

Jean-Jacques Thomas and Steven Winspur. *Poeticized Language: The Foundations of Contemporary French Poetry*. University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1999. 279p.

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Despite the somewhat jarring sonorities of the word “poeticized,” the main title of this book appropriately describes the authors’ goal. In their ambitious study Thomas and Winspur seek to present an “overview of the main tendencies in contemporary French poetry as a whole,” from the First World War to the present, by accounting for individual poetic practices and linguistic experiments through “a detailed study of specific poems” (6). To this effect, their book covers an array of poets as varied as Apollinaire, Saint-John Perse, Tzara, Aragon, Eluard, Bonnefoy, Jacob, Ponge, Jabès, Roubaud, and the OuLiPo group, among others, while leaving out only a few prominent names, such as Claudel and Char. Aiming for cultural diversity, their book also includes the francophone poets Glissant and Césaire, as well as three women poets: Risset, Chedid, and Hébert.

Approaching, let alone understanding and interpreting, contemporary poetry represents a daunting prospect for many readers of French literature. *Poeticized Language* sets out to overcome this resistance, arguing cogently that “readers forget that the body of poetry they have ignored for the most part is contemporaneous with their own culture,” and that “[t]o ignore such writings is to turn the act of reading into a nostalgic look backward, rather than an understanding of the present” (7). More persuasively still, a series of meticulous and illuminating analyses familiarize us with the mysteries of a poeticized French language, uncovering ways in which poems produce meaning and reveal more concealed processes at work within language itself. Reiterating Valéry’s characterization of poetry as a kind of dancing with respect to the “walking” of everyday speech, Thomas and Winspur explain how poetry may be viewed as “a backdrop to all linguistic acts, insofar as it illustrates to the utmost degree the power of language’s effects” (10). It is to a voyage of discovery, then, that the authors invite us, and one could hardly wish for more adept guides than these two specialists in the field of twentieth-century French poetry.

It should be noted, however, that *Poeticized Language* is hardly designed to appeal to a non-specialized readership, as every chapter assumes more than a passing acquaintance with modern French poetry, and further, with structuralist and deconstructive approaches to language and literature. Who, other than a specialist, would be able to decode a word like “hypotaxis,” inscribed on the second page of the introduction as though to warn off readers who may be enthusiastic but

insufficiently geared for the adventure? To the untrained reader, Thomas and Winspur do offer one or two pedagogical chapters—chapter six, “Image and Formula,” is a case in point—as well as helpful references, in the footnotes conveniently located at the bottom of each page, and particularly in the select bibliography, “limited to recent general studies,” half of which are in English. It is nonetheless regrettable that the bibliography should exclude such distinguished critics as John P. Houston, Mary Ann Caws, and John E. Jackson.

An original feature of this book consists in its collaborative undertaking. The authors’ joint efforts challenge the view that most academic studies are, and perhaps should be, produced as solitary ventures. If not undertaken with the utmost caution, however, this kind of methodology may generate confusing statements. In their introduction, for instance, it is unclear whether or not the authors endorse what they term “the most widely recognized attribute of the French language,” namely that French, in Rousseau’s words, “is hardly suited for poetry and certainly not for music” (1). Numerous examples easily disprove such a sweeping statement—one could cite Ronsard and Verlaine as musical poets writing centuries apart from one another—yet the authors’ own perspective remains ambiguous. At times, they seem to concede the inherently poetic character of works written prior to the late nineteenth century, admitting that not all pre-modernist poets had lost track of “the underlying causes” (3) of the “formal apparatus of verse and rhyme” (2), and that “poets from Apollinaire onward have ‘poeticized’ even further the language of literature that was handed down to them” (8). At other times, they appear to believe that “French acquired a poetic dimension” (2) only toward the end of the nineteenth century, as poets unshackled themselves from the formal constraints imposed by tradition, their “language now free of the exterior affectations that had made it seem like poetry to the casual reader...” (5). In the latter case, Thomas and Winspur exemplify Antoine Compagnon’s depiction in a 1991 essay (*Stanford French Review* 15) of literary critics who tend to perceive and judge poets almost exclusively according to a modernist paradigm of progress initiated by Baudelaire and perpetuated by Rimbaud, Mallarmé, and their successors, as though genuine poetry were simply inexistent prior to *Les Fleurs du Mal*.

Beyond this kind of ambiguity, the book’s main argument is not to be challenged, for twentieth-century poets have indeed “poeticized” the French language by working on its formal and semantic properties to an extent unparalleled in the history of French literature, at least since the experiments of the “Grands Rhétoriciens” in the fifteenth century, which Thomas and Winspur acknowledge (160, 198). Through the labor of several twentieth-century poets, the French language has developed an apparent autonomy, or a non-communicative dimen-

sion, that justifies the authors' radical nominalism: "Basically, we believe it is the verbal and symbolic order that constitutes the writing subject, and not the other way around" (20). Reminiscent of the Stoic notion of self-construction, this view does not prevent them from adhering to "the performative power of words" in poems by Chedid and Jabès, for instance, that teach readers "how to live" (155).

The book is structured according to the authors' identification of three major "ways of poeticizing language": mimetic, intertextual, and "*techno-ludic*" (14). Mimesis, we discover, is essentially self-referential in a modern poem, as its "topographical markers . . . are merely inscriptions within a textual system, and their referential value is subordinate to the internal functioning of the poem in question" (12). This notion of the poem as "a closed entity" divulges one of the main tenets of structuralism, as expounded by Michael Riffaterre in his 1978 *Semiotics of Poetry* (2). Needless to say, Thomas and Winspur will deconstruct poems by Perse and Bonnefoy which give the impression of "pointing to an inexpressible something-or-other" (111), since "the limits of language can exist nowhere except as an effect of language itself" (115). In the perspective of a fundamentally non-communicative poetry, intertextuality becomes a crucial means of establishing an ethical relationship with readers by inviting their collaboration (13), albeit one that requires a broad textual memory, or "memorial competence" (91). The playful aspects of modern poetry further contribute to its ethical dimension by imparting a welcome sense of lightness, although, as the authors remind us, "in order to function at all, these ludic exercises must obey specific operating rules" (14), and thus they are far from being mere "exercises in futility" (60).

With its illustrations of pictorial poems, its numerous examples accompanied by reliable translations, its well-grounded and sustained close readings, *Poeticized Language* presents a comprehensive and yet detailed analysis of poetic practices that have often appeared refractory and hence discouraging to interpretive efforts. Even without subscribing to the authors' philosophical premises, readers interested in language, and especially those who are, or aim to be, specialists of modern French poetry, will find their thought-provoking book to be of great value. It should prove instrumental in graduate courses, while the insights it offers should also inspire teaching at the undergraduate level. ✱