

Justifying the Margins

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Also by Pierre Joris

POETRY

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Another Journey, 1972.
Chants de la révolution de Julian Beck, 1975.
Contretemps à temps de Carl Solomon, 1974.

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PIERRE JORIS



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As is reiterated in the Arab literary tradition, vision and knowledge are foremost a *rihla*, a moving away from one's place: displacement and travel, dissemination of oneself through space and time.

Stefania Pandolfo, *Impasse of the Angels*

My age, my beast, who will be able
To look into your pupils
And with his own blood glue together
The vertebrae of two centuries?

Osip Mandelstam (*transl. by Stephen Broyde*)

Il n'y a ni crise, ni défaite de la pensée, ni apocalypse des valeurs, il n'y a que la paresse: oubli de se lever tôt, de noter sa mort.

Philippe Sollers, *Carnet de nuit*

Nimrod in Hell

My father was a healer and a hunter. Is it any surprise that I became a poet and a translator? We don't escape our filiations: we only stand more revealed, as the territories shift, as the hunt closes in. In an early work I spoke of St. Hubertus, patron saint and protector of hunters, bishop of Liège, who is also invoked against rabies. While hunting on Good Friday, he had been converted to Christianity when he saw a stag with a light cross between its antlers—this was supposed to have happened in the dark woods of the Ardennes, i.e., just north of where Arthur Rimbaud was born, and in a space he measured out in long walks.

But in Hubertus, or behind that too easily christianized hunter, lay already an earlier hunter: not a saint, though an even more biblical figure: Nimrod, “the first mighty man on earth”—a hunter, a mighty hunter before or against God (depending on the translation). The Old Testament associates this giant and mighty hunter with the project of Babel (his kingdom comprising Babel in the land of Shinar, where the Tower will be built) and thus with the question of language and translation. And not surprisingly, as Giorgio Agamben reminds us, Dante has Nimrod in his hell (*Inferno* XXXI, pp 46–81) with the loss of meaningful language as his punishment. So that what the giant speaks in the *Commedia* is neither the lingua franca of Latin nor the new Vulgar Tongue. Dante gives us one verse of Nimrod's ranting: “*Raphèl mài amècche zabì almi.*” Commentators from Benvenuto to Buti, or more recently, Singleton, are certain that these words are meaningless. A few, such as Landino, suggest that the words could be Chaldean, others that they may be Arabic, Hebrew, Greek. . . . But the problem may not be there at all: The words Dante puts into Nimrod's mouth are fitting, are accurate in their intention on language. Their meaning, in that sense, is absolutely

clear: they mean to be ununderstandable, to be the babble of Babel, the language that is untranslatable into any language—and that therefore, we know, must be translated. And yet—the lingo of Babel was the single language that all humanity understood, that a jealous commander-in-chief then shattered as punishment for the early humans' communality; “divide et regna” already the essence of YHWH's political science. So that Nimrod either remembers the first, unified language of the human race which we no longer know, or he speaks in one of the post-Babelian lingos, which are what makes translation possible.

But his words, no matter which language or nonlanguage they are in, are fitting in a further sense: they are babble, thus a babelian bavel, and thus connect to *bave*, Fr. for drool, spittle. A false etymology—but are any etymologies really “false”? Aren't they the engine whose misfirings, rather than smooth transparent linguistic runs, drive poetry forward? A false etymology, then, possibly, but one that brings in that much despised excretion without which we would have no language. And now, looking up the etymology of “bave” it turns out that the word goes back to pop. Latin “*baba*”, an “onomatopoeia that expresses the babble [*le babil*] of children.” Or of giants. Or of the single universal language all humans once spoke in their lingo-genetic childhood. Now this *bave*, this spittle, this active saliva (doesn't the word “alive” hide somewhere in “saliva”?), as George Bataille's *Encyclopedia Acephalica* teaches us, is “the deposit of the soul; spittle is soul in movement.” For spittle accompanies breath, “which can exit the mouth only when permeated with it.” Because “breath is soul, so much so that certain peoples have the notion of ‘the soul before the face.’” Without spittle, no breath, no soul, no language—it is the lubricant that immanentizes the pneuma. But it is also, the EA goes on, that which “casts the mouth in one fell swoop down to the last rung of the organic ladder, lending it a function of ejection even more repugnant than its role as gate through which one stuffs food.” And its sexual connotations and erotic manifestations allow it to befuddle any hierarchical classification of organs. The EA again: “Like the sexual act carried out in broad daylight, it is scandal itself, for it lowers the mouth—which is the visible sign of intelligence—to the level of the most shameful organs...” The scandal of children and giants speaking in a language comprehensible (or incomprehensible) to all, like spitting in public. Neither YHWH nor Dante can let this happen. The one shatters the single language, the other gathers the now incomprehensible words of the giant hunter Nimrod but makes them, has to make them fit into his language, wiped clean of spittle.

For Nimrod's languaged anguish cannot, and does not exceed the Dantean world, it fits exactly into the cosmotopography of his lyric epic. It is metrically exact and accurately rimes with "palmi" two lines above and "salmi" two lines below. Gentle giant, speaking nonsense in comely divine words. Not surprisingly the prissy Latin poet wants worse from Nimrod, telling him "Stupid soul, keep to your horn," and dismissing him thus: "Let us leave him alone and not speak in vain, for every language is to him as his is to others, which is known to none." Yet Nimrod in rage hunts still—for meaning, and he says his meaning.

Poet, translator: même combat! We keep hunting among stones, Dante hunts down language in the *De Vulgari Eloquentia*, where he tells us: "let us hunt after a more fitting language... so that our hunt may have a practicable path, let's first cast the tangled bushes & brambles out of the wood." (Ronald Duncan's translation, modified). But the *selva* will always be *oscura*, mutters Rimbaud in the Ardennes, stumbling through Hubert's hunting grounds, escaping mother and her tongue (is that why he gives up writing poetry?) and he stubs a toe, goes to Africa, travels the desert, the open space, no *selva oscura*, no guide needed, he has learned the languages, this nomad poet who knew that "living in the same place [he] would always find wretched," to go on trafficking in the unknown, master of "la chasse spirituelle," a hunt that will not let up.

Homophonically this morning I hear Dante/Nimrod's line as:

"Rough hell may enmesh ease, a be-all me."

I

On the Nomadic Circulation of Contemporary Poetics

In the poem “Ode or Nearly There” from *h.j.r.* a line wrote itself: “[To] caravan/atoms into lines of flight.” The oddness of this line was brought home—wherever that may be, if ever caravans do get there, which is, in turn, neither here nor there—when it was queried by my French translator. Though French certainly isn’t home either, as no language is, despite our desire to make it so. Language is the stranger, the other, we want to engage and which always, and irremediably so, remains the outside. Our outside we are building a future home in which we will never inhabit. We can only inhabit that which will disappear with us, that which does not survive us, i.e., ourselves. We are our home, the infinitesimal second— *die Sekunde, diese Kunde*—of presence to ourselves we imagine in retrospect to have been us present to ourselves when we/it is already too late, gone, a cadaver as we move into a here that, even before we can dot the I of our quasi-presence, has become a there. A there that does not “exist,” that is always already an ex- if it “ist” at all, but really, neither back there nor ahead, as René Daumal says: “J’avance vers un avenir qui n’existe pas. I am going toward a future that does not exist: leaving every minute a new corpse behind me.” His was a slower time, this giddy fin-de-siècle makes that every second. “Sirrt die Sekunde.” Atom of time. One by one, second to none. Uncuttable: from Latin *secare*, to cut, or split. The deepest cut. And uncuttable sequence. Daumal’s minute may be tropologically meant to stand for the minutest, but it is still a molar comfort.

These are the languages of my dispersals, my diasporic wanderings, the German and the French that underlie the lingua franca of the new

