material object; as something capable of infinite modifications. Unapologetically taking the liberty of toying with Chardin's compositions, cutting them to his measure by the use of these varying lenses to show his similarity and his difference from the painter, Ponge elects enlargements or sections of minor compositional elements, divests the composition of any anecdotal reference so we are forced to concentrate on the objects themselves, and congratulates himself on giving them a fresh voice:

J'y suis, même, devenu assez expert
Pour, comme un organiste agile ou un bon chef d'orchestre,
Savoir faire sortir -
Non à proprement parler du silence -
Mais de la sourdine, de la non-remarque,
Telle ou telle voix, pour en jouir
Et faire jouer ma clientèle (NMC 228-9).
To take Chardin's carefully arranged domestic interiors and submit them to his own will could imply that Ponge detects in them some inadequacy, but it is rather the equivalent of selecting a few paragraphs from a favourite author for close reading, and is, in part, a way of praising Chardin's artful attention to the smallest elements in his paintings. "Un signe bien trouvé" remarks Ponge a propos of the inevitably reduced formats of Braque's lithographs as published in book form, "est valable dans n'importe quel format", adding that "Bien sûr que, d'aucun sujet, aucune expression définitive n'est possible!" (AC 245). Here Ponge is taking account of modern art's greater variety of perspectival devices, its wandering, all-seeing, more selective and playful eye departing from the limited field of human vision and suggesting its relative impoverishment. The implication is that the contemporary artist registers more impressions and uses his eyes differently from his Eighteenth Century counterpart.

The most obvious effect of Ponge's variants is that of dépouillement. It is as if Chardin's compositions were panoramas too large, too cluttered for him, despite their striking simplicity and naturalness (one need only glance at his tiny painting of a Fontaine de cuivre to detect the departure from the rich overabundance in previous still life works). Throughout this text runs a series of periodic and irresistible shifts from a wide focus to a minute one. We have seen how the frenetic activities of life are replaced by rediscovery and contemplation of a simple plate of peaches or a "serviette-éponge". Ponge finds himself "sollicité plusieurs fois" by objects in this way (NNC 231), and his response to the objects in Chardin's paintings is no exception, since he clearly prefers to execute his own series of variations by selecting minor features from Chardin's compositions. There has always been a tendency in still life paintings to set apart a single object from the mass of a more complex composition in order to concentrate
on its qualities: a cut and half peeled lemon, a single flower, or a piece of fruit isolated from a compotier. Let us take one common still life subject, asparagus, to illustrate the fact. A painting of asparagus by Bonvin, *Marmite de cuivre et asperges* (1881), has all the traditional elements of a still life exercise: the white cloth, the simple foodstuff, the asparagus in a tight bundle, with a single, irregular stalk lifting its head and refusing to lie flat. Echoed by the upward angle of the spoon in the copper pot, this single asparagus stalk is picked out. Hence Ponge would appear to be recognising that the "muettes supplications" of individual objects are noticeable in painting too. In the gradual simplification of still life compositions, Manet eventually paints a tiny painting of a single asparagus stalk (interestingly, from Ponge's materialist point of view, because he felt he had been overpaid for a larger painting of a bunch of the same). Much later, Ponge and Fautrier turn to asparagus as the theme for a lavish *édition de luxe* in which the 'microscopic' effect is further highlighted. Here Fautrier covers the pages on which Ponge's text is written with the very texture, fibre and colour of the vegetable, homing in to such an extent that the idea of asparagus is taken to near abstraction. Seen in terms of a still life tradition, Ponge may be described as one of the most advanced points of this tendency to dépouillement, which is also a simultaneous enrichissement. In the Chardin text the point is emphasised by Ponge's creation of six new compositions taken from details of five Chardin paintings: *Attributs de musique*, *Jeune homme au violon*, *Les Débris d'un déjeuner*, *Le Gobelet d'argent* and *L'Enfant au toton*. It is background elements with minor roles which are elected by Ponge, and hence liberated. Thus the delicate hands holding the bow of a violin from *Jeune Homme au violon* form a new composition, whereas in the original we might have been more tempted to look at the player's face. Similarly, Ponge's versions of
L'Enfant au toton exclude the human interest provided by the playing child but concentrate on an ink pot and quill pen, or a tiny crayon in its holder which, in the original, may well be the last element to attract our attention, as it is partially concealed in a half open drawer. The new compositions remind us of the effect of overlap, remarkable, for example, in Degas, in which the edge of the canvas is clearly not the limitation of the pictorial world, and the idea of careful composition is abandoned in favour of casualness. Furthermore, objects are brought closer to us by the exclusion of Chardin's own pictorial space. Frontalisation results in the impression of what Braque preferred to call not visual but tactile space. These objects are placed in such a way that we are forced to look up at them and this, along with the magnification of objects, illustrates "leur façon d'encombrer notre espace, de venir en avant, de se faire (ou de se rendre) plus importants que notre regard" (NMC 232).

Before the start of Ponge's text is placed a long, thin, rectangular detail from Chardin's Attributs de la musique, the length of this new composition displaying to their best advantage long folds of drapery and a goblet on its plate. The textures and colours of the background and the compression of space make the detail reminiscent, in its present format, of something from Braque's Synthetic Cubist period, whose exquisite sense of colour they also share; the fresh lime green offset by a thinner line of orange, whose reflection is picked up by the shining goblet and plate. Again, provocatively, no musical instruments are included, although the first five paragraphs of Ponge's text, which this plate accompanies, rely on a musical metaphor. It is worth stopping to consider the function of music, a third type of artistic creation evoked in this text, since from the outset Ponge suggests that his contact with the surrounding world may be aurally rather than visually accounted for. The terms "entendre" and "écouter" perpetuate
his earnest, yet ludic myth that in his poems objects are coaxed into speaking in their own voices and on their own terms, granted independence to give solo performances. The simile, "J'écoute le monde comme une symphonie" invites us to keep these modes of creation separate but to compare them, and the translation of Ponge's act of creation into musical terms (the "bout de [son] porte-plume" is imaginatively handled "comme le bâton du chef d'orchestre" (MNC 229)) is a bridge between the respective semiotic fields of painter and poet. In his contribution to the painting / poetry question, Ponge remains trenchant concerning the superiority of the written word, and a similarity in inspiration, aim and result detected particularly in his preferred still life painters is axiomatic; for Ponge they are all attempting "de façon variée et avec plus ou moins de bonheur, par l'action sur de tout autres matières, de tout autres outils que les miens, à donner forme matérielle et durable, et force communicative d'autant, à des soucis ou des élans originellement tout analogues et, dans les meilleurs cas, finalement à des orgasmes rigoureusement homologues aux miens, malgré la spécificité de leur langage" (AC VIII). All creators produce compositions; the pen and the brush are linked by the bâton. Music also has the element of time which painting lacks and used as a bridging metaphor between the arts, this hints at the superiority of the written word; only language shares the temporal and the sonorous elements of music, as well as partaking in the concrete, visual and spatial mode of expression proper to painting (in 'Les Façons du regard' Ponge speaks of "le regard-de-telle-sorte-qu'on-le-parle" (TP 137)). The connotations of a symphony correspond nicely to the notion of natural harmony which is prevalent in Chardin, and to Ponge's concept of fonctionnement, of the world as a meticulously orchestrated, vast and interrelating machine. The composer to whom Ponge turns in this texts is, of course, Rameau. His music links him to Chardin since

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painter and composer alike are revolutionaries, yet embody measure, and a Rameau gavotte, described by Ponge as "noble et joyeuse, aristocratique et paysanne, enthousiaste et spirituelle: grave et gracieuse à la fois" (NMC 233) is likened to Chardin's Fontaine de cuivre for its unpretentious encapsulation of Eighteenth Century values. Rameau also provides a link between Ponge and Chardin, and a passage from Pour un Malherbe shows how Ponge characterises Rameau in terms which are equally appropriate to his own poetry: "échappe à la sécheresse... échappe à la préciosité, parce que toutes ses articulations harmoniques, si détaillées, si brillantes, et parfois si nacrées scient-elles, naissent à partir de la grave musicalité d'une basse fondamentale exprimant l'épaisseur et le fonctionnement en profondeur du monde" (PM 211).

In his use of details from Chardin, Ponge is, then, able not only to describe his 'parti pris des choses' as he has done in numerous texts, but also to provide a visual illustration of his techniques by focusing upon minor compositional elements. The new and simple eloquence of these updated compositions illustrates the validity of Ponge's endeavour. The details selected fall into two subject groups, all including elements to be held in the hand and linked by that fact. Firstly there is the traditional still life iconography of fruit and kitchen utensils, but typically, Ponge is predominantly interested in a second category - the attributes of the arts - and in the act of creation they suggest; the human skills of writing, drawing and music as evoked by the quill pen and ink bottle, the piece of chalk and the hands holding the violin. It is significant that Ponge describes the creative pleasure and salubrious effect of contemplating a plate of peaches, rather than that of looking at a Chardin painting of the same. What is celebrated is the value of the individual's contact with objects; the 'parti pris des choses' is illustrated as a practical mode of behaviour, a
viable way of life, and a spiritual exercise in meditation and concentration.

With the detail from *Le Gobelet d'argent*, Ponge is moving further towards an ethical explanation of the still life. Casually placed on a kitchen table with three apples and an earthenware bowl, the silver goblet is far removed from religious regalia, yet the accompanying text speaks of "communion" and of how we now respond to everyday objects "religieusement" (NNC 233). The detail from the fairly light hearted *L'Enfant au toton* which Ponge elects is, in keeping with the more serious development of his text at this stage, the nearest of all the plates to the mood and starkness of a *Vanitas* painting. Others are generally rich in colour, texture and hints of sensual pleasure, but this, the most sombre and monastic of the chosen details, has a Flemish severity and "un éclairage de destin" (NNC 235), illustrating the "sens du vide" (NNC 233) which came to dominate Chardin's later compositions. The upper two thirds of the detail are plunged into darkness. At the bottom we see a cream coloured scroll upon a dark grey book, and an ink pot, a quill leaning from its mouth. In Ponge's modern interpretation of the increased ethical value of the still life genre, the theme, if not the ancient symbolic subjects of the *Vanitas* is of major importance; "La moindre nature morte est un paysage métaphysique" "les grands signes ne sont pas qu'aux cieux" (NNC 235). Here, some traditional symbolism is included (writing material often accompanied a skull or a clock, as a meditation on the inevitability of death and the futility of the human desire for immortality through the pen) but for Ponge even the simplest arrangements of fruits is an unostentatious expression of man's inescapable destiny, and an implicit reference, "sans endimanchement", to his existential predicament. This is the value of Chardin for the modern spectator, but Ponge is keen to point out our difference from Chardin, which makes still life all the more crucial today. 

Whereas the comparative
stillness of Chardin's era seemed to go hand in hand with his peaceful domestic scenes, this text incorporates a series of hectic images in strong contrast to the mood of still life painting. The rhythms and activities of modern life - "Une longue course l'hiver dans les bois", "un après-midi au cirque" with its colour, noise and rapid succession of glaring spectacles, a car journey or "un voyage en avion" (the metaphor used in 'Braque-Japon' for man over-reaching himself (AC 120)), are corrected by the tranquillity of contemplation "chez-soi" (NMC 229-30). The moral tone, advocating the joy of simple pleasures, and the calm encounter with our destiny connects the still life with an Epicurean philosophy which will be further developed in Ponge's work on Braque.

Chardin's legacy to the Twentieth Century is, then, a collection of tranquil works which invite us to engage in an unsensational encounter with mortality. Indeed, this essay helps us to understand Ponge's response to Giacometti and to other dramatic suggestions of our 'plight'; "la disposition des entrailles des poulets sacrés, celle des cartes battues puis étalées sur la table, celle du marc de café, celle des dés quand ils viennent d'être jetés" (NMC 235), such spectacular signs hold less interest for Ponge than the everyday reminders of our condition which, without evading the facts, assure us that "la tranquillité est de droit" (NMC 236).

