

In Search of Lost Conversations

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***Models of Collaboration in Nineteenth-Century French Literature: Several Authors, One Pen*, ed. Seth Whidden (Farnham, Surrey: Ashgate, 2009), 187pp., £55.00.**

Helen Abbott, *Between Baudelaire and Mallarmé: Voice, Conversation and Music* (Farnham, Surrey: Ashgate, 2009), 245 pp., £55.00.

The nineteenth-century may well strike us now as an age of lost conversations, mere snatches of which we find recorded in diaries, most notably perhaps those of the Goncourt brothers, or in accounts of various salons and literary cafés, or in such fleeting references as make their way into reviews, autobiographies or letters. We might get an inkling, for instance, of Georges Cuvier's seductive use of his voice through notes taken during his lectures and particularly during his debates with other scientists, or of Stéphane Mallarmé's conversation at his Tuesday gatherings through reminiscences left by his disciples or occasionally opponents. We might hear echoes of Gautier's witty chatter in articles such as that by Charles Asselineau, in the *Revue fantastique* of September 1861: "la conversation de Gautier mériterait une étude spéciale. Sa mémoire prodigieuse, nourrie de lectures inouïes, chargée d'anecdotes incroyables et de souvenirs de voyage, sa gaîté, tenaient attentif pendant des heures l'auditoire le plus impatient et le plus vif." Or we might get some idea of Delacroix's conversational skills when Baudelaire relates the following anecdote: "Il commençait par vous dire, quand vous entriez chez lui: 'Nous ne causerons pas ce matin, n'est-ce pas? ou que très peu, très peu.'"

Et puis il bavardait pendant trois heures. Sa causerie était brillante, subtile, mais pleine de faits, de souvenirs et d'anecdotes; en somme, une parole nourissante." And there are various accounts of the lectures an ailing Baudelaire gave in Belