Cathal Kerins

Reflections on language as an inadequate medium of expression between people and things with regard to the work of Francis Ponge

Ponge does not seek a medium for expressing the relationship per se between people and things. Rather he seeks to highlight the agency and unreliability of language itself by using objective descriptions of people and things in order to demonstrate language's inherent subjectivity. In effect, he is trying to warn us about the agency of language itself. However, he must do this in a way that is entirely impartial. Therefore, we must ultimately become aware of the agency of language on our own without any allusions to this effect from the poet. This leaves two obstacles for Ponge: how to avoid hypocritically implicating himself in exactly this which he accuses language of doing (i.e. by warning an individual of the agency of language, he becomes agent himself); how to construct a mechanism that is absent of bias, both that of his own and that of language itself, that will bring about an autonomous realization within the reader. To overcome these obstacles Ponge invents a new genre which he exemplifies throughout his chef d'oeuvre *Le Parti pris des choses*, a genre that he calls *Objeu*.

Objeu is a neologism coined by Ponge from the amalgamation of "objet" and "jeu de mot". It is the basis for the invention of an ingenious writing method which Ponge refers to as a "création métalogique".[1] The method involves the creation of a verbal mechanism by which Ponge hopes will bring about a balance of equivalences between the order of words and the order of things.[2] This verbal mechanism, the "création métalogique", is a construction of text that is as much about its verbal self as it is about the thing which it describes, or as Greene explains it: "a piece of writing whose internal relations are all".[3] Furthermore, Ponge notes

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[1] Robert W. Greene, "Francis Ponge, Metapoet" *MLN, Vol.85, No.4* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1970) pp. 576
[2] Robert W. Greene, "Francis Ponge, Metapoet" pp. 575
[3] Robert W. Greene, "Francis Ponge, Metapoet" pp. 576

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that within this genre the best poem is that which will exhibit itself via this verbal mechanism

method to be "le plus structuré, le plus dégagé, le plus transposé, le plus 'froid' possible"[4].

Michael Riffaterre hits the nail on the head when he states that the "prose de Ponge

n'est jamais autre chose que l'expansion textuelle d'un mot-noyau"[5]. This "mot-noyau" as

described by Riffaterre, I believe, is the source or the focal point of the "création

métalogique" around which all the other parts of the mechanism are constructed. Ponge plays

with the various significances of this "mot-noyau", or what he calls "l'épaisseur sémantique"[6]

which contributes to the lexical overlap and tautology in much of Ponge's prose.[7]

The notion of the mot-noyau is clearly exemplified in Ponge's *L'huître*[8]. Ponge notes

how the form of the text is proportional to the oyster.[9] He adds that the form is that of a close

block of text which represents the closed physique of an oyster. Furthermore, he outlines the

important internal structure of the poem too which is divided into three separate

descriptions[10]: the exterior of the oyster; the interior of the oyster; the small final body of text

which is comprised of only two lines which is emblematic of the size of the pearl, itself

perhaps a metaphor for the "mot-noyau". Therefore, it could be said that the form of the

poem is effectively a reflection of the principle of the "création métalogique" method

whereby the poet has brought about a balance of equivalences between said object and the

text.

Furthermore, the circumflex in the word "huître" is a typographic element of which

Ponge takes full advantage. Although the circumflex is clearly symbolic of the open oyster,

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[4] Francis Ponge, Le Savon (Paris: Gallimard, 1967) pp. 125
[5] Michael Riffaterre, "III. Ponge Tautologique ou Le Fonctionnement du Texte," Ponge Inventeur et Classique (Paris: Union Générale d'Édition, 1977) pp. pp.66
[6] Michael Riffaterre, "III. Ponge Tautologique ou Le Fonctionnement du Texte," pp. 78
[7] Michael Riffaterre, "III. Ponge Tautologique ou Le Fonctionnement du Texte," pp. 76
[8] Francis Ponge, Le Parti pris des choses (Paris: Gallimard, 1942) pp. 43
[9] Francis Ponge, Entretiens de Francis Ponge avec Philippe Sollers (Paris: Seuil, 1970) pp. 102
[10] Francis Ponge, Entretiens… pp. 102

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Ponge notes[11] that his use of descriptive words was much influenced by the fact that these words contained a circumflex, hinting that this was perhaps as valid a reason as their semantic meaning. This illustrates that the "mot-noyau" is not restricted to the semantic meanings of words but can also be subjected to typographic expansions such as inscriptive resemblance and text formulation.