From the lessons provided by a fresh reading of the Eighteenth Century master, we now move to those provided by the more complex universe of Braque. Described by Ponge as a revolutionary classicist, Braque does not need to be updated; he is Chardin's modern counterpart, his ""pendant" dans l'histoire" (AC 69), but for Ponge he expresses far more that just an unaffected relish for the pleasures of plain bourgeois living.
Ponge and Braque

"C'est devant l'oeuvre d'un autre, donc comme critique, que l'on s'est reconnu créateur" (TP 148). This early comment on the value of other creative figures makes it clear that they are essential for Ponge to situate himself. If L'Atelier contemporain strains towards self-portraiture, providing a series of mirrors in which Ponge notes the correspondences between his own poetic work and the works of contemporary artists, then it is his eight texts on Braque which provide the clearest reflection. In Braque Ponge finds many confirmations, not least of which is a painted version of his own 'parti pris des choses'. This allows him, quite legitimately, to give a résumé of his own theories in his writings on the painter. Both share a predilection for everyday objects which provide us with sensual pleasures and which receive their full meaning through interaction with a human agency; objects which invite us to touch, smell, eat, drink, play or listen. More importantly, both share the notion that man is more himself when dealing with such humble objects than when contemplating human affairs: "Il nous est arrivé de constater que pour nous satisfaire, ce n'était pas tant notre idée de nous-mêmes ou de l'homme que nous devions tâcher d'exprimer, mais en venir au monde extérieur, au parti pris des choses"; "Et jamais plus qu'alors (l'homme) ne se montre homme [...] Jamais il ne rend mieux compte de lui-même" (BR 62-63).

In the treatment of their chosen objects, poet and painter show striking similarities. Neither creates directly from life; neither desires to re-present an absent referent. Both are in the business of presenting 'essences', or what Ponge calls the "idée globale intime" (BR 58) of the generic object. This again is described in his writing on Braque: "chaque personne possède [du plus simple objet] une idée profonde, à la fois naïve et complexe, simple et nourrie (épaisse, colorée), puérile et pratique". This is an idea
which results from mature reflection, which is "formée par une sédimentation incessante, la somme à ce jour des impressions reçues", and which "se forme contre la simplicité abusive du mot" (BR 63). Both poet and painter reveal new faces of the object; Ponge's whimsy, wit and surprising analogies uncover its intimate identity, whilst Braque dislocates his objects, bending them forwards to meet us and making them appear at once familiar and extraordinarily strange. In their penetrating treatment of our everyday environment both Ponge and Braque go beyond Chardin's accurate representations of objects to provide us with examples of what Ponge calls the Objeu and the Objcic, independent objects which throw fresh light over the concrete world, which are themselves composed of natural elements and which have achieved a joyful, sensual, occasionally playful, autonomy. Above all, both Ponge and Braque are concerned to have the still life object represent a metamorphic view of the world in which nothing is finite and where all, including man, is in perpetual flux, requiring perpetual redefinition. Braque is concerned with the relationships between objects and with the life implicit in an object rather than with the object itself. It is "Les secrets et non les apparences superficielles de la Nature" which are his true subject (BC 21). This explains Braque's universal appeal, since he represents the eternal and unchanging laws of growth, change and decay in nature. He appears to Ponge as the only artist who achieves this all important notion of dynamism, of movement and becoming, as opposed to the stasis with which the painter's universe is usually cursed. This is attained by his provision of more than one view of an object at a time; by the trembling, fluidity and hesitation in his baroque line; by his dissociation of colour and form; by the representational independence which he gives to light, and by a certain deformation of the contour of his objects (BL 242). For Ponge Braque's images "participent de la lourdeur, de
l'épaisseur, des maladresses, des faiblesses et de la précarité des créatures" (BL 245).

Braque's paintings, then, seem to take us to the heart of Ponge's notion of fonctionnement, of the universe as a vast machine of interlocking parts. They reveal to us the growth and disintegration of form, and encourage a lucid awareness of our own position within this eternal round of birth, fruition and decay: "Là seulement nous pouvons voir comme, dans le vide, se font et se défont les choses, comment elles naissent et meurent et renaissent autres, par la permutation de leurs éléments. Et ainsi voyons-nous le tout où rien ne se crée jamais de rien" (BMO 313). This materialistic world view is why Ponge often treats the protean objects in his poems according to their 'life cycles' rather than their mere appearance - 'Le Galet' in all its stages, for example (TP 104-15), or the complex progression of a shower of rain (TP 35-36). In 'La Pratique de la littérature', a lecture delivered in 1956, Ponge abruptly reminds his audience of this wider perspective and proceeds to make some illuminating comments about another view he shares with Braque. Firstly he takes his listeners outside the lecture theatre; "Mais ça continue dehors. Tout fonctionne. La terre, le système [...] tout marche, ça passe, ça tourne, et non seulement les herbes poussent, très lentement mais très sûrement, les pierres attendent d'éclater ou de devenir du sable" (Méthodes 275). Secondly, he develops a view of Nature as a universe of imperfections in which every object and person carries its own particular form of 'damnation'. The damnation of these mute objects, whose existence is "probablement aussi dramatique que la nôtre", is that they too find difficulty in expressing their individuality, achieving this only through "des poses, des façons d'être, des formes auxquelles elles sont contraintes". Nature's laws confine them to behave in a particular way, and even their colour is viewed as a kind of condemnation - a theory which Ponge sees reflected in Braque
(Méthodes 276). If an object is, for argument's sake, red, then this is because it is incapable of absorbing red rays. Like all objects, however, it strains towards the absolute, towards perfection: "Toutes choses voudraient être blanches, laisser passer tous les rayons. Mais elles ont toutes un défaut, une damnation". The explanation of colour as condemnation, as inadequacy, as indicative of relative perfection is part of Braque's universe; "c'est le sens tragique, dramatique, mettons le sens de Braque, si vous voulez, en peinture". As a striking comparison, an object parading in Picasso's work is not subject to the absurd; "Chez Picasso c'est le contraire. Elle veut être rouge, elle dit: je veux!". In the absence of such self-confidence, however, the lesson for man is not to strain for absolutes, not to perceive relative perfection as tragic, and to revel in the absorbing diversity of Nature's errors.

Given such profound similarities, it is in his approach to Braque that Ponge runs the greatest risk of being accused of using the art criticism as a manifesto. At the same time, however, there is such complete coincidence between himself and Braque that it also gives him the opportunity to provide one of the most searching, accurate and profound on-going studies of L'Atelier contemporain. Ponge's own rhetorical terminology is far from an intrusion here, and can happily serve a double function without the slightest risk of betraying Braque. The writer's "porte plume" is "imbu, si je puis dire [...] de la même encre" (B-J 123), and indeed many of the aphoristic reflections on art and life contained in Braque's own Cahiers could well have been written by Ponge. It must not be forgotten when speaking of self-portraiture in Ponge's work on Braque, that Ponge's own development appears to have been influenced at several stages, or at the very least confirmed, by Braque's work. From his initial, haunting encounter with Braque's Violon - a papier collé seen hanging on Paulhan's wall in the rue Campagne-Première in 1923 - the painter has been a constant
touchstone, taking an increasingly important role in the writer's ethics ("chacun de ses chefs-d'oeuvre, dans chacune de ses périodes, a été comme un palier dans mon 'éthique'") and becoming, rather than a passing influence, a "Maitre de Vie" (FV 247). Ponge’s first meeting with the man himself took place with the intermediary of Paulhan, who, in Ponge’s absence, had astutely distributed copies of Le Parti pris des choses to Braque and Picasso. Ponge first visited Braque’s atelier in 1945, and remained friends with the painter until his death in August 1963. Perhaps the summit of this relationship is the important collaborative effort Cinq sapates, Ponge’s first illustrated édition de luxe in which the same spirit emanates from Ponge’s texts and Braque’s simple, unadorned lithographs. The potential for self enrichment latent in the rudest of objects is clearly the nub of the the creative universe of poet and painter alike. In the title of his last essay on Braque, Ponge implicitly refers to the creative fruitfulness this friendship has allowed him to enjoy by speaking of his "re-co-naisance et dette à jamais" to the painter. He remarks earlier that "La rencontre de ce maitre a été l'une des plus importantes de ma vie", and that "je lui ai voué aussitôt une grande vénération" (FV 246). As Ian Higgins puts it, Ponge’s "emotional, intellectual and artistic devotion to Braque and his work means that these texts are particularly clear prises de position".

The eight pieces on Braque are, then, amongst the most moving, personal and comprehensive tributes Ponge has written about another individual. They constitute the chronicle of a friendship, taking us from Ponge’s first experience of Braque’s work, through several moving encounters, and finally to the painter’s death and beyond. Five of the texts are written during Braque’s lifetime, three after his death. They were written for a variety of audiences, publications and circumstances, with a particular theme holding sway in each. The dates of writing, spanning
the period from 1946 to 1980, mean that they cover most of the period of Ponge's art criticism, and offer the finest example of its variety, and a rounded portrait of Braque rivalled only in comprehensiveness by that of Fautrier. The tone and nature of Ponge's work on Braque are partly due to the fact that Braque was already a mature artist when Ponge began to write about him. Ponge's first text on Braque is written some thirty years after the high Cubist era, his first meeting with the painter took place when Braque was sixty four, and although there are fruitful comparisons to be made between Ponge's own techniques and those of Cubism (their self-reflexive nature, their tendency towards punning and play, the way in which they send the spectator / reader back to the surface of the painting or poem), any importance one may be tempted to attribute to a particular period or style is overshadowed in these essays by the larger questions of the ideal function of art and the artist. What Braque meditates on is the nature of the creative process and the proper functioning of the creator. This is the global subject of *L'Atelier contemporain*, and indeed of Ponge's work as a whole, and it is with these questions that we will begin, reserving detailed attention to Ponge's critical discourse for the second part of this study which deals with Ponge's ultimate "idée globale intime" of Braque, 'Braque ou un méditatif à l'œuvre'.

What, then, does Ponge consider to be the virtues of this still life painter, and what are the major themes Braque allows him to develop? More than any other artist he permits Ponge to take modern art into the political and the religious or ontological sphere, and to reveal its important role in engendering a new Humanism and perpetuating a sense of the French identity. The texts on Braque are couched in a background of ever increasing disillusionment with the political climate and with the cultural and moral bankruptcy
of contemporary society in which "le goût de la majorité s'est ravalé au degré le plus bas" (B-D 103). As in his work on Giacometti, Ponge refers to "la civilisation finissante" (B-J 122) and in his sombre portrait of degradation Braque is repeatedly posited as a way forward. This disillusionment is a tragic sequel to the "atmosphère de matin triomphal" of the early Cubist era, described by Ponge in paragraphs which capture the excitement of an Apollinaire (B-D 104). For the moment, however, adventure must retire until order once again holds sway, and the role of art as a corrective, both for the individual and for society as a whole, becomes essential. This explains the title and theme of Ponge's first work on Braque, 'Braque le réconciliateur'. Written in 1946 this essay constitutes a serious look at the moral responsibility of art in a post-war climate. It is based on the notion that Braque's art is therapeutic, which will be developed in further essays on the painter, to surface with the greatest intensity in Ponge's final essay on Braque, 'Bref condensé de notre dette à jamais et re-co-naissance à Braque particulièrement en cet été 80'. Here Ponge speaks of "l'effroyable trouble actuel, français et mondial", catalogues the ills of a world which has run out of control and lost touch with itself ("mœurs, violence, terrorisme, lâcheté, atrocités, veulerie, ignominie") and presents Braque as an antidote: "son idée seule aujourd'hui me rassure" (BC 16).

Part of Braque's value, then, lies in the fact that he stands apart from the restless instability of his age. Despite Ponge's brief connection with the subversiveness of Surrealism, his preference has always lain more naturally not with those creators who "plongent dans l'inconnu pour trouver du nouveau, demandent à être projetés, secoués, aiguillonnées, chatouillées, exaltés" (BR 61), but with those who begin creating from a troubled standpoint which they temporarily resolve through their work. Such artists
"ressentent violemment le chaos et le dangereux balancement du monde", and "désirent violemment des moeurs d'équilibre". It is an equilibrium which is also restored to the spectator, and Ponge stresses the comfort to be found in Braque's works (BR 67-68). These are "tableaux de dimensions moyennes", where familiar forms are "recoupés à notre mesure", colours are "un peu domptés [...] répartis un peu plus sérieusement que dans la nature; pour notre aise, notre confort", the whole taking effect "Dans le mezza voce et le grave", and producing an "effet sédatif". The spectator is thus placed "au confort de la nature familière à l'homme d'aujourd'hui", the world made provisionally accessible to his understanding. It is to Braque that "nous avons tendance à aller nous reposer (des autres tableaux)", and a brief suggestion of a comparison between Braque's Violon and a de Chirico painting which Ponge encountered hanging side by side in Paulhan's appartment illustrates this point neatly. The modest size and style of the one is in no way overshadowed by the illogical and profoundly disconcerting peinture métaphysique with its appeal to an oniric universe. The de Chirico is, in format, subject and ambition, "grandiose", the Braque quite simply "grand". "De quel côté était la grandeur, je vous laisse à imaginer" (BL 293).

This 'réconciliation' is, however, profoundly different from the kind of comfort to be found in Chardin since Braque is a closet subversive, a master of paradox and ambiguity. Ponge repeatedly contrasts the antithetical functions 'troubler' and 'rassurer'. His initial statement is that Braque's work is there "Non pour troubler, mais pour rassurer" (BR 66), which is then developed in line with Braque's own paradoxical statement, "L'Art est fait pour troubler, la science rassure". Ponge shows that Braque delivers the best of both worlds and does not allow us to bury our head in the sand; if he is a "réconciliateur", it is nevertheless "en me troublant qu'il me rassure": "Me plaçant à la fois à la hauteur ou profondeur de mon trouble.
et au confort de la nature familière à l'homme d'aujourd'hui, il m'étaye de tous les côtés". It is suggested that Braque is a difficult, thought-provoking artist, and that despite his mastery of decorative techniques learned as a peintre-décorateur, he is not immediately commercial. His pictures do not appear so thoroughly serene to us as do Chardin’s, since his art strikes out beyond established frontiers and presents the future; "Ce tableau vous met fort en colère: il ne représente rien. Bien sûr, puisqu'il vous présente l'avenir" (BAM 73).

For the poet who urges everyone to "fonder sa propre rhétorique" (TF 177) the origin of art is not the arbitrary decision of a dilettante to put brush to canvas, but "une impérieuse nécessité d'expression" (BR 66). This echoes Ponge's own urge to come to terms with the absurd as he experiences it - less as a metaphysical concept than as a linguistic one - an endeavour which constitutes his own perpetual battle with the boulder of Sisyphus. In a poetic image of the ontological foundation of artistic expression, we see why art for Ponge is less an affair of schools than of powerfully individual creators. Such artists give examples of the individual's perpetual re-adaptation to the present moment. Their expression, like the song of the nightingale, a fragile bird who sings sweet and consoling music in the dark, wards off fatal chaos. It is an instinctive, indispensable corrective statement through which the nightingale "corrige [....] à la fois ses précédentes démarches et le monde qui tournerait à sa confusion et à sa perte s'il ne chantait à l'instant" (BR 61). As Braque puts it, "L'action est une suite d'actes désespérés qui permet de garder l'espoir". This explains the importance both writer and painter attribute to the ceaseless process of creation, as opposed to the finished product and it affirms that the function of painting, as an expression of man's relationship with his world, has moved...
far beyond the imitative instinct to a profound desire to recover harmony. Painting does not present the world so much as a way of being in the world, allowing us to "rejoindre notre identité personnelle à la minute en question" (BR 68). This emphasis on the individual is why, in his first text on Braque, Ponge introduces the problem of tradition and modernity which has already been mentioned with regard to Chardin. Past works of art may well be satisfying, but they are by no means sufficient since "à chaque minute tout change [...] tout redevient pour chaque personne hétérogène [...] chaque personne remet tout en question" (BR 61). The only works to be retained by the future will be those which defy previous notions of "vérité" or "invraisemblance" because "la vraisemblance, n'étant que l'académie de l'ancien vrai, est donc faux par définition" (BR 62), and any 'defects' detected now may later be defined as qualities.

This, however, does not imply a radical break with the past. One way of achieving réconciliation is through Braque's typical Frenchness, and Ponge places the modern master alongside La Fontaine, Boileau, Rameau, Poussin, Chardin and Cézanne. A precise definition of 'Frenchness' is hard to come by, but it is one of the painter's most important attributes in Ponge's eyes ("rien n'est plus français que Braque" (B-J 128)) and one which he is keen to emphasise, since a constant thread running through all his work is a desire to protect and perpetuate the French genius. Braque is typically seen by art critics (and particularly French ones) as an independent conservative, one of the last of a line of French masters who introduced such features as the right to paint any subject, rejection of the academic cult of finish and detail, and the celebration of the sketch as an end in itself. He epitomises the French insistence on artisanship as well as artistry, and the respect for method, order and objectivity. For Ponge the typically French qualities are salubrious. There is an
avoidance of excess, sobriety and measure being prevalent even in the controlled energy of "La furia francese", while the natural impatience of the French character prevents another, inverse form of excess, "la minutie" which appeals to "Le mauvais goût commun" (BL 243). These qualities combine the cerebral with the emotional in a healthy equilibrium ("J'aime la règle qui corrige l'émotion" is one of Braque's dicta: "J'aime l'émotion qui corrige la règle" is another). They involve harmony, elegance and restraint, since "La grandeur en France ne se mesure pas à l'ampleur des gestes, ni à l'éclat des voix, ni à la violence, à la théâtralité des attitudes" (BL 242). Both Ponge and Braque may be described as intuitive and disciplined, spontaneous and patient, and if Braque is a revolutionary he is a quiet one, producing his effects so subtly that "on ne ressent plus tellement la trouvaille, la hardiesse, que la satisfaction, l'harmonie" (BAN 74). Braque's concern for structure, measure and self-imposed restrictions means that even his early Fauvist period is considered an aberration by many critics, and the painter himself declared that progress in art consists not in surpassing but in understanding one's limits. This awareness of limits is enriching rather than impoverishing and it is an important theme in Ponge since it involves the recognition that even our most adventurous inventions are subject to the cultural framework of our fatherland ("Nos origines font partie de notre originalité"), and perhaps also of our native region (in Pour un Malherbe Ponge compares writers to wines, emerging from the terroir of their region, whose distinctive flavour they maintain (PN 14)). More importantly, it involves our awareness that we necessarily experience everything not only through the culture but through the language of our fatherland. This is why Ponge declares himself to be "patriote de la langue française", why he claims in Pour un Malherbe that "la meilleure façon de servir la république est de redonner force et tenue au langage" (PN 22) and why
he is always keen to show the roots leading back from his own work into the fertile soil of French history.

Braque belongs, then, to a classical tradition, but the modernity of his art is also essential. His works are powerful totems whose quality is "à la fois classique et magique", and which give authentic expression not only to the painter himself, but to his epoch. Braque is said to provide the clearest example of "la spécialité française" which attains perfection in modern art since, "rencontrant enfin le trouble le plus profond, il le résout - si bien que son succès ne soit plus l'honnête-homme, mais l'Homme - avec la Nature des Choses par son action enfin réconcilié" (BR 67). Thus he corresponds to one of Ponge's constant urges: "dire (et plutôt indirectement dire): 'homme, il faut être. Société, il faut être' (et d'abord 'France il faut être')" (TP 216). In his preface written for an exhibition of Braque in Tokyo, 'Braque-Japon', Ponge again points to Braque's importance as a revolutionary classicist and is gratified to see the painter sent to another ancient civilisation which also has its own troubles to overcome (he refers to "la fleur récemment atomisée de l'Extrême-Orient"). Affirming that "les indices de l'esprit nouveau" are to be found only in such ancient nations he gives his essay an international flavour by predicting that together, through their individual processes of "recueillement" these nations will be the source of a new, universal culture, a culture which is "authentique et profonde". Perpetuating his use of flower imagery Ponge speaks of the nectar which such nations "savent faire monter par leurs tiges de l'obscur et fraîche profondeur du monde muet" (B-J 128) and it is clear that Braque, "un organe essentiel de notre patrie" is to be instrumental in this process.

Finally, it is Braque's humanist and moral import which attracts Ponge so strongly to him and which is another integral part of the French character ("Nous n'allons pas, généralement, jusqu'à la métaphysique, la morale nous
suffit" (BL 241)). This is why much of Ponge's work on Braque is suffused with patriotic and religious vocabulary, and why it is above all Braque who permits him to develop the crucial notion of art attaining the status of a new religion. With Braque in particular, the ethical comes to dominate over the aesthetic. He is viewed as a leader, a revolutionary, but one who stands resolutely outside any specific religious or political system. His deep suspicion of such ready-made ideologies is given expression in his Cahiers in terms reminiscent of Ponge's own frequently reiterated misgivings: "Idéologies et constructions: une goutte d'eau sur ces pains de sucre et tout se dissout".46 "Tous les ismes," he proclaims, "sont des constructions".47

The artist is, however, compared with political revolutionaries in 'Braque ou l'art moderne comme événement ou plaisir'. The tone here is naturally more politically biased since the text was written for a Communist publication and addressed, Ponge says, to the "réalistes en politique dont je me flatte d'être l'élève et l'ami" (BAN 70). In the "bouleversement actuel des civilisations" Braque works "parallèlement au savant et au militant politique" to forge, for the people, "les qualités de l'homme à venir" (BAN 76). In line with Marx's tenet that the function of art is not to imitate but to change the world, Braque's works are seen as both a reflection and a profound cause of social change. If society may be seen as a machine, functioning according to a widely accepted ideological system, then artists are individuals poorly adapted to the machine, yet determined to find a place within it. This endeavour does not deform artists, whose power makes them robust; instead it deforms the machine and initially troubles its smooth working: "ils font alors grincer l'assemblage, de façon qu'ils attirent l'attention sur eux, provoquent d'abord de l'agacement et de la colère" (BAN 73). Subsequently it is the machine which is altered to accommodate them. This is why artists and revolutionaries are said by Ponge to change
nature, society and man himself. Since Marxism precludes the use of the mystical or religious epithets to which Ponge often turns in his writings on Braque, the artist is for the purposes of this text, "un homme comme les autres, un peu plus sensible peut-être et plus enragé d'expression" (BAM 72). In 'Braque-Japon', however, it becomes clear that the lessons contained for us in the life and work of this modest, unassuming painter, are without parallel. Here he is portrayed as "un maître de vie", more like a Zen master than an artist or a revolutionary. His statements on art and life, available in his paintings and in his Cahiers to which Ponge directs us for a full understanding of "son génie moral" (B-J 129) are mystical, paradoxical and parabolic. Braque's dessins are said to be exemplary as "communiqués quotidiens de la guerre sainte" (B-D 103); Ponge is not averse to using the term "le miracle" for the painter's achievements, and his own moving and fervent response, his own "vénération", results in his urging the reader to consider Braque "avec l'intérêt et la dévotion qui conviennent" (B-D 104).

The idea of the religious capacity of art is by no means a new one, but it has assumed increasing importance in an age when even progressive theologians have recognised the need to re-interpret our definitions of religion. Since materialistic currents of belief have bypassed any notion of the supernatural or of established religion, they have thrust creative power firmly within the hands of man. Religion may therefore be defined as a creative activity, generated by man in order to infuse new values into life. This is also a fitting definition for art, in a philosophical climate which points increasingly towards a sense of futility and lack of absolutes or purpose. According to Richard Verdier, this is the running message in the whole of L'Atelier contemporain, which "chasse la crainte et l'adoration même, qui peut être une tentation de la crainte. Il nous place devant cet événement que l'art
The artist, then, is tomorrow's priest, re-inventing faith and emancipating the religious impulse which is common to all of us. This is why art, and particularly Braque's art, is such a serious matter for Ponge. Faith must be channeled into the values being created, and yet to be created, in what Ponge calls "la préhistoire" of man (BR 69). This new religion is fluid, "sans dogmes, tout en pratiques". It is a "religion à l'état naissant, effervescente" a "culte, tout de ferveur, qui cherche et trouve au fur et à mesure ses disciplines". Furthermore, it is feared by the tyrannies of the moment: "fort dangereuse, à ce qu'il paraît, pour l'ordre établi". This is another guarantee of the essential liberty modern art grants to the individual; since "le plenum du Comité central du parti communiste de l'U.R.S.S. [...] ne tonne pas du tout contre le Concile" (BL 237), it is self-evidently a more powerful instrument of social and individual change than established forms of religion.

The piece most reliant on religious imagery is 'Braque lithographe'. We would hardly expect the introduction to a complete collection of lithographic works to be based around a paradigm of "images saintes" (BL 238), yet in this essay, completed virtually the moment before Braque's death in 1963, and the "Assomption de l'œuvre" referred to in 'Feuillet votif', the ethical concerns prevalent in all Ponge's works on this artist are further elevated to the realms of the sacred. This is a serious text, with a sense of urgency, in which Ponge writes as a disciple. He is not concerned with describing isolated lithographs, but with the description of lithographic techniques, similar to that presented in 'Matière et mémoire' (AC 43-53), with its mixture of empirical observation and imaginative flights of fancy. The rituals of lithography are popular with Ponge for several reasons, not least because "L'exécution de l'œuvre
because the material itself, the lithographic stone, has a role in the creative process. It has a personality, a memory, and a certain unpredictability. Like language it has a strong quality of disobedience or potential treachery, and is capable of resistance and caprices. Here, however, the moving stages of the lithographic process are given another dimension by Ponge as they are punctuated with religious metaphors, religion therefore becoming firmly attached not to a set of pre-ordained beliefs, but to a process of discovery. The opening paragraph describes this complete catalogue of Braque's lithographic work as "une sorte très précieuse de vulgate, ou disons de missel plénier, à l'usage de ceux pour lesquels l'art moderne tient lieu actuellement de religion" (BL 237). Thus it is like a Bible, or a comprehensive book of prayers (a 'missal' being especially an illuminated prayer book). The acts of creation the lithographs record are "actes des apôtres" (BL 239), and the lithograph is a kind of "dialogue antiphonique"; "Si j'ai parlé de missel plénier, voilà bien ce que j'entendais: un missel comportant antennes et répons" (BL 242). Ponge again speaks of the morality involved in Braque's use of colour and links this to patriotism; these "images saintes" are "convenables à notre avenir" and "colorés comme des drapeaux", yet still retaining the subtlety and sobriety which is proper to Braque; "Et pourtant, voici le miracle, ils n'ont jamais rien d'une fanfare et ressembleraient plutôt, si l'on veut, à quelque récitatif de musique sacrée" (BL 244).

Ponge's description of the artist as a great spiritual leader is perhaps a surprising one inasmuch as it is a fundamentally Romantic concept, apparently out of step with his less elevated portrayal of Braque as a humble artisan and "réparateur". It is certainly different in nature from the description provided by Ponge the erstwhile responsable syndical and member of the Communist Party who attempts to
portray Braque as a social revolutionary in 'Braque ou l'art moderne comme événement et plaisir'. What is interesting is Pongé's constant reassessment of the power of art and of the relationship between art and society as worked out in his texts on Braque, and his increasingly conservative affiliations are manifest in the essays. Braque's mature work is by far too quiet and unassuming to be tagged with any grandiose epithets, and the reader may well feel that the religious or political images which represent him as a revolutionary or sacred figure are something of a pis aller in critical terms. A more apposite moral affiliation for the painter is to be found in the ostensibly less ambitious Epicurean philosophy of Lucretius, for whom Braque and Pongé share a mutual respect: "Je ne voudrais pas qu'on m'accuse ou me soupçonne de tirer Braque trop à moi, ou vers quelque doctrine. Non, mais vers ce que Lucrèce, lui encore, nomme la sapientia" (BND 290). This philosophical materialism may be regarded as the wellspring of the mature positions of poet and painter alike. It will be further explored in the following study of 'Braque ou un méditatif à l'œuvre' since it forms Pongé's concluding note in his most definitive work on Braque to which we now turn.

Braque ou un méditatif à l'œuvre

This is the most complex and important of the texts on Braque. Here the inspiration behind Pongé's entire collection of art writings, the theme of the atelier and the absorbing activity within it, reaches its summit. Of all the ateliers Pongé visits, of all the creative methods he encounters there, it is Braque's which provoke the most frequent and devoted responses. Braque is most intimately associated with his working environment; the best of his creations since the start of the Cubist period involved 'representations' of the closed space of his studio, and
Unlike Kermadec or Picasso, he is rarely visualised by Ponge in isolation from it. His existence is reduced to his studio, his private life indissociable from his art; "Avec l'âge", comments Braque, "l'art et la vie ne font qu'un".2 This essay is a profoundly serious illustration of Braque's comment. Painting is not confined to gallery walls, nor literature to bookshelves; the wide ranging weave of thematic strands in Ponge's text all serve rigorously to bind the act of expression to every aspect of life and to an irrereplaceable moral function. This text goes further than any other within L'Atelier contemporain towards affirming that our own identity, our relationship to society, our interpretation, understanding and even our creation of the outside world depend upon our manipulation of concrete materials into patterns of signs.

Since the title of this essay suggests we will be introduced to Braque at work, Ponge's aim will be to give us his "éloge de la méditation de Braque et de l'oeuvre qui en résulte" (BNO 305), an insight into the master's atelier and the type of meditation which takes place there. This is not without problems, however. Here as in all his approaches to Braque, Ponge is paradoxically both reluctant and eager, and is once again obliged to search for areas he can safely explore, since Braque is a difficult painter and a private one. In 'Braque-Japon' Ponge speaks of "cet atelier qu'il réussit très bien, malgré sa réputation universelle, à défendre des importunes; où l'on est admis d'abord difficilement" (B-J 123) and he fittingly makes direct access to the studio difficult in this essay. As he states in his introductory text on the generic atelier, his attempt to describe it carries the "risque de crever la notion d'atelier, de la détruire en quelque façon, enfin d'en percer le mystère" (AC 1). Braque's own comments concur in this, indicating that to define or describe something is to substitute the definition or the description for the real
thing. Put most succinctly in his Cahier: "Il n'est en art qu'une chose qui vaille: celle que l'on ne peut expliquer". This justifies Ponge's continual fear of petrifaction. It helps to explain why his texts on people are always on the move and, particularly in the case of Braque, why questions are replaced by more questions rather than by definitive answers or formulae. Before looking at how Ponge deals with this problem of showing Braque at work, let us look at the singular importance of the studio for Braque.

Towards the end of his life, Braque lived constantly amongst his own creations in his four studios (two in Paris, two in Normandy) where he was surrounded by easels and palettes, compotiers and vases and all the typical odds and ends found in his still lifes. The tools of his craft were carefully arranged and prepared for use, the painter keeping as many as thirty half finished canvases in his studio at any one time, passing from one to the other to make minute adjustments, or sitting for hours in contemplation. Here took place a steady recreation of the world and the self, Braque's paintings ripening gradually around him in a process of continual rectification which could last for a period of months, since for this painter a painting was ready only when it had effaced the idea which gave it birth.²³ Braque's ateliers were serene places, suffused with a veiled and inconstant light. If the atelier was for Émile Picq an "arrière-cuisine" (AC 5), and for Jean Hélion a "gymnase désaffecté" (AC 88), it became for Braque, as Robert Hughes puts it, "a kind of secular chapel".²⁴ This is not to say that Braque would have set himself up as any sort of high priest of the art world; he was rather a scrupulous, painstaking and pragmatic craftsman. Thus many of the images Ponge finds for him have a practical emphasis far removed from any arcane notions of art for art's sake. He is a "mécanicien de village" (B-D 106), a "jardinier" or "ouvrier" (B-J 124), an "accoucheur" or "chirurgien" (B-J 125), trades or professions which involve the patient
acquisition of great technical skill, and the application of this skill as a corrective to repair the broken down machinery of our world or to ensure well being. Braque, in his "laboratoire", restores to health small portions of the material world and helps to ensure the harmonious fonctionnement of the vast machine in which we are a cog.

The processes within Braque's workshops are not only the most compelling for Ponge, they are also more fascinatingly revealed in Braque's own studio compositions than in those of any other painter. It is worth glancing for a moment not at Braque's actual ateliers, but at what he makes of them in his paintings, for we could say that Ponge's last text on the master takes its cue from the greatest achievement of Braque's old age, his series of eight atelier paintings. Dating between 1948 and 1956, these massive, symphonic compositions provide subtle evocations of the atmosphere, light, and objects in his studios. They are not, however, mere studies of the attributes of painting or of a given environment: Braque's studio paintings by far surpass this local theme. It is less the rooms themselves which provide their subject than the artist's powerful résumé of the discoveries made within them over the years. Perplexing and demanding, the Studio works are a testimony to the greatness of the craft of painting itself, providing the clearest illustrations of Braque's comment that he preferred a painting to be experienced poetically, not 'understood'. They are clearly more conceptual than perceptual, a rich synthesis of Braque's typical motifs and the high point of his examination of matter, space, and metamorphosis. Here we find his unorthodox paint surfaces and his distinctive range of muted but sumptuous colours. Here we see the fake wood graining or marble effects, worthy of Chardin in the exactitude of their colour and texture, but like the patterned passages from Braque's Cubist period, typically independent of any descriptive function. This décalage of pictorial elements is also achieved through
Braque's perplexing combination of perspective and reverse perspective, through the double profiles and multiple views of one object which shatter the cohesion of traditional space. These paintings juggle with the solid and the fluid, the transparent and the opaque, space and form, movement and stasis, the 'real' and the imaginary image. Strange and indistinct objects, half-formed or metamorphosing shapes merge in the space of the canvas with more recognisable ones. The fluidity of these objects allows them to represent several things at once; are we looking at a bunch of flowers or a piece of lace? a woman's profile or a fish? (As Ponge suggests in an earlier text, the Q of Braque's name, with its handle, has multiple evocations, and could resemble either a hand mirror, an earthenware kitchen pot, or a ladle (BR 59)). So comprehensive is this summary of his universe that Braque even includes portions of past paintings within these new ones, or occasionally a previous work in its entirety, offering frames within a frame. One of the major, and most perplexing inclusions are the large sea birds which fly in the studio and enliven the spatial element. The bird may be perched on the corner of Braque's easel; it may be seen metamorphosing with his palette, or it may already have flown half way off his canvas, declaring its parity with reality beyond the frame. Birds are the hallmark of Braque's last works, instruments in revealing the nature of space as he moves from portraying the earth and humble objects to fascination with the sky.

If the large Atelier paintings are a mature résumé of Braque's work, 'Braque, un méditatif à l'oeuvre' is, equally, a long résumé of Ponge's past texts on Braque, and of his enduring thoughts about his own work. Both may therefore be described as elaborate, symphonic compositions. Ponge's dense, complicated text is saturated in Braque's spirit, directly quoting from, but more often hinting at, his pensées, favourite leitmotifs and personal techniques. Subjects rise into the foreground then sink away, only to
reappear or half appear later and the portrait of the painter is intriguingly elliptical. In all Ponge's approaches to Braque we are, as Serge Koster puts it "à la limite de l'émulation par mimétisme". His understanding of Braque is such that in this final text he functions almost as a 'porte parole' and appears uncharacteristically confident of his ability to speak for the painter, even when not speaking about him, and even if this confidence is conveyed to us in a somewhat negative manner ("je ne me crois pas incapable de qualifier cet homme et cette œuvre" (BNO 294)). Here perhaps more than in any of the critical essays, Ponge's text proceeds by faithful adéquation to Braque's own techniques and preoccupations.

The energies behind this text can be traced through Chapon's catalogue of the exhibition of Ponge's manuscripts, under the heading 'Braque - Draeger'. Amongst these are invocations from Lucretius, extracts copied from Braque's Pensées, notes taken from re-reading various "tombeaux" for Braque (collected in Hommage à Georges Braque), and a "Liste après relecture soigneuse, hier et aujourd'hui, de mes écrits précédents sur Braque", the whole suggesting a slow saturation in Ponge's own, and others' thoughts on the painter. Thus this text is the ultimate and most conclusive "idée globale intime" of Braque, a vast collage of all Ponge's impressions seven years after the painter's death. This includes self-quotation, Ponge borrowing from, for example, 'La Terre' (which appeared in Cinq sapates) or from his previous writings on Braque. Like Braque's atelier paintings themselves, then, Ponge's last major statement on Braque within L'Atelier contemporain represents the merging of years of discovery into a single 'frame'.

It is useful to compare this carefully meditated text with the Draeger text on Picasso which, like Ponge's text on the horse, could be described as a 'eugénie'; "c'est-à-dire une chose venue presque complètement dans le moment" (Méthodes 271). In the case of 'Le Cheval' Ponge writes his
text in a single burst, rejecting any urge to alter the text afterwards, "Parce qu'il exprime cette impatience, ce côté nerveux du cheval, cette fierté, cette colère". Equally, in the case of Picasso, Ponge's text is racy and bold; "instantanément l'élan fut permis, le train de signes lancé" (AC 325). The approach to Braque is necessarily slower, more meditative. Ponge is aware that now the painter is dead, this is a different kind of testimony. On 28 July 1970 he decides "[Il me faut concevoir ce texte, un peu comme une "Ode à Georges Braque"]". The ode was originally a long, elaborate lyric poem, meant to be sung. Ponge is thus planning a lengthy text comparable to a musical composition in its complexity and recurrence of themes; a prose exercise in Braque's allusive painterly mode which critics regularly describe in terms of musical techniques. The prototypical ode is exalted in style, and elevated and serious in subject. Like the Pindaric ode, Ponge's text is encomiastic, written to praise and glorify a champion and his art; but instead of Pindar's passion and visionary boldness, this, like the Horation ode, is calm, meditative, and restrained.

This text is, then, a testament written to praise Braque and to give an account of Ponge's relationship with him. It is also a complicated, multiple enquiry, binding together and interrogating all acts of creation and perception, with Ponge's technique of drawing our attention to the materiality of language, to the épaisseur of our verbal environment, reaching its height as both technique and theme. The language is probing, nuanced and suggestive, prompting us to adopt a meditative stance ("Méditons un moment, voulez-vous? Sur votre propre goût des images" (BNO 286)) and the term "méditatif à l'oeuvre" applies so thoroughly to Braque and Ponge alike that the reader may begin to ask whether the 'méditatif' in question here is in fact Ponge himself, since although admission to Braque's studio is the theme and aim of Ponge's text, it also offers an example and an exercise in the kind of meditation to
which Braque had devoted his life. Given the essay's complexity, three of its aspects or 'layers' will be dealt with separately: firstly Ponge's attempt at direct characterisation, secondly indirect characterisation achieved through *adéquation*, and finally the far reaching theoretical messages in the essay concerning our use and experience of language.

Direct characterisation of Braque is typically sparse and evasive, beginning only in the middle of the text and after eight pages of more general discussion. We are granted one physical portrait of the painter "Assis au pied de son divan et roulant des cigarettes, tandis qu'il faisait asseoir son visiteur sur un haut fauteuil, comme une cathédre, à côté de lui" (*BNO* 293), but the portraiture is abruptly terminated: "Mais est-il besoin de vous en dire plus? Allez aux photos de lui, allez aux reproductions de ses toiles". Ponge often suggests that Braque's paintings are "indiscutables", so self-sufficient that they defy language and render it superfluous (*BR* 65). Typically avoiding heavy comment on either man or works, Ponge approaches obliquely, limiting himself to the concrete, to descriptions of things which can be verified empirically and of which he has physical experience. Here he resorts to a metonymic description of Braque's residences, which offer themselves more safely for description and which are, like the paintings, concrete emanations bearing the painter's stamp: "Certains traits caractéristiques de leur habitant s'y trouvent clairement donnés à lire" (*BNO* 297-98). A guided tour of Braque's environment is a particularly astute way for Ponge to overcome his problems of characterisation, particularly since it reinforces the message running throughout *L'Atelier contemporain* that the reading of a text is a physical journey through a concrete environment. In Ponge's first essay on Braque the text is described as an
"antichambre" (BR 65). Here we reach the journey's end; the very locus of meditation.

The first residence to be approached is that in the rue du Douanier on the edge of the Parc Montsouris in Paris (BMD 299). A page of visual detail leads the reader by degrees from the street through Braque's garden and into the heart of his atelier, a literal recreation of the physical approach Ponge made when visiting Braque, and also to some extent a mise en abyme of our mental and intellectual approach to an understanding of Braque himself. Ponge presents a long series of thresholds, each opening onto another threshold, and spends more time enumerating obstacles and boundaries than describing the studio. The modest, unassuming exterior of the house is, however, quietly yielding in all its details, its whole nature indicative of the presence within. The "petit jardin" separates the façade of the house from the quiet street "vers laquelle il descend en pente douce", and the few passers-by can see the house which, like an object in a Braque canvas, is "non du tout exagéré visible, ni du tout soigneusement caché". The "petit sentier non du tout rectiligne, assez couvert", the railings "où s'entrelacent quelques feuillages" could both belong in a Braque painting. Notable throughout this description is the recurrence of the adjective petit; "La façade [...] donne sur un petit jardin"; "un petit mur surmonté d'une grille peu haute"; "une assez étroite petite porte grillagée"; "un petit perron de quelques marches"; "un petit sentier". All Ponge's details point towards the measure, simplicity and modesty of the man. If we compare this to the grandiose epithets Ponge finds for Fautrier and his work, it is clear that even in its praise, this text is obedient to Braque's restrained character and to his horror of anything that smacks of excess.

The studio itself is described as a composition seen through the frame of the doorway, with a certain geometry,
the strong verticals and horizontals revealing a concern for form and for situating objects in spatial relations. "On ne voyait d'abord qu'une ou deux longues rangées obliques de tableaux, qui sur des chevalets, qui posées (verticalement) par terre: tous face à l'angle antérieur droit de la grande pièce". The plants here are "hautes et luxuriantes" like Braque himself; the harmony and simple grandeur of "le travailleur" is echoed in the appearance of his surroundings and, in turn, in the balance of Ponge's phrase: "Nul ordre affecté, nul désordre affecté. Tout en place pour la méditation et le travail de la ou des toiles en œuvre" (BMO 300). It is significant that as we approach the heart of Braque's residence Ponge finds it more difficult to be objective and his contained fervour for this artist comes to the surface. He returns to a most vivid memory, his first visit to Braque's studio in the rue du Douanier in 1945 and the "choc que j'y éprouvai" (BMO 297). As Braque opens the door on to his dining room Ponge is accosted by the blacks and reds of a still life which occasions such an intense respose that it becomes the remarkably high point of his reminiscences. "J'ai été saisi d'un sanglot irrepressible"; "la peinture me produit rarement un effet pareil" (BMO 246-47). This is indeed an unusual thing for Ponge to write about, but it serves as a useful reminder. Despite Ponge's evident scorn for lyricism, despite the control in all his texts, it must not be overlooked that a flood of emotion is frequently the starting point for his work on people, art and objects alike. In 'La Mounine' (1941), a series of notes which also refers to the "sanglot", it is the sight of the Provence countryside which occasions Ponge's emotion. There also, the desire to channel this emotional energy into a rigorous expression is clear; "Il s'agit [...] de faire servir ce paysage à quelque chose d'autre qu'au sanglot esthétique, de le faire devenir un outil moral, logique, de faire, à son propos, faire un pas à l'esprit" (TP 404). The same need to use his emotion usefully and instructively is
present in this essay, and Ponge's memory is a warning sign that the text must once again move to the realms of objectivity. The "sanglot" is therefore immediately excused as a purely physical phenomenon ("nous étions encore un peu sous-alimentés à ce moment-là" (BNO 247) and re-defined as "une sorte de spasme entre le pharynx et l'oesophage" to avoid suggestions of over refinement ("cet 'esthétique' ne me plaît pas trop" (BNO 300)). The description is at once abandoned; "aujourd'hui même je m'aperçois que je ne peux vous en dire davantage sur cette maison de la rue du Douanier; il me faut passer à autre chose" (BNO 300-301). Unbridled emotional reminiscences on the part of the writer are not the way to introduce us to Braque.

The house at Varengeville, situated in rolling countryside and beneath the skies which influenced Braque's final period ("beaucoup de ciel. Ciel de Normandie") is only described from the exterior (BNO 301). Already Ponge is retreating from the locus of creation as from the potential emotionalism of his account: "ce que je veux seulement dire concerne le jardin". Gardening is viewed here as a language in itself with its own rules and again Braque is directly reflected in the planning of this border which surrounds the house. Ignoring the pruning and taming of nature prevalent in the traditional French garden with its wide perspectives, its magnificently ordered but artificial symmetry, Braque's garden is on a human scale. He has performed "Rien que d'infimes modifications, semble-t-il, mais, de toute évidence, Braque a médité ce paysage". Working as in his paintings "sans tenir compte du tout d'effets de perspective, mais plutôt d'un effet d'étagement, il a conjugué le jardin et la campagne environnante". Thus the painter's garden refers us to his rejection of geometrical perspective and his refusal of recession; his "effet d'étagement" which projects objects forwards and invites us to touch them. This also points to Braque's emphasis on paint as autonomous matter; in cultivating his garden, he
has taken account of the life of his material and collaborated with it rather than dominating it. Braque himself puts forward the notion of his work as that of a gardener: his paintings "poussent tout seuls. Il suffit que je les surveille et, bien sûr, les aide un peu, par moments, en y allant couper quelque branche, dégager quelque pousse, en les émondant quelque peu" (B-J 125).

Description of Braque and his surroundings, revealing though it may be, is only one way of introducing him to the reader. A more important way is to be found not in the content but in the growth, movement and behaviour of Ponge’s text which in itself is appropriate to Braque. Ponge knows Braque’s work and maxims so thoroughly that his whole essay is a kind of metalanguage, steeped in the painter’s energies, and is profoundly obedient to Braque even when it may appear to be straying from its subject. The unconventional opening paragraphs of this essay are the first indication that it will obey other than purely descriptive laws and that it intends to inform in other ways. These paragraphs have already been discussed in some detail, particularly in the light of their effect on the reader and their play on the sounds and physical properties of Braque’s name. They have a multiple function: to alert the reader to the concrete nature of words (the essay may begin by describing the act of reading in terms of driving a car, but the reader is involved "dans la lecture d’une toute autre chose qu’une rangée de voitures à l’arrêt" (BMO 283)), to suggest that Braque is a liberating influence ("Braquez à fond pour vous dégager du crâneau"), and to show that in beginning this essay on a great painter in such a controversial manner Ponge is in fact acknowledging the latter’s lessons:

Braque eut raison. Braver les apparences et quelques convenances par la même occasion, c’est le plus sûr moyen de trouver le bon sens (BMO 283).
By playing with Braque's name in this way and by suggesting that Braque would have approved, painter and writer are brought closer together. Thus the essay begins with both the theme of Braque's difficulty ("Je ne crois pas que l'oeuvre de Braque puisse être de sitôt popularisée", "ses principales caractéristiques s'y opposent") and the actual difficulty we experience in digesting Ponge's text. In Ponge as in Braque the eyes or mind of the observer or reader are permitted to pursue a certain path for only a limited period before disruption occurs. We are lead into contradictions and perspectival surprises by creators who desire to puzzle and to force us into reflection.

The methods of creation of Braque and Ponge are parallel and are constantly in evidence in Ponge's text. An earlier description of Braque's dessins applies perfectly to Ponge's own mode of writing here: they are "Une suite de tentatives, d'erreurs tranquillement composées, corrigées. Elles ont l'allure et le ton de l'étude et de la recherche, jamais de la conviction, jamais de la découverte... Mais la découverte est là, à chaque instant" (BD 108). The compositions of each are built up bit by bit rather than conceived as a whole. Both work through trial and error, through the inclusion of repetitions and variants ("Pour se corriger" affirmed Braque, "il faut ajouter") which means that any sense of self-confidence and boldness is rare in both. Ponge's essay moves forwards through a series of refusals of the expressions already found. His syntax often conveys doubt or negation, and although he has a gift for pertinent and precise formulae which capture Braque's contradictory qualities (for example, "Il y a un luxe (de précautions) une harmonie (de censures)" (BR 68)), his contradictions and rectifying statements (often beginning with "mais", "d'ailleurs", "ou plutôt") are more frequent than such deft touches.

Each paragraph or phrase of Ponge's essay is an offshoot of the paragraph or phrase which precedes it and
serves less to develop what has been said than to resist it and to question its authority. Ponge makes explicit reference to this technique of self-contradiction roughly in the middle of his text. After describing Braque's house in Varengeville he concludes his paragraph decisively with an unmistakably categoric point of closure which indicates to the reader that the author is now turning away from the personal and the anecdotal in his approach to Braque: "Voilà. J'en ai assez dit" (BNO 301). This is followed, however, by Ponge's return, against propriety and decorum, to what he calls "mon sanglot de 1945", his emotional response to a Braque painting. Between these comes a key to his use of variants and contradictions, a statement which is in itself contradictory: "Parce que je ne suis pas pour le principe de non-contradiction, et parce que j'en ai besoin (besoin de me contredire), pour nous frayer un passage vers la suite, la suite et fin de ces pages [...] etc." (BNO 301).

A further reminder that writing is heuristic, taking form and contour only en route and fitting into no predetermined frame is precisely the metaphor of 'encadrement' to which Ponge returns with somewhat heavy handed persistence in this text ("Telles seraient, quasi statistiquement précisées, les dimensions de l'encadrement de mon propos" (BNO 297); "Pour encadrer mon propos" (BNO 293) (Ponge's italics)). Each development is studiously enclosed within limits, announced, closed, or temporarily suspended. The function of frames is of course to single things out for special attention. They endow form and provide limits which connote control and order, but typically they are dispersed throughout this text in a rather unorthodox and erratic manner, appearing to serve as reminders to the author of the way in which his text is growing. Ponge deliberately likens his technique of framing to Braque's own "souci d'encadrement" (BNO 294). He comments in an earlier essay on the painter that many French
masterpieces "sont, par leurs auteurs mêmes, soigneusement encadrés" (BL 243). Braque, we are told, frames his paintings "non seulement de cadres de bois [...] mais, sur la toile même, de cadres peints, tracés du même pinceau et de la même matière (picturale) que l'oeuvre même, en faisant donc partie, partie tout à fait indissociable (exactement comme ici, c'est au moyen des mêmes matières (encre à machine sur papier de Voiron) que je suis en train de tracer l'encadrement de cette étude)" (BNO 294). In painting his own frames Braque is reappropriating them so they no longer denote representationalism, but the passing into a distinctive universe proper to the painter. Braque also elects unconventional formats, long wall panels, octagonal, or oval shapes to escape from the notion of the painting as a window and eliminate the traditional schema of 'cubic' space based on perspective. In Ponge's case, the procedure of framing interrupts our reading and throws the reader back on himself. It draws our attention not to fixity but to the rejection of a pre-ordained format or limit for the text, suggesting that any frame can only be imposed gradually as the text progresses and that the writer is not certain of what is going to be said until it actually has been said. This explains the trying and testing, and sometimes the sudden rejection or temporary abandonment of 'frames' which Ponge has promised to fill. The reader is thus thrust into involvement with just that kind of heuristic process which constitutes the creative act of both Ponge and Braque.