empire: American English. The omitted first, or degree zero language, really, of my languages: *Letzebuergesch*, a gentle ghosting appearing at times in certain s-sounds, in the impossible “tee-aitch” where “so” and “though” become homophonic, and the sh-sounds, sschlupping about, but hush now, that’s the mamaloshen, so far removed now though so far from removed that I sometimes fear it will come back in the last words it will be given me to speak and that no one will then be able to understand. And finally there is the Arabic that has gone missing, that I chase after, promising myself to make it yet into the tent where late in the day when the sun is setting over the schist mountains of Thamad sung by Ibn Tarafa, all the others can gather to enjoy the hospitality of that nomadicity I have made so much of. (We may then again discuss what Derrida thought so often about, identity, ipseity, and the “pse” of “ipse” more than the initial “I” and its dissemination through that range of terms that create an Indo-European complex which puts hospitality and hostility under the same tent. And then we will wonder if under the tent of Arabic hospitality—ziyafah—where I hear, ignorant of the etymology right now, certain phrases, i.e., you have to show it, hospitality, ziyafah, to everyone, to the stranger as well, to the one on the road, and will of course link up with Derrida’s wanderings around the hostis/hospes theme. It is exactly when Derrida begins to think his diasporic self, his Franco-maghrebian nonidentity, his worried, threatened, recent, precarious citizenship, that he proposes the *monolingualism of the Other* with its double, contradictory postulation:

- *We only ever speak one language...*
(yes but)
- *We never speak only one language...*

and this, interestingly enough, immediately gets Derrida to think of that most diasporic act of crossing, translation, as he writes that this double postulation “is not only the very law of what is called translation. It would also be the law itself as translation.” A core diasporic performance for writers is of course translation—first in their own writing, in the written “monolingualism” of their books, and then in the translations—and their attending problems—these books, or rather, the “language(s)” of these books posit.

What I want to do in the following is to set a few markers to witness this contemporary complexity. The growing nomadicity of our languages, the dissemination of minor-literature modes as Deleuze-

Guattari like to call them, the critical reflection elaborated by theorists/writers such as the Algerian Réda Bensmaïa, or the Martinican poet/theorist Edouard Glissant (cf. his *Introduction à une poétique du divers*, and his *Poétique de la relation*) and the cultural practices of postcolonial poets, thinkers, and translators all contribute to a radical subversion of traditional cultural patterns in both writing and translating. Here then a quick sketch of a few of the vectors these new diasporic practices take through the work of three Maghrebian writers—Abdelwahab Meddeb (Tunisia), Habib Tengour (Algeria), and Driss Chraïbi (Morocco). This will be a heterogeneous meander, as I will use their work to bring up a variety of questions, problems, matters, really that will however not coalesce into some wider picture. Archipelago-poetics, archipelago-politics.

Driss Chraïbi, the elder statesmen of the modern Moroccan—Maghrebian, really—novel, startled and upset his country (while gaining immediate recognition in France) when in 1954, just two years before Moroccan independence, he published his first novel *Le Passé Simple* in Paris, France. This is a paradigmatic work stating the epistemic break between traditional (Arabo-Islamic) Moroccan culture and the modernity of French-speaking culture in terms of the family genealogy of a father/son opposition. Let me just touch upon two aspects that highlight tiny, but essential matters regarding the situation of the Maghrebian (writer) and his *langue fourchue*, his “forked tongue,” to use Abdelfattah Kilito’s expression, in relation to writing and translation: first, the title and then the problem of a possible/impossible return to the language of the country after independence. *Le Passé Simple* is not only *in* French but speaks *of* and *to* French—in that its surface semantic meaning is (literally translated) “The Simple Past” (the English translation of the book is called just that), while for any French-speaker educated in his or her language, the phrase is immediately and simultaneously heard as the grammatical name it also is: the past historic tense. Writes Stefania Pandolfo in her essay “The Thin Line of Modernity”:

The French *passé simple*, grammatically, is the tense of an impossible narration. Rarely used in the first person and almost untranslatable in English (*je fûs*, “I have been,” but in the remote past, a past forever severed from myself), the *passé simple* conveys without mediation the uncanny temporality of a cut. (“The thin line...” p 119)

Obviously Chraïbi wanted to inscribe this “uncanny temporality of a cut” into his title. This is exactly the paradoxical nature of these three words: the semantic surface simplicity of the simple noun qualified (*le passé*) by a descriptive adjective (*simple*) is undercut, torn apart by the *other* meaning, the one that states exactly the opposite, namely that this past is in fact not simple at all, but inscribes a cut, a fracture, the wound that will not heal, the aporia of an active absence/presence in the “simple” title. It may be going too far to see in this title the (unintended?) ghosting of Arabic (something we will come back to in more detail when speaking of Abdelwahab Meddeb’s work). Or at least of one aspect of Arabic poetics, namely the traditional use in popular poems of words whose polysemic meanings include the exact opposite of the stated, surface meaning. Such a device was very useful indeed in an autocratic society where the poet could (and had to) address laudatory epithets to the sovereign, as it enabled the poet to reveal in the same word the hidden truth of despotic oppression. Be that as it may, it does seem important to me to insist on the fact that the poetics of Chraïbi’s French title rehearse, while displacing, the initial and initiating Maghrebi wound of the forked tongue: here, rather than playing itself out between Arabic and French, the cut is (re) located in the other’s language itself. The colonizer’s language too is caught in an irresolvable double bind: no language is a house the writer can simply inhabit, the only home is to found in the ever-shifting force field of the spaces of its internal contradictions—which it is the writer’s job to bring to light.

Obviously the English title “The Simple Past” completely strips away that cut, that trauma expressly stated, demanded by the French title, leaving a nearly quietist, pastoral sense of “simplicity.” (cf. Flaubert’s title: *Un cœur simple*) What would happen if the title were translated into Arabic? I nearly wrote “back into Arabic”—but a back is unwarranted, Chraïbi wrote from and into French, that is the whole point of the book—the novel’s own desire is to be an accurate temporal arrow, forward from the old Arabo-Islamic tradition to the modernity of the colonizing civilization. Now, despite the furor the book caused when it was published, it did eventually return to the (Arabic) Maghreb, even if by a circuitous route: it is only one of two Chraïbi novels translated into Arabic, but published in Tunisia, not Morocco—thus returning from the diasporic language but not (yet) to the homeland. But there is a further twist: the Arabic title of *Le Passé Simple* becomes, just as the English, literally *The Simple Past*, i.e., it makes for the same reduction than the englished title—an irony one could read as yet another proof of the

impossibility of translation. At one level then, Chraïbi “cannot go home again,” at another this impossibility can be read as the basic law of nomadism and of a diasporic poetics: the eternal return to an original site can only locate change, abolish itself, find the new as the ruins of the old, as the ruined origin. It is as if the most modern situation of the Maghrebian writer mirrored the opening of the oldest poems: the *atlatl* or return to last year’s camp-fire, there only as ruins, as trace. We will return and stop there too.

The second point I want to make concerning Driss Chraïbi’s work, and of further interest in this context, is the fact that a later novel by Chraïbi, *Un ami viendra vous voir?* (1966) also caused scandal, but this time on both sides of the Mediterranean and for the same reason: Refusing or trying to overcome the wound of the forked tongue at least at the level of content, the novel did not speak of either Maghreb or France, but was set in Canada and thus eschewed any of the thematics expected from a “Franco-maghrebian” work. Double scandal! Writes Abdellatif Abboudi:

By writing *Un Ami viendra vous voir*, Chraïbi aimed at destroying, proof in hand, some of the base prejudices shared by a society undermined by racism and the exclusion of the other; and notably those clichés anchored in the imaginary of a Parisian elite stuck in the swamp of its superiority complex, and which considers literature and art according to ideas based on geographical belonging (sol) and race. An idea which gains a white writer, newly arrived from Argentina or Russia, for example, easy admission into the small club of Parisian literati. By contrast, the writers coming from the ex-colonies found themselves parked in a narrow square full of obstacles and traps. Simply because they were of ARABO-AFRICAN origin. (my translation)

In a fascinating return, it is this novel that has just this past year been published in an Arabic translation by Abdellatif Abboudi in Morocco.

I have so far spoken of novels (or at least of the title of a novel), rather than of poetry, and this stands to reason: the genre with which the Maghrebi writers first advanced their cause in French and in France was the novel—a western form that was unknown in the Arab context—and not poetry, the essential literary form of the Arab-speaking peoples. Though a study of the other founding Maghrebin novel, Kateb Yacine’s *Nedjma*, would show that in his writing the notion of genre is itself completely nomadic: the “novel” *Nedjma* can—and should, in fact—be

seen as but one moment (what I have elsewhere called a “mawqif,” a station, a momentary stopping point) of a vast katebian “écriture” that constantly and radically subverts the western “law of genre” and moves nomadically between poem, novel, and play, the latter genres being but ways of extracting specific moments of the writing. These extractions are all too often not based so much on the writer’s own conceptions—even if the diasporic writer’s struggles with or against those semiforeign genres play a role, often positive but at times also limiting—but are more often imposed by the contingencies of the diasporic situation, in this case the French publishers’ insistence for books circumscribed in ways that make the foreign text “readable” to an European audience.

