OF ART AND EPITHETS: APPROACHING THE POETRY OF OLIVIER LARRONDE THROUGH HIS "ALBERTO GIACOMETTI DÉGAINE"

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"Soyez [l]es lecteurs [de Larronde] avant que, demain, la postérité n'ait déposé sa patine sur ses chefs-d'œuvre, et que l'Université, en les corsetant de commentaires, n'ait diminué le souffle de leur jeunesse."

Angelo Rinaldi, "Un Peigneur de comètes" (*L'Express*, 15 February 1985)

"La patine est la récompense des chefs-d'œuvre."

André Gide, *Journal* (16 January 1923)

AT the relatively early age of 38, the French poet Olivier Larronde died of an epileptic fit in October 1965. At that time, he had only published two poetic collections, *Les Barricades mystérieuses* (in 1946) and *Rien voilà l'ordre* (in 1959), with his third collection, *L'Arbre à lettres*, only appearing in print in 1966. Despite his limited literary output, Larronde had been considered by Paul Guth in September 1959 as "[u]n des sommets de la poésie française depuis la guerre" ("Olivier Larronde poète" 114) and was hailed one month after his death by Jean Cau as "l'archange poète de l'après-guerre" ("Olivier Larronde" 72). Larronde's reputation as a great poet grew when he was honored posthumously as the first recipient the following month of France's first *Prix de Littérature*. And yet his works still remain largely unstudied by critics. The Modern Language Association Bibliography database, for example, does not list a single study on any of them. Were one, some three decades after Larronde's death, to rephrase in the past tense the question posed rhetorically by Bernard Pivot shortly after Larronde was awarded the literary prize, "[l]e prix [de] Littérature le sauvera-t-il du silence

auquel il semblait condamné?" ("Larronde des vivants" 161), one would – given the test of time and with the confidence bolstered by it – have to answer in the negative.

Rather than study Larronde's poetic works, critics have further enshrouded the poet in the silence to which he has long been condemned by pointing to their difficulty. Instead of provoking analysis, as in the case of the poet Stéphane Mallarmé, with whom he is often compared and whose works inspired the publication several years ago of two more book-length studies, [1] the hermeticism of Larronde's poems has to date blocked, or stifled it. "[D]irects *et* difficiles" (emphasis added), is the way Gaston Bachelard categorizes them to Larronde in a letter of June 1959, for after reading them he finds himself both "heureux *et* confus" (emphasis added). Referring to the collection *Rien voilà l'ordre*, an anagram of "Olivier Larronde," which the younger poet had sent him, Bachelard continues:

> Depuis qu'il est sur ma table je n'ai cessé de méditer les poèmes [...] Il faut les recevoir sans réserve et cependant jouir de leur beauté sans complaisance. L'image chez vous ne veut pas de redites. Il faut qu'elle soit un principe de poésie. Une fois partie elle va à son extrême. Ainsi une grande formule est, à chaque page, illustrée: "Un peu là et beaucoup ailleurs." Ah! si je faisais encore mes cours à la Sorbonne, avec "un tel motif" je ferais toute une métaphysique. ("Lettre" 65)

Now Cyril Connolly is less meditative, more forthright than Bachelard. Repeated attempts to bring them out from what he categorizes as their "general obscurity" bring Connolly to observe with regret in 1966: "Most of these poems turn round and round in vain like interlocking puzzle rings which I cannot open." ("Soirs" 89, 92) Here, Connolly amplifies the frustration evident in a 1955 article published by Gabriel Pomerand in *La Parisienne*. Addressing Larronde's failure at the time to have produced a second volume of poetry, Pomerand writes:

> Ses poèmes d'il y a dix ans sont pour le poète d'aujourd'hui des travaux de calligraphie scolaire. L'auteur sourit des problèmes sur lesquels peinent les plus grands des mathématiciens de la poésie. Il provoque lui-même des formules invérifiables empiriquement et qui se réduisent à des hypothèses abstraites, à des nombres abstraits.

[1] See Roger Pearson's *Unfolding Mallarmé: The Development of a Poetic Art* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996) and Graham Robb's *Unlocking Mallarmé* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996).