Another similarity is that both Ponge and Braque interrogate their materials as they work, experiencing them as partially autonomous, concrete entities which collaborate in the creative act. Braque was not a draughtsman and he made few rough copies. What he had to say grew out of his paint and the other materials with which he experimented. In the same manner, Ponge makes references to ink, the pen, or the sudden discovery of a new word, a new combination of "phonoléxèmes" (BNO 307) which appears almost arbitrarily.
under the pen ("puisque ce mot, fort heureusement, vient d'apparaître sous ma plume" (BNO 309)). The acts of writing and painting are, then, partially unpredictable and not subservient to thought. An example of this sudden focusing of attention on a single word comes about a third of the way through the text, when a single word imposes itself on Ponge, the word 'grand'. It is the last word on Braque, the most definitive epithet, although "pas trop courant dans mon lexique". "C'est qu'en effet je crois, s'agissant de notre homme, qu'il faut donner place, d'abord, donner la place qu'elle mérite, à cette qualification. C'est elle, la grandeur, qui doit à mon sens, planer au-dessus, si je peux ainsi dire, surmonter, comme une accolade ou comme un accent circonflexe, de ses deux ailes étendues, toutes les autres qualités dites de cet homme et de cette œuvre, toute notion prise d'elle et de lui, tout texte essayant de communiquer cette notion" (BNO 291) (my italics). The notion of "grandeur" then, is developed into Ponge's textual equivalent of one of Braque's distinctive hallmarks; the birds which dominate and float freely through his ateliers, decorate the ceiling of the Etruscan gallery in the Louvre, and constitute quietly authoritative, simple motifs.

A more striking method of lingering on individual words comes at the end of the essay where we see Ponge sharpening his tools, paying particular attention to his writerly palette. Ponge expresses regret that space is running out and he will not be able to enter into the study of certain words appropriate to Braque, to delve "jusqu'à leurs profondes racines (intérieures)" (BNO 313). This is obviously considered more important than direct portraiture or the accumulation of details. Typically, Ponge wishes to ensure that we experience the text through épaisseur and not just through contiguity. The closing pages therefore involve an appeal to Ponge's preferred resource, the Littré, a tool to be copied from, added to or amended; to be used "à ma façon", "jugée par certaines scandaleuse" (BNO 313).
words Ponge is keen to clarify are the key notions of "méditation" and "métier". In each case Ponge is only partially content with what he finds; in each case the definitions available in Littré allow him to point to "les antimonies de l'ancienne culture" (BNO 314) which have been resolved by Braque. Littré defines métier, for example, as simply "habileté d'exécution" in painting or writing, a notion which requires correction: "C'est ici qu'il convient de nous demander si l'exécution et la conception ne se chevauchent pas étroitement". In an unacknowledged quotation from Braque Ponge wonders whether "vaincre la matière n'est pas moins important que de la séduire à collaborer à l'ouvrage" (BNO 314) and comments that one of the antimonies resolved by Braque is "celle jusqu'alors admise entre l'esprit et la matière [...] Entre la conception et l'exécution".

Under Méditer is a definition which allows Ponge to use the dictionary as a confirmation: "Réfléchir avec force et maturité sur quelque chose" delights him in its appropriateness to the painter; "force et maturité, c'est tout Braque". Méditer also points to another antimony corrected by Braque: "Celui qui médite est tourné sur lui-même; celui qui contemple est tourné vers le monde extérieur" (BNO 314). It is important for Ponge to set the record straight on the notion of meditation, since it is a key one for his whole essay. If Braque's activity in his atelier is described as "méditation", we must understand the word as Ponge understands it. The etymological detail from the Latin meditari which suits Ponge does not simply imply contemplation and cogitation, but incorporates action or exercise. Both Braque and Ponge can be called méditatifs in this sense. The constant subject of their meditation is the nature of their art itself ("Mais sur quoi a-t-il médité? Essentiellement sur la peinture elle-même"), in which neither places "l'esprit" above "la matière", since thought does not precede, but is only a function of the paint, or
the words employed. "Penser" says Braque, "n'est pas raisonner", a definition of thought which allows Ponge to present in this series of reflections on the master's work, what is perhaps his most vigorous statement of materialism within L'Atelier contemporain.

One of the most important factors in this essay, then, is that it is an essay about the properties of language. Ponge continually reminds us that reading does not constitute an encounter with the Truth and that words must be taken at face value; that is, as rearrangements of matter. Our customary association of language with an absent referent which it 'faithfully represents', with a "signifié antérieur" leads us to overlook its concrete nature and to overestimate its value as an absolutely accurate repository of a pre-determined message. Ponge's very first approach to Braque, 'Braque le réconciliateur', began with some paragraphs of apparently playful associations of sounds, shapes and meanings contained in Braque's name. This reminded us of several things: firstly that words are a concrete environment; secondly that they are at least partially responsible for the way the text behaves and develops; thirdly that Braque as he emerges from the essay is totally dependent on language. It is not Braque himself we will encounter here and Ponge therefore begins by illustrating that Braque is, for the purposes of the textual universe, as much a word as a complex of ideas and feelings. This 'playful' passage is framed by two references to "réalité" which constitute a curious challenge to the reader's understanding of the term: "je ne vais pas m'occuper de fonder sérieusement en réalité (c'est-à-dire en paroles) le magma de mes authentiques opinions [....] Non! Je ne dois pas ici fonder cela en réalité" (BR 59). The equation drawn here by Ponge, réalité = paroles, is further developed in this final essay. Reality is, quite literally, whatever is said or written. One anecdote which neatly illustrates the equation as both Braque and Ponge understand
it comes with mention of Braque's residence at Sorgues. Ponge has no first-hand knowledge of this residence but it gives rise to an anecdote about a local which allows Ponge to liken Braque's 'doctrine' to that of Epicurus, "notamment à l'endroit où celui-ci expose son hypothèse des simulacres, faîtes d'atomes aussi réels (matériels) que l'objet dont ils émanent" (BNO 298). With typical Mediterranean enthusiasm, the local proposed to send Braque a gift. Although the gift never materialised, both Braque and Ponge enjoy the earnestness and evident fervour of the verbal promise, which has far greater savour than the actual gift of fish, or figs, he proposed to give. It is the promise itself which constitutes the gift.

Another thematic example of drawing our attention to the materiality of language comes when Ponge places us in the following hypothetical situation: having purchased a newspaper from a kiosk on the Boulevard St-Michel, we are shocked to read of a recent disaster. That, however, is but one side of language. The other side, and the one on which the aforementioned depends, is the fresh ink of the headlines: "et voici que l'odeur de cette encre vous est au moins aussi sensible que la signification (serait-elle affirmée historique) des événements relatés" (BNO 306). To appreciate Ponge and Braque, then, one must be "sensible au moins autant au signifiant qu'au signifié". Such an appreciation is certainly fostered by the Draeger text itself; the huge characters of Ponge's text on the thick, roughly textured mustard coloured pages of this lavish edition make an extremely striking impact, but the sensual pleasure provided by paper and print is a minor factor. The reasons for fostering such an awareness in the reader are far more serious than this, and are related to the power of language. It becomes clear that Ponge believes the gravest consequences can ensue when our critical approach to the relationships between the abstract and the concrete, the intellect and the body, is neglected. To begin with, Ponge
outlines the "mutation sensationnelle à laquelle l'humanité [...] est en proie depuis une centaine d'années", and the way in which preconceived systems for explaining and understanding our experience became chronically inadequate, out of step with the experience itself. Until that point, declares Ponge, every facet of our experience was comprehended through a clearly defined and universally acknowledged system, one in which geometry, logic and rhetoric were conceived in harmonious, parallel patterns: "nous vivions, concevions le monde (et nous-mêmes), nous comportions dans le monde (et en nous-mêmes), agissions dans le monde (et sur et contre le monde, et sur et contre nous-mêmes) selon les figures imposées par la géométrie en vigueur depuis Euclide". In science, however, it became clear that certain phenomena simply did not fit within "la grille de la géométrie euclidienne" and could not be explained within its terms. In literature too, traditional lessons in rhetoric ceased to be delivered from about 1880, as though it was obscurely understood that "la rhétorique ancienne ne fonctionnait plus" (BNO 303). Human discoveries and experience, then, had exploded beyond the means available to describe them. "Tout était remis en question: en questions. Tout le Monde et tout le monde, était dans le bain" (BNO 304).

The above helps to explain why any fixed means of theorising about the world, any system imposed a priori are perceived by Ponge as regressive, as a hindrance to human discovery serving to distance us from reality rather than giving us access to it. In the case of plastic art, single viewpoint perspective is a good example of such a system. To all intents and purposes it is an expression of assurance, but one which actually serves to separate us from our environment, and is fundamentally alienating. It is interesting that both Braque and Ponge passed through a stage where their art was susceptible to being described as the product of a theory: Cubism in Braque's case, and in
Ponge's, his tightly structured, 'infallible' crystalline poems. Both reach a point, however, where they are hostile to the idea of replacing defunct systems with new ones, because systems, by their very nature, limit our discoveries. This is why in Ponge each object has its own particular rhetorical form, and why in Braque each painting is a law unto itself, not a product of a preconceived idea. No work of art, however satisfying, "ne justifierait aucun son de cloche ou de buccin, aucun Te Deum, aucun cri de triomphe" (BAN 76). In his last essay on Braque Ponge celebrates the essential newness of each of the artist's creative leaps, which he describes through the metaphor of bird flight: "Il se jette dans le monde comme l'oiseau y plonge la première fois, hors du nid. Le départ de l'oiseau observé par l'augure, la façon dont il prend son vol; l'hésitation du pigeon voyageur quand il va trouver la direction à prendre pour rejoindre, se rejoindre, revenir au point de départ. Pas de mise en scène, pas de discours, rien de linéaire, pas de sens." Rather than constituting a system, Braque reconstitutes chaos. Ponge takes this back to its Greek roots, and finds "ouverture et abîme, c'est-à-dire libération". This acceptance of lack of system is precisely why Braque is said by Ponge to reassure and trouble the spectator at the same time.

There is, however, a still more serious repercussion involved in our reliance on preconceived theories, since they are profoundly linked in Ponge to chaos and catastrophe. Both Ponge and Braque made frequent references to the fragile world of the intellect. Braque's comment that "Il faut toujours avoir deux idées; l'une pour détruire l'autre" is given a rather more radical ring in Ponge's 'Le Monde muet est notre seule patrie' (Méthodes 204), where the only theory fit for adoption is said to be the systematic annihilation of values: "Ainsi, plutôt que d'aboutir FATALEMENT à la catastrophe, ABOLIRONS-NOUS IMMÉDIATEMENT LES VALEURS, en chaque œuvre (et en chaque technique), DANS
LE MOMENT MEME QUE NOUS LES DECOUVRONS, ELABORONS, ELUCIDONS, RAFFINONS." In 'My Creative Method' Ponge declares that "Les opinions les mieux fondées, les systèmes philosophiques les plus harmonieux (les mieux constitués) m'ont toujours paru absolument fragiles, cause un certain écoeurement" (Méthodes 9). Their "inconsistance", their "côté lâche et inquiétant" (Méthodes 21) is disgusting to him, and yet, returning in this essay to the car metaphor with which he began, Ponge suggests that ideas represent the greatest temptation for writers: "celle de se laisser glisser, comme une voiture sur le verglas, vers quelque idéologie, c'est-à-dire à l'emploi abusif d'une des faces de ces Janus que sont les mots (idées), au détriment de leur autre face (chooses)" (BNO 311). This dualistic way of viewing language represents, in fact, two temptations. The first is the ivory tower ("refuser systématiquement les informations de la vie courante"), and it is important to remember that despite his constant stress on the significant, Ponge is keen to distinguish himself from Structuralism and from what he calls "des froids formalistes", since emotions, ideas and opinions do have a place in his work. The second temptation is far more serious; that of accepting "La face 'Idée' of words, defined by Ponge as "celle de la guerre". This is related by Ponge to the worst forms of political extremism and ideological repression; to Nazism, Fascism and all the atrocities of war, represented as the blind pursuit of ideology. "Oui, il est loisible à l'esprit humain de se lancer, à corps perdu, je veux dire à corps oublié, dans la métaphysique; dans l'indicible (l'innommable). Idéologies, théories, religions aussitôt s'en ensuivent... Mais le corps, les corps, ne se laissent pas longtemps oublier. Il réagit, ils réagissent. Exaltations, dépressions: c'est la folie (individuelle ou collective), l'escalade vers l'apathie ou le suicide. Désormais, toute vie heureuse, tout plaisir (pris au présent) sont perdus" (BNO 288). Equilibrium and constant awareness of the dual aspects of
language, its concrete and abstract faces, are essential, which is why poetry for Ponge is described as "on ne peut plus grave" (BNO 310). This kind of equilibrium which is not involved in explaining the unknowable or in submitting the world to theory takes us to the heart of the ethical importance of both Ponge and Braque: "Quant à ceux, et nous en sommes, qui goûtent au suprême degré le mystère, l'obscurité de la matière et de la nature des choses, mais y trouvent occasions seulement de plaisir, non de crainte et d'adoration, n'est-il pas réjouissant pour eux, et pacifiant, de contempler la face du Janus des mots-chooses tournée justement vers la paix?" (BNO 312). Writer and artist alike restrict themselves to relative knowledge, to things which can be verified empirically, beyond which anything else is either pure speculation or downright dangerous for the individual and for society.