This question—better: this problem—of genre will come up again and more radically so in an investigation of contemporary Maghrebian poetry and its nomadic wanderings between North and South. But before addressing the question of Arabic poetry, let us first look at how the North has done its best to occult the Arab roots of poetry in their domains, from Ezra Pound to Jacques Roubaud: the need to locate an indigenous, autochthonous origin of western poetry lead to the northern Mediterranean, Provence and the troubadours. As Maria Rosa Menocal recounted the story in a recent book, the field of romance philology (as well as the above-mentioned poets) has done everything in its power to negate an Arab origin or even a strong originary influence on what it postulated as the origin of the European lyric. Open your American Heritage dictionary and the etymological root for the word *troubadour* will be given as a reconstructed, presumed, and unattested (i.e., *) Latin root “tropare.” And yet it has been known since at least 1928 (through the work of Julián Ribera), that the obvious root is the Arabic word “taraba,” “to sing,” and sing poetry; “tarab” means song. Ezra Pound too was looking for euro-origins of lyric poetry, even if in his 1913 essay on the Troubadours he concedes a vague possibility as far as the tunes of their canzos are concerned: “They are perhaps a little oriental in feeling, and it is likely that the spirit of Sufism is not wholly absent from their content.” And in the essay on Arnaut Daniel he writes:

And he may, in the ending “piula,” have had in mind some sort of Arabic singing, for he knew well letters, in Langue d’Oc and in Latin.... So it is like as not he knew Arabic music, and perhaps had heard, if he understood not the meaning, some song in rough Saxon letters.

And that’s it; once EP has established the origins of Euro-poetry in the canzone, its transformation and perfection by Dante, he is ready to

move to China and Japan. Clarity was to be found only in the North, either the Asian one, or the Mediterranean one; the Mediterranean South is dismissed in one 1932 footnote from *Spirit of Romance*: “1932: Spanish point of honor, romanticism of 1830, *Crime passionnel*, down to sardou and the 90s, all date from the barbarian invasion, African and oriental inflow on Mediterranean clarity.”

Thus the western refusal, century-long, to connect the Mediterranean, to open up to the Arabic, to envisage our lyric as also a diasporic entity. An entry, I think, may be possible now via the work—mainly in French—of young postindependence Maghrebian writers. Their French is new, crisp, mestizo’ed, a “langue or littérature mineure” (as Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari propose in relation to Franz Kafka). Sitting in the weirdly named “Hôtel Transatlantique” (an old colonial French hotel chain, its name unchanged after independence and despite the fact that this desert place was a few thousand miles from the Atlantic Ocean) in El Oued, the “Village of a Thousand Domes,” an oasis of the Souf in the North-eastern corner of the Algerian Sahara, in 1977, I read Abdelwahab Meddeb’s first book, *Talismano*, just received from his publisher Christian Bourgois in Paris. The newness of the book was instantly clear to me: no longer a novel, not a poem per se, but an autobionarrative cum essay cum poetic perambulation of the Mediterranean North and South, it may be best to call it a *récit*, a recital—in Blanchot’s sense of the *récit* as nonnovel, and in reference to the concept of the “recital” as the name for the Arabic narratives of Sufi mystics like Shorawardi (whom Meddeb has translated) or Ibn Arabi. The incredible thirty page opening description of immersion in the meanders of the medina of Tunis firmly sets the autobiographical origin as son of an Arab scholar and denizen of one of the oldest urban centers of commerce and learning of the Maghreb (reaching back to pre-Carthaginian times). One could even see in it a postmodern version of that traditional opening gambit of the classical pre-Islamic Arab ode, the *atlal*, already mentioned, in which the wandering poet returns and stops at the site of an old camp, and laments the ruins. But both content and form of what follows seem to immediately belie—or at least profoundly alter—such a supposed formal ghosting. For in *Talismano*, this opening section is followed—*instanter*, no cut, not even the seam of collage, but as rhizomatic offshoot—by a picnic in Venice on the tomb of EP, from whence the text will nomadize through France, Italy, and Egypt, among other places.

Talismano is a paradigmatic text for a newer, postindependence, generation of Maghrebian authors. If the cultural confrontation that

formed the basis of the elder generation's novels is still there as a theme, there is now a more complex consciousness of the bi- or multi-lingual diasporic space that subtends the writing. In that sense Meddeb's work can be seen as developing and practicing a theory of writing commensurate with the postcolonial diasporic situation and one that takes into account both the oral and the scriptural aspects of the Arabic language that ghosts the French text. For here, and maybe for the first time, Arabic ghosts the text not as some originary but lost—voluntarily or involuntarily—mother-tongue that has become unavailable or wants to be (come) unavailable in order to prove or help achieve the postcolonial modernity of the author through its overt rejection. It is there neither as *Verfremdungseffekt* nor as orientaling ornament or realistic anchoring of the place, as is often the case in the more naively representational novel. It is there—or rather, its absence—presence works as a consciously thought through and acknowledged relationship to the other language, as witness, worker, energizer, transformer of the diasporic language in which the text presents itself. It is its live/hidden counterpart, set in motion by the writer in order to work through the diasporicity of his situation. His writing is thus indeed a *textum*, a weaving of the visible thread of the French and the invisible thread of Arabic—and it is the interweaving of both in a conscious and active engagement with the two languages that creates the final text, a true *amour bi-lingue* to use Abdelkebir Khatibi phrase.

But Arabic is not only another language at the levels of vocabulary, grammar, syntax, etc. It is also other in its scripturality, through which it connects to a core Arab art, calligraphy, involving both work on and extension of the act of writing, and which both obeys and circumvents the Qur'anic proscription of the representational. Here is how Meddeb himself formulates his position: "Comment peut donc écrire celui qui à l'origine calligraphie, puis travaille la langue qui, au départ, fascine parce que maîtresse de ce qui semble être chimérique puissance? [How then should he write who originally "calligraphs," then works (in) this language which fascinates to begin with, because mistress of what seems a chimerical power?"] In relation to *Talismano*, the critic Dina Al Kassim speaks of a "transgraphing" which she defines as a practice that "shifts the emphasis from a concern with semantic meanings toward a search for new terms and new forms of writing," in the process relocating "the ideological impasses of the national imaginary within the unraveling contexts of the linguistic, historical, and religious complexity of maghrebin culture." Meddeb himself speaks of this writing as

“allography” —a writing that retools French—not by simply allowing Arabic words in, but by refiguring it at the grammatical and syntactical level (something that the reader experiences very strongly as a violence done to the language, especially as French is one of the most recalcitrant languages when it comes to such wrenchings). In order to analyze the work done by Meddeb’s allographical poetics on a deeper level than the purely bilingual argument of an irreducible encounter between an “unwritable” because oral “mother tongue” and another form of standardized language, Al Kassim coins the very useful term “calligraphesis,” a concept that “contains within itself both the specificity of meaning and the excess of its own staging.” That calligraphy cannot be “translated” into the writing, she sees as

the seeming limit [that] becomes for *Talismano* the scene of writing’s promise as calligraphesis restores the problem of embodied meaning to the aspirations and proscriptions of the nation state embodied there. Far from being an ancillary effect, the illegibility of the calligraphic line is interior to legibility itself. The obvious and the obscure, the clear speech of state dictum and the unspeakability thus legislated, are intertwined in any writing that will acknowledge the calligraphic character of its own inscription.

Such an analysis also immediately points to the immense problems of translating works of this order into a further level of textual diasporal removal—into English, say. But it is also here that I see a major challenge for our own US-based avant-garde practice. For one, work such as Meddeb’s and Tengour’s (of whom more below) seems to me to be much more boundary-breaking and challenging than most of the Parisian so-called avant-garde writing (despite notable exceptions, such as Pierre Guyotat’s profound dislocation and re-inscription of an oral component into a French language that for most practitioners—even those as writerly avant-gardists as say, Michel Deguy or Jacques Roubaud or Pierre Alféri—remains based on the classical and profoundly static model of French). All too often—and despite valuable translations that are its outcome—the engagement of US avant-gardistas with French experimental writing, rather than being a diasporic displacement, turns out to be a recognition of sameness—and vice versa. (An interesting example of this in relation to the novel is the tremendously positive French reception of Paul Auster’s work, acclaiming it as the quintessential contemporary American novel, while seemingly blind to the fact that the “readability” of those novels for the French may well be