> Larronde s'exerce à une pêche miraculeuse où on découvre les manières de perdre le poisson péché. En un temps de superproduction artistique, ce raffinement tend à exercer l'habileté des simples pêcheurs pour les rendre capables de lancer leur filet plus haut.
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> À ce niveau de recherche et de découverte, les plus habiles des poètes sont vaincus, dépassés, alors que le public ordinaire de la prosodie s'en voit depuis longtemps refuser l'entrée. ("Olivier Larronde" 133-4)

For Olivier de Magny, who was one of the members of the jury for the *Prix de Littérature*, the impenetrability of Larronde's art is announced with the title to his first poetic collection. In the most sustained discussion of Larronde's poetry to date, de Magny explains:

> Le titre déjà du premier recueil annonce ses poèmes comme des *barricades mystérieuses*, et sa poésie comme un art clos. A l'instant même où ils commencent à nous séduire – car ils sont de prime abord entreprises de séduction – ces poèmes s'affirment obstacles à leur réduction en quoi que ce soit d'autre qu'eux-mêmes. Ils obligent bientôt le lecteur qui s'y engage comme en n'importe quelle lecture à s'en retirer, à prendre sa distance (presqu'une distance optique) afin que sa lecture devienne regard sur ces merveilleux pièges pour l'attention, regard posé sur ces très denses objets de poésie. Ils écartent en même temps, toute approche critique autre qu'une sorte de description conjecturale. ("Précieuse" 123)

Our intention is not – as Rinaldi might fear – to "corset" Larronde's works with commentary ("Peigneur" 137). Instead, we will propose a simple means for rescuing Larronde from the critical silence to which he has been condemned for too long. Preferring a paratextual tact – to move from the outside of the poems inward–, we will point to the first part of a two-part essay Larronde wrote on the style of Giacometti following the publication of his second collection of poems as a place to begin.

The ties between Larronde and Giacometti were first publicized in June 1959 at an exhibit that opened at the Galérie Maeght in Paris. Displayed were 32 drawings by Giacometti – nearly all of them of Larronde and all of them to be published in an illustrated edition of *Rien voilà l'ordre*. When Marc Barbezat published this second illustrated volume of Larronde's poetry later that same year, the ties between the poet and the artist sparked the commentary of critics. Bachelard, for example, speaks of Giacometti's statuettes, of the artist's sketches of Larronde, and of his own admiration for the book he had been sent in his letter of 1959 to the poet:

J'ai vu dans la vitrine de Maeght les figurines d'Alberto Giacometti. Elles tiennent pour des filaments intérieurs. Dans les dessins de votre album, c'est en mille traits que le visage est créé. Chaque trait vit dans une simplicité curieuse. Et puis de toutes vies qui tiennent – c'est le cas de le dire – à un fil. Voici qu'un être vivant sort de ce beau papier blanc, emplit la page, s'enfonce dans le cerveau de ceux qui savent rêver comme un Giacometti. On finit par se croire au niveau d'un grand œil qui sait dire ce qu'il voit. Dites à Giacometti mon admiration.

J'envoie un mot rapide à Marc Barbezat, car il n'est pas commun d'éditer un tel livre.

Recevez donc avec Giacometti, avec Marc Barbezat, l'expression de mon triple enthousiasme. ("Lettre" 66)

The proximity and depth of the ties between the creative output of the two men are furthermore emphasized by Connolly in an essay published in the scholarly journal *Art and Literature* the year after Larronde's death. "[I]t is [. . .] clear," Connolly writes, "that [Larronde] was aiming at a genuine abstract poetry, that the tie with Giacometti's art was close and deep." ("Soirs" 94)

Besides the critics, however, Larronde himself recognized parallels between his work and the art of the famous sculptor in a short essay which was first published by Aimé Maeght in 1961 in a volume devoted to Giacometti, *Derrière le miroir*.[2] On the surface, Larronde's essay, titled "Alberto Giacometti dégaine," is a celebration of Giacometti's style. But considered in light of what we already know about Larronde's poetry, the essay can also be read as a celebration of his own art as a poet. Indeed, it offers a means better to understand it.

Positioning the work of Giacometti at the opposite pole of what he sees as the frenzied self-expression of today, in the first paragraph of the essay Larronde praises the elder artist's embrace of Art for Art's sake:

À l'opposé du point où nous sommes d'expression forcenée, quand tout fait office de langage, l'ouvrage d'Alberto Giacometti n'est fait que pour être fait. Lui défait à peu près content qu'il en fait: ce qui s'impose est la différence sans raison. (1)

[2] Besides Larronde's essay, this volume includes essays on Giacometti by Léna Leclercq and Isaku Yanaihara. The essay can also be found in the section titled "Médailles" of Larronde's posthumously published *L'Arbre à lettres*, where it is preceded by three other short essays: two on Pascal, "Mal-Saint Pascal," and "Au Café de Flore"; and one on Nerval, "Gérard de Nerval sur les plans relatifs de l'Histoire ou Quand on est fou, pas pour longtemps!"