This most definitive essay on Braque is one of the finest examples of Ponge's mature position, and to compare it with the works of that early taciturn and hermetic poet allows us to contradict those who, like Audisio, would have us believe there has been little evolution in his creative or philosophical programme. Here, Ponge has developed his earlier notion of reconciliation and of art as a new religion into a robust humanism - a kind of Epicureanism (BNO 290). The aims here are calm, serenity and happiness linked to reason, lucidity and moderation. Knowledge is cultivated only in order to free man from superstition, prejudice and vague terrors. Acquisition of knowledge is restricted by the notion that the senses are inadequate and deceptive, that there are no transcendent values, no absolute Truth, only provisional truths, and that all systems attempting to explain nature definitively are reductive. Ponge feels that such a materialism, such abstention from profitless theorising, is particularly appropriate to contemporary soucis, and Braque espouses this way of life and thought most thoroughly. For Ponge, then, Braque is the only artist
in whom the ethical outweighs the aesthetic. He is every bit as heroic as Ponge's snail; not simply an artist but a being whose very existence is a work of art (TP 61), and whose achievements in the still life genre are perhaps best expressed by lending him the compliment paid to Ponge by Camus; "Quand on a fini le Parti pris, on a justement consenti au relatif, mais par des moyens supérieurs". **
NOTES

1. Jules Renard, *Histoires naturelles*, Plonnerion (Paris, 1907). First published in 1890, these prose poems have much in common with those of Ponge. Renard evokes the simple pleasures of country life, and the farmyard animals which inhabited his childhood. Relying on his intense observation of nature in all its plenitude, but referring to it without lyricism or idealism, he provides what Ponge would refer to as the "définitions-descritions" of a naturalist (Méthodes 20). His descriptions of animals, many of which are also elected by Ponge ('Le Cheval', 'La Chèvre', 'Le Lézard', 'L'Araignée', 'L'Escargot', 'Le Papillon', 'La Guêpe', 'Les Hirondelles') are undertaken with clear sighted affection and a humorous pinch of anthropomorphism.

2. It is interesting that both Ponge and Williams make frequent references to painting in describing their literary achievements. In spite of their disparate cultural origins, all these modern still life writers have arrived, quite independently, at a similar position. All engage in brief, objective descriptions of common or utilitarian objects, aiming to achieve self-renewal through fresh perception of the concrete world. There are clear parallels between, for example, Williams' red wheel barrow upon which "so much depends" (Collected Earlier Poems, New Directions (New York, 1966), p.277) and Guillexic's treatment of 'Un Bol', 'Un Clou', 'Un Bahut' (Sphère, Gallimard (Paris, 1963)). Guillexic's fond tutoulement of his chosen objects is accompanied with respect and a knowledge of the qualities he can derive through his interaction with them. The act of cleaning the old wardrobe, for example, also refreshes and cleanses the poet in an act of mutual renewal comparable to that achieved by Ponge.


4. References to Ponge's essay on Chardin, 'De la nature morte et de Chardin' (*L'Atelier contemporain*, pp.228-36) will be given as *MC* and followed by the relevant page number.

5. This neglect is noted by several critics. Michel and Fabrice Faré refer to it in their introduction to a study of the genre entitled 'La Vie silencieuse de la nature morte' (*La Nature morte de Brueghel à Soutine*, Galerie des beaux-arts de Bordeaux (5 May - 1 September 1978)) and Charles Sterling remarks that the origins and nature of the still life are "loin d'être éclaircies par les historiens" (*La Nature morte de l'antiquité à nos jours*, editions Pierre Tiane (Paris, 1952), p.7).


8. Albert Camus, 'Lettre au sujet du Parti pris' (27 January 1943), in Hommage à Francis Ponge, a special number of the Nouvelle revue française, 4, no.45 (September 1956), 386-92 (p.388).


10. 'Plat de poissons frits', (Pièces, p.121). This poem, written in 1949, is quite different from Ponge's 1947 'Bauche d'un poisson' (Pièces, p.99). It is unusual in that it does not attempt to give a "description-définition" of any plate of fish, but is concerned with a particular plate of fish in a particular setting and could easily be a description of an Impressionist painting. The mood of the whole, the stress on the instant which Ponge is capturing, "cet instant safrané", and the bathing of the whole in golden light is reminiscent of Impressionism. There is a clear composition: the fish and bottle of wine on the table, the little boat captured leaning dizzily forwards on a choppy sea seen through the open window, and the play of light giving the whole a Mediterranean feel. Ponge's vocabulary for the fish doubles up as photographic vocabulary ("pellicule", "plaque", "rêvélée", "instantané") but rather than imitating Impressionism's dissolution of objects in light Ponge achieves density and control and retains his stress on form through the tightly woven fabric of the poem.


14. Bordier, p.21. The whole of the proverb runs "tant va la cruche à l'eau qu'à la fin elle se casse".


18. In 'La Vie silencieuse de la nature morte', La Nature morte de Brueghel à Soutine, p.7.

19. 'Parade pour Jacques Hérodé' was originally published by Galerie Furstenberg (Paris, 1946) for an exhibition of Hérodé's works. This text goes furthest towards questioning our ability to know or 'tame' objects. It constitutes a comparative backwards glance to previous treatments of
the object in art, permitting Ponge to criticise the cautious cowardice of those he ironically calls "réalistes" and who remain outside the cage they have constructed for the object. He also refers to the Impressionists who tamed the object simply by dazzling it with light. Néroid, on the other hand, faces up to a "nouvelle étreinte", wielding the brush / fouet only when "la Chose est déjà sur lui, en gros plan".

20. See La Nausée, Gallimard (Paris, 1938). This malaise reaches a peak in Roquentin's contemplation of a chestnut tree root: "Je ne me rappelais plus que c'était une racine. Les mots s'étaient évanouis et, avec eux, la signification des choses, leurs modes d'emploi, les faibles repères que les hommes ont tracés à leur surface" (pp.165-66).


22. This exhibition was organised for the Musée d'Art Moderne, Paris.

23. Quoted in La Nature morte de Breughel à Soutine, p.194.

24. Denis Diderot, 'Salon de 1765', in Diderot sur l'art et les artistes, Hermann (Paris, 1967), p.217. The critical dilemma in which Diderot was placed by Chardin is neatly illustrated in his response to the painter's morceau de réception of 1728, La Raile dépouillée, of which he comments "L'objet est dégoûtant, mais c'est la chair mêmes du poisson, c'est sa peau, c'est son sang; l'aspect même de la chose n'affecterait pas autrement" (Diderot sur l'art et les artistes, p.212). Diderot clearly did not see that Chardin's technical feat and his choice of subject matter were inseparable.


27. "On n'entend rien à cette magie" explains Diderot, "ce sont des couches épaisse de couleur appliquées les unes sur les autres et dont l'effet transpire de dessus en dessous. D'autres fois, on dirait que c'est une vapeur qu'on a soufflée sur la toile; ailleurs, une écume légère qu'on y a jetée... Approchez-vous, tout se brouille, s'aplatit et disparaît; éloignez-vous, tout se recrée et se reproduit" (Diderot sur l'art et les artistes, p.209).


29. The complete list of these titles amongst which Ponge deliberates are: 'Chardin (à propos de)'; 'De Chardin et de la nature morte'; 'De la nature morte et de Chardin'; 'Pour Chardin: éloge de la nature morte'; 'Pour Chardin'; 'De la nature morte (à propos de Chardin)'; 'De la nature morte et de Chardin'. See the exhibition catalogue Francis Ponge: Manuscrits - Livres - Peintures, Bibliothèque publique d'information Centre Georges Pompidou (25 February - 4 April, 1977), p.7.


32. Warehime, p.59.


34. Bonvin was one of the many Nineteenth Century painters who were inspired by Chardin's themes and technique. For Bonvin's painting of asparagus see Natures mortes françaises du XVIIe au XIXe siècle, Galerie Daber (Paris, 9 April - 6 May 1959).


36. In Braque's definition "L'espace visuel sépare les objets les uns des autres. L'espace tactile nous sépare des objets". It is not enough, says Braque, to make people see what one paints, "il faut encore le faire toucher" (see Cahier de Georges Braque, Fernand Mourlot (Paris, 1947)).

37. This comparison is returned to in 'Braque le réconciliateur': "Mais voyons bien pourtant la différence des deux époques, et le mérite, par là, et l'importance du chef-d'oeuvre actuel" (L'Atelier contemporain, p.69).

38. Only seven of these texts are contained in L'Atelier contemporain, the last being written in 1980 and after the publication of Ponge's recueil. The following is a list of the essays, with their original place of publication where possible:

'Braque le réconciliateur', Editions d'art Albert Skira, Collection "Les Trésors de la peinture française" (Geneva, 1946). This was a preface for a book of reproductions.

'Braque ou l'art moderne comme événement et plaisir', Les Lettres françaises (May 1947). This is a Communist weekly. Ponge's text therefore deals with the crucial responsibility of modern art in society and its active role in social change.

'Braque-dessins', Collection "Plastique", no.9, printed by Braun et Cie. (Paris, 1950). This was a preface for the first volume of Braque's graphic work. Here Pongs treats a favourite theme; the value of process and of the artist's preparatory work.

'Braque-Japon', in L'Art de Georges Braque, Miaz, no.566 (Tokio, October 1952). The essay also appeared in Liberté de l'esprit, no.37 (January 1953). Written in 1952 to accompany an exhibition of Braque's work in Tokyo, the essay celebrates Braque's qualities as a specifically French artist and a spiritual leader.
'Braque lithographe', Fernand Mourlot, edited by André Sauret (Monte-Carlo, 1963). A foreword to Braque's complete lithographs (there are 146 plates). Here Ponge celebrates the art of lithography and points to the function of art as a new religion.

'Feuillet votif', Hommage À Georges Braque, Derrière le miroir, nos. 144, 145, 146, edited by Maeght (Paris, May 1964). This was a collective tribute to the painter, Ponge's text being written immediately after Braque's death on 31 August 1963.

'Braque ou la méditation à l'œuvre', in Georges Braque de Draeger, with texts by P. Descargues, A. Malraux, F. Ponge, edited by Draeger (Paris, 1971). This introduction to a volume of reproductions sums up the achievements of a mature master. In L'Atelier contemporain the text is retitled 'Braque ou un méditatif à l'œuvre'.

'Bref condensé de notre dette à jamais et re-co-naisance à Braque particulièrement en cet été 80'. Written in May 1980, this is one of the accompanying prefaces to a richly illustrated exhibition catalogue for a large retrospective exhibition, Georges Braque, Fondation Maeght, 06570 Saint-Paul (5 July - 30 September 1980) (non pag.).

References to these texts will use the following abbreviations with the relevant page number of L'Atelier contemporain:-

BR 'Braque le réconciliateur'
BAM 'Braque ou l'art moderne comme événement et plaisir'
B-D 'Braque-dessins'
B-J 'Braque-Japon'
B-L 'Braque lithographe'
PV 'Feuillet votif'
B-MO 'Braque ou un méditatif à l'œuvre'
BC 'Bref condensé de notre dette à jamais et re-co-naissance à Braque particulièrement en cet été 80'


40. Cahier de Georges Braque, Fernand Mourlot (Paris, 1947). These dicta interspersed with drawings and written during periods of convalescence are profoundly valuable to an understanding of Braque's art. Ponge appears to have absorbed them so thoroughly that they recur in various guises in his texts, often without acknowledgement. All quotations from Braque are taken from this source unless stated otherwise. There are no page numbers in the Cahier.

41. Paulhan is both a literal and a figurative meeting place for Ponge and Braque. His description of Braque's 'parti pris des choses' could just as easily refer to Ponge himself (see Jean Paulhan, Braque le patron, Gallimard (Paris, 1952)), and there is considerable overlap in the images Paulhan and Ponge find for Braque. Paulhan's first incomplete version of Braque le patron was published in Poésie 41 in Paris during the Occupation and it is possible that to some degree Paulhan and Ponge
fed off each other's works. It is interesting that Paulhan also wrote about Fautrier, Dubuffet, Picasso, Karshaya, Germaine Richier and others who have their place in L'Atelier contemporain, often with a similar emphasis and similar imagery to that of Ponge.