Philippe Sollers also touches on an aspect of this verbal mechanism when he refers to the process he calls "anagrammatisation"[12] in Ponge's work. However, this I believe, only alludes to one aspect of the "procédé"[13] which encompasses more than just text and phonic density and repetition but also depth, concurrent progression and retrogression, individualization, differentiation and deliberate ambiguity.

If we take the latter, deliberate ambiguity, and we take into account Ponge's fondness for neologisms and his attentiveness to the malleability of words[14], it is clear that Ponge exploits this ambiguity to demonstrate the inherent unreliability of language. Ponge plays a lot with the ambiguous meanings of words. For example, Ponge invokes ambiguity in his poem *La cigarette*[15] with the very calculated use of the word "choient" which is the present tense third person plural of both "choyer" and "choir", meaning "to pamper" and "to drop" respectively, when he alludes to the action taken by the ashes of the cigarette upon themselves. Ponge employs both these meanings in this context to highlight the unreliability of language.

Ponge also makes use of employing figurative language in a literal sense to the same ends. In *Escargot*,[16] Ponge exploits the figurative phrase "baver d'orgueil". We encounter the

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[11] Francis Ponge, Entretiens… pp. 105
[12] Francis Ponge, Entretiens… pp. 101
[13] Philip Sollers, Entretiens… (1970) pp. 101
[14] Greene, "Francis Ponge, Metapoet" pp. 585
[15] Francis Ponge, Le Parti pris des choses pp. 40
[16] Francis Ponge, Le Parti pris des choses pp. 54

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phrase early in the poem only to come across it again later, re-employed in a literal sense which is achieved by replacing the verb "baver" with its nominal counterpart "bave" which would normally seem odd, except that in this instance, the literal sense sits perfectly within the context of the poem. This again, is another example of Ponge making language seem unfamiliar to the reader in order to alert him/her to its unreliable nature. This unreliability and ambiguity serves to fluster the reader who is caught off guard, unsure whether to interpret the text in a literal, figurative or symbiotic way. Effectively, he is providing an obstacle to the reader on which the reader must reflect to overcome. However, there is no answer. Ponge hopes only that this reflection may be enough for the reader to have their own autonomous thought and ultimately question the role of language and its instrumentality.

On one hand Ponge is employing ambiguity to highlight the opacity of words to the reader and on the other hand he grapples with them inferring from them their etymological concreteness in an attempt to disperse their opacity and agency which would enable a balance of equivalences to take place by giving back to the reader a certain control over the represented words. Rather than allowing the insidious agency of language to influence us unwittingly, this etymological concreteness enables us to understand and distinguish the depth of language's influence.

However, the "création métalogique" is not solely defined by static constituent elements. The technique is itself capable of movement. Inherent in the method are the movement of both progression and retrogression. This stark relationship, between two opposing yet in Ponge's eyes symbiotic movements, is evident in his poem *Les arbres se défont à l'intérieur d'une sphère de brouillard*[17] where language is both a historical and living phenomenon, as is evidenced in the in the reference to the "plus jeune âge" which

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[17] Francis Ponge, Le Parti pris des choses pp. 45

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relates to both antiquity and the youthfulness of a growing tree; where there is both genesis

and death, as clear from the fact that "les feuilles leur sont dérobées" and are already

undergoing oxidization due to the retreat of the nutrients away from them within the tree;

where temporal references abound, highlighted by the use of "août" or "est devenue", the

latter being a reference to evolution and, in a *soutenu* sense, to the future.

Ultimately, Ponge is less concerned about the relationship between people and things

than he is about the relationship that people and things have with language. His "créations

métalogiques" serve as the verbal mechanism within an original genre, *Objeu*, which is

designed to make language seem unfamiliar to the reader and thus instigate an independent

evaluation of language's agency. This is brought about through the effective balance of

equivalences Ponge incorporates into the method which limits in equal measure both the

agency of language and that of Ponge himself.

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