In the second paragraph, the poet develops the idea that Giacometti "unmakes" about as much as he "makes." He emphasizes that for every extant work by Giacometti there at one time existed many more. But all of these other works were sloughed off as part of the creative process. For Larronde, the very seriousness of Giacometti's art derives not from the end result that is attained but rather from the process of reduction that has lead to this end:

Il faut penser en appréciant quelque chose de lui aux dizaines d'autres mêmes choses qui fructifièrent là dans le climat de ses mains. Pensez aux écorces nombreuses qui en tombèrent . . . non pas ébauche et brouillons, mais bel et bien ouvrage d'art ni plus ni moins coté des amateurs, qu'il s'offrit seul. Il s'en offrit le travail, pur et peu simple, comme le plus grave. Imaginons leur succession qui peut être le plus grave dans son art.

Moving from the husks that – with the unnamed tools of the second paragraph which are held in Giacometti's hands – fall away from each of the artist's works, indeed that *constitute* his work, Larronde's reminder in the first sentence of paragraph three that ethics is man's working tool bridges his discussion of the artist's technique with that of art and epithets:

On oublie pour la totémiser que la morale est un ustensile de travail chez les hommes, chez un homme. Si l'œuvre de quelqu'un est plus exemplaire que qualitative, c'est tout simplement qu'elle est inqualifiable. On ne peut donner que l'exemple quand il n'y a pas encore d'épithète.

The poet extends the latter discussion into paragraph four, which is the heart of the essay and also the point of intersection between the tactile and the verbal, between art and poetry, between Giacometti's world and his own:

Là le style. Une manière de dire touche du doigt ce qui mérite un nom, l'innommable encore. Aussi la page réussie du poète sera possédée sous tous ses angles par un seul mot, son nom proprement chez des gens plus forts, plus fins. (1-2)

With Giacometti's style thus pointed to – albeit still unnamed –, Larronde slowly concludes his remarks in the remaining three paragraphs of the essay's first part. Where the essay begins with a discussion of Giacometti's art of using art to abolish only slightly less than what he makes, it ends, is "wrapped up" with the image of a mummy, the result of Giacometti's "art" preserved forever:

Ce plus qu'échange avec Alberto Giacometti commence avec son art d'employer l'art d'en défaire juste moins qu'il n'en fait. Pas la discrimination dont le grossier processus et les recettes ont une sauvagerie, dérisoire à côté de cet art.

Nous devant ce qu'offre Giacometti, tâchons d'enchaîner la figure aux dynasties d'autres objets qu'il s'est donnés sans nous à l'endroit qu'elle fait.

Cela vous laisse de temps en temps (des siècles pour sa terre) quelque momie de son travail munie du faste subtil des transfigurations qui se devaient d'en finir avec tout l'appareil des contradictions, des contrariétés. (2)

How does the discussion of art and epithets at the heart of the first part of Larronde's essay on the style of his illustrator shed light on his own poetic works? If we strip it of its verbiage, exposed at its center we find the sentence that addresses the "successful" page of the poet and, by extension, of Larronde himself: "Aussi la page réussie du poète sera possédée sous tous ses angles par un seul mot, son nom proprement, chez des gens plus forts, plus fins." Now this sentence *revealing* possession leaves open to question the referent of the third person singular possessive adjective, "son." The awkwardly worded English translation of the sentence, published in volume 10 of *Art and Literature* reads "Also the poet's successful page will be possessed from all its angles by a single word, *his proper name*, among stranger people, subtler." ("Alberto Giacometti Draws" 107, emphasis added) But it might also be interpreted to mean the following: "Also the poet's successful page will be possessed from all its angles by a single word, *its name appropriately*, among stronger, more subtle people." (emphasis added) Read as revealing a possessive relationship between the successful page and its name, between the poem and its title, it offers a means potentially to open the "interlocking puzzle rings" that, for Connolly at least, Larronde's poems represent.

In her recent book on poems and their titles, poetry critic Anne Ferry points out that grammatically speaking, the title of a poem acts as a statement, a comment, an observation, or a signal about the poem. It is inseparable from the reader's experience of the whole yet not contained in the text. "Even though we [. . .] understand the title to be chosen by the poet as a feature of the poem's design," Ferry explains, "we make a perfectly ordinary distinction between words *about* the poem and the words *of* the poem. Most concretely, the grammar of the title embodies

that difference [. . .]" (*Title* 211) How then is the Larrondian poem possessed from all of its angles by the statement, comment, observation, or signal that is its title? Besides this relationship of possession, what – if anything – can the title tell us about the poem?

Before considering these questions, it should be noted that not all of Larronde's poems even have titles, let alone one-word titles. Larronde's claim is thus potentially useful for unlocking only some of the "puzzle rings" of his verse. But of those poems that do have one-word titles, which to choose to test the validity of his claim? The choice is not difficult, for Larronde has given a different title to each of his named poems except for two: a poem titled "Communiante" and its variant, published side-by-side – as though in communion – in Larronde's first collection, *Les Barricades mystérieuses*. This unique example of two different pages of poetry sharing the same title is the ideal testing ground for the relationship of possession described by Larronde. For his claim to be valid, the relationship should be the same in both versions.

The first version of the poem is a quatrain:

Savante aux battements des ailes et des cils,
Pour une jeune fille un envol est facile
Dans la barbe du mur d'avoir passé les doigts:
La feuille est vite plume à ses talons adroits. (28)

Coupled with its curious syntax, the level of abstraction in the poem makes interpretation difficult. But with its title as a window into it, portrayed in the poem we see a girl – her innocence suggested by her youth and her fluttering eyelashes. She reaches for the host wafer ("la feuille") through a notch in the wall ("la barbe du mur"), and her soul is guaranteed elevation (suggested by the ornithologically related nouns "ailes," "envol," and "plume") in the process. Without the noun "Communiante" to "possess" it, Larronde's poem seems little more than an ill-strung set of words. With it, however, it is a "page réussie."

We see a similar scenario in the ten-line variant of the same poem.[3] Only here the communion scene is portrayed with greater detail. With this added detail, it also takes on a darker tone:

[3] This version of the poem was actually published first, in 1945, in the *édition préoriginale* of *Les Barricades mystérieuses*, volume 10 of Barbezat's journal *L'Arbalète*. Note that the title of the journal serves as the basis for Larronde's play on words in the title of his third poetic collection, *L'Arbre à lettres*.

Abusant du trousseau, facile
Est un envol, pour peu agreste,
Verdissante, l'hostie cueillie
Dans la barbe où pèchent ces doigts
La récolte orne tes chevilles,
Ignorant peu d'où vient l'invite
De chaînes couvre un maladroit
Mais plumage est bientôt la feuille
À vos yeux, jeunes de tout sexe
Érudit à battre des cils. (29)

Here, Larronde's use of the noun "hostie" in the third line reinforces the relationship of possession between the title and the poem that we see established in the quatrain. But in its comparative clarity, this longer version of the poem also better captures the hypocrisy it stages. From its first line, the added details of what the young girl wears and how she wears it ("Abusant du trousseau") reveal the scene as one of abuse. As for the young girl portrayed in the facing quatrain, elevation is easy ("facile/Est un envol"; "plumage est bientôt la feuille"). But here we see the fluttering of eyelids less as the innocent act of a child than as part of a role: where dressing up for church, reaching out, fishing for the host ("la récolte") through the notch in the wall ("Dans la barbe où pèchent ces doigts") are small, indeed easy prices to pay for sins already committed only as long as future sins are all guaranteed absolution with the same facility.

And yet because of its darker tone, because in its published presentation the second, longer version of the poem faces the first, it invites a rereading of the first in light of it. We thus recognize, in retrospect, that the young communion taker of the first is really no more innocent in her role-play than that of the second. What, in our first reading, seemed mere innocence is, when rereading the quatrain in light of the dizain, that much more abusive, for she plays her part so well. "*Savante* aux battements des ailes et des cils" (emphasis added), she knows what innocence can earn her and therefore communes in hypocrisy with the young girl of the second: a different angle of her own self. An example of what we saw earlier termed by Pomerand as "une pêche miraculeuse où on découvre les manières de perdre le poisson péché," this poem – really two poems possessed, in communion with one another through a single title – dramatizes the *rewards* of fishing.

Just as with her fingers the young girl portrayed in both poems is empowered by faith in the guarantee of absolution, of the elevation of her soul through the taking of communion and successfully fishes for the host wafer through the notch in the wall, so too must we, as future critics of Larronde empowered by a useful key to unlocking his poetry have faith of our own: that awaiting us in our rereadings of – our potential self-elevation through – Larronde lies the miracle of discovery.

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