43. Ian Higgins, Francis Ponge, p.95.

44. Le Jour et la nuit; cahiers de Georges Braque, Gallimard (Paris, 1952), p.12. These two complementary dicta are juxtaposed here.

45. Georges Braque, Cahier, "le progrès en art ne consiste pas à étendre ses limites mais à mieux les connaitre".


49. Le Jour et la nuit, p.38.


51. Ponge defines sapiens thus: "c'est-à-dire quelque chose qui n'est pas du tout une sagesse dans le sens où l'on dit: 'C'est un enfant sage', mais une connaissance munie, fortifiée, dans sa forteresse. Dans le texte de Lucrece, c'est cela: un renforcement des convictions profondes, des goûts profonds, retrouver l'authenticité, j'ose dire, 'ethnique'". See 'Ponge commenté par lui-même', Le Monde, 18 May 1979, p.25.

52. This is the last of Braque's maxims in his Cahier, quoted by Ponge ("Braque-Japon", p.123) although without acknowledgement of its source. The relationship between personal life and art is important in Ponge, for whom the purely personal outpouring is anathema. It is facile, unrevealing and sterile because it is intransitive. This seriousness and objectivity is perhaps a key to Ponge's preference for Braque over Picasso. Picasso was a self-obsessed showman, and gave his most precious talents to depicting his sequence of mistresses, his son, his emotions. The art of Picasso is the biography of his life; in Braque it is the inverse which is true. As Patrick Mc Gaughy comments of Picasso's achievement in the high Cubist years, "All the energy that the 'soft' side of Picasso dissipates in antic performances is here disciplined and
channeled into plastic form" ('Reflections on the Picasso Exhibition', Artscribe, no.25 (October 1980), 32-36 (p.34)

53. Braque claimed that the idea was "le ber du tableau [...] l'échafaudage d'où le bateau se libère, pour glisser à la mer" ('Braque ou l'art moderne comme événement et plaisir' (p.74)). It is ridiculous, says the painter, to imagine a boat sailing with its cradle. As with Chardin, "Le tableau est fini quand il a chassé l'idée, qu'on est arrivé au fatal. La tête libre" (Cahiers).


60. See Chapter 1, pp.63-65.

61. Farasse notices an oscillation in Ponge between two models of sentence, the proverbial and the hesitant: "La phrase assertive d'une part, qu'elle soit affirmative ou négative, phrase autoritaire, tranchante qui installe une écriture à la fois précise, exacte, dure, efficace, proverbiale, dans laquelle toute floriture ou afféterie est dissoute [...]. D'autre part, une phrase modale, subitement modélée, mais incertaine, multiple, insuffisante, constamment réécrit, contestée". See Gérard Farasse, 'Héliographie', Revue des sciences humaines, 38, no.151 (July / September 1973), 435-57 (p.452).

62. One critic who does judge this scandalous is Mark J. Temmer (see 'Francis Ponge: A Dissenting View of his Poetry', Modern Language Quarterly, 29 (June 1968), 207-21 (p.209)). Temmer considers Ponge's work to be mediocre in general, and detects a creative weakness in his resort to the dictionary, as if the writer were 'cheating' that all important quality of imagination, la reine des facultés. In Temmer's assessment, Ponge "[calls] upon the Littré for inspiration, then glorifies his need of it, thinking to transmute his weakness into strength" (p.209). This interpretation ignores the fact that Ponge is referring to past usage in order to revitalise language, to resist its current, unquestioned usage, and hence to take usage into the future. It also overlooks the fact that such a resistance and thoroughgoing renewal of our linguistic resources is one of the most important functions of poetry.
63. See Lois Dahlin, 'Entretien avec Francis Ponge: ses rapports avec Camus, Sartre et d'autres', French Review, 54, no.2 (December 1980), 271-81 (p.278). Ponge is referring in particular to his dissociation from the Tel Quel group.

64. Gabriel Audisio, "Tout Ponge était donné (sa pensée, son esprit, sa méthode) dès ses premiers propos, dès ses premiers écrits", in Philippe Sollers, Francis Ponge, Poètes d'aujourd'hui, no.95, edited by Pierre Seghers (Paris, 1963), p.112.

CONCLUSION

Perhaps Francis Ponge's most salient feature as a writer is that he has systematically and repeatedly declared himself incapable of just about everything he has ever accomplished. Many of these declarations may be traced back to his profound distrust of language, his disgust of theory, thought, emotionalism and lyricism, and his battle against inarticulateness. Ponge's degree of success in overcoming his scruples has mainly been studied so far through focusing on his poems on objects, either those of Le Parti pris des choses (which must surely be regarded as atypical when Ponge's work is viewed as a whole), or the more open texts which are products of his "rage froide".

Turning to the relatively neglected area of Ponge's art criticism allows us to broaden our appreciation of his output, since it is a product of his attempts to deal with other of his inhibitions and represents the summit of his election of increasingly difficult subjects for his texts. Ponge's acceptance of the critical function often requested of him means that he is working in what appear to be near impossible conditions given the tabooe surrounding his work. Here many more factors must be drawn into the equation: Ponge's conviction that Man has been too much spoken of in literature and cannot be directly approached; his apparent reluctance when dealing with specific individuals rather than generic objects; his avowed inability to speak about the things he most loves; his uncertainty about the perimeters of his new role as critic; the new kind of readerly requirement he has to satisfy - all such problems must be overcome, and Ponge accepts the challenge all the more passionately because of his "incompétence" (AC 151). It was felt, then, that more critical energy should be devoted to studying this aspect of Ponge's work in detail, and a
great deal remains to be learned by giving wider attention
to his art criticism, to other aspects of his contact with
artists, and to his texts on people in general.

In the case of the criticism, my intention was to show
Ponge's flexibility in dealing with fresh problems and to
select texts which best reveal the variety and scope of his
essays on art. I have attempted to illustrate several of the
most striking ways in which he 'uses' his chosen artists and
overcomes his dilemmas as critic and portraitist. The
critical essays are particularly revealing since they
represent what often appear to be peculiar alliances, yet
these are alliances chosen by Ponge himself, rather than
those inflicted upon him by the associations his work has
been seen to have with a number of literary groups or
trends. What apparently peculiar couplings are provided by,
for example, Fautrier or Giacometti. The former sees Ponge
risking his much cherished objectivity and control,
abandoning his preference for unsensational subjects and
quite unexpectedly dealing with the disturbing issues of
torture and atrocity. Fautrier is, furthermore, concerned
not with precision but with the deeper urges and obscure
turmoils of humanity, which cannot be given clear
expression. This alliance is clearly preferred by Ponge to
any fleeting connection he may have had with the
subconscious as manifested by Surrealism, and his first
attempt to write on Fautrier results in a persuasive study
of a new and difficult artist, whilst the second, with its
insolent sense of irreverent play, represents a release from
the multiple constraints of the text on the Otages.

The case of Giacometti - another unlikely alliance -
takes us from the celebration and promotion of a difficult
and none too popular artist to the non-celebration of a
popular one. Ponge's unorthodox, light-hearted response to
the sculptor is a fine example of corrective criticism, of
criticism as resistance rather than acquiescence. Equating
himself with Romeo at the Capulet feast, masked and plotting
to wrench adolescent beauty away from its repressive environment, Ponge accepts Giacometti's image of destruction only as a healthy starting point for recreation. Giacometti's JR is replaced by Ponge's Nous, by the pluralised self, and the writer's resistance is effected by the very form of his texts, by rejecting Giacometti's obsessive whittling in favour of the fleshed-out forms of 'Joca Seria'.

With Chardin and Braque, we return to Ponge's theory that our account of the material world is also the best possible account we can give of ourselves, since we can define ourselves only in relation to such external coordinates. With Chardin there is no convincing or wooing of the reader to be done as to the artist's value, but the true contemporary significance and appropriateness of his work is reassessed. The still life is presented as an activity, and we are encouraged less to look at Chardin's works than to contemplate the world as he contemplated it. Braque, however, is Ponge's closest partner, his prime image of the patient, tentative and humble craftsman devoted to his art. It is clearer than ever in the works on Braque that the painter is in a kind of paradise, his attempts to restore harmony unhampered by the writer's constant battle against ideology and the fragile world of the intellect.

What is remarkable in the art writing as a whole is that Ponge remains true to his initial imperatives, yet despite his inhibitions he still manages to open up a critical space for himself, producing a fascinating, contagious mélange of art criticism, autobiography, indirect manifestos, poetry and prose. As far as any charge of self-portraiture goes, it is true that Ponge's criticism constitutes a self-defining process, and that each artist represents a fresh opportunity for Ponge to verify his beliefs, but then this is surely true of writing of any kind. Any definition of criticism evoking 'parasites' and 'hosts' is invalid here, since Ponge deals with artists and
their works in a supple and fluid manner which will not 'petrify' them into a single meaning. It is indeed a tribute to Ponge that despite the metatextual nature of much of his writing, despite his tendency to involve us in the intricacies of his text rather than those of his elected subject, he gives us such an insight into modern art whilst still retaining his writerly integrity. Refusing to consider the artist as a fixed entity, refusing to insist on the finished product, Ponge leaves both painter and paintings enticingly free, using his prose to echo rather than to anchor the subject of his texts. He also provides a fine balance between the criticism of a professional and that of a poet, inasmuch as he manifests a deep understanding of artistic techniques without being dry, yet retains the mystery of creation without being pretentious or overblown.

The atelier as a place of repair; the stress on (and illustration of) genesis; the existential foundation and moral import of art and literature, such features are the hallmarks of Ponge's work and of his era, and it is particularly instructive to watch how the author progressively confirms his own stance through a wider study of creative figures, all of them straddled between their acute awareness of ruin and their determination to reconstruct, all absorbed in what Ponge refers to as "le grand jeu: de refaire le monde" (TP 228). Particularly refreshing is Ponge's determined reiteration of his (realistic) optimism and lack of melancholy; a calm and mature position which is worked out through his art criticism as much as through his other texts. Naturally this comes to the fore in the case of Braque, but unlike Malraux, for example, Ponge's criticism is devoid of anguish even when his subject would appear to require a dose, and to retain such a positive vision in the case of the Otages or of Giacometti is a particular (and particularly audacious) triumph. One is left with the feeling that although Ponge could not be hailed as one of the most profound thinkers of
our times, his is indisputably one of the healthiest approaches to our ongoing existential predicament. Throughout *L'Atelier contemporain*, he encourages us to eradicate some of our most cherished transcendental quests, and to engage in a voyage of discovery with a totally different emphasis. Ponge restores us to our true place in nature, celebrating our creative capacity in which he has a quasi religious faith, yet doing so within an inevitably limited framework which affirms that our ordinary sense perceptions are inadequate, and that our experience is characterised by unanswered and largely unanswerable questions. This in turn is echoed in the text's irrepresibly inquisitive stance, its loose ends, open-mindedness and admission of relative perfection, or indeed its deliberate courting of failure when it appears to be on the point of organising itself too well. The form and the underlying philosophy of *L'Atelier contemporain* are, then, in perfect harmony.

Given that the field of art criticism has become such an important feature of contemporary literature, it is only fitting that Ponge should be given his place within it. In addition, the repercussions of his contact with the visual arts in general (referred to by Sollers as the 'triangle' formed by text, painting and concrete world in Ponge's work (*BPS 88*)) should perhaps receive greater acknowledgement. It is of course difficult to judge whether or not Ponge's texts would have evolved differently were it not for his continual and parallel study of the plastic arts, particularly since his poetic works do not rely on specific paintings or sculptures for their genesis. In the case of Giacometti and the work on Man, we see the criticism and the other texts come together to solve one particular problem, but evidence of influence is not always so clear even when, as in the case of Braque, Ponge specifically acknowledges a great debt. I would suggest, however, that the study of other
methods and other media confirmed Ponge in his writerly experiments, particularly in his development of open texts and his stress on the concrete, on words as 'matter', rather than purely as ideas.

A further area which developed from this and which has received relatively little attention is Ponge's contribution to the Twentieth Century livre d'art tradition, the sumptuous results of his collaboration with artists as seen in the many de luxe editions, and his masterful handling of the physical components of the book. Perhaps one could look at Ponge's experiment in using visual supports in De la nature morte et de Chardin as a forerunner of a text like La Fabrique du Pré, which employs photographs, maps, works of art and even sheet music to evoke as fully as possible Ponge's memory of the meadow in Le Chambon-sur-Lignon. Such speculations, however, would be fruit for another study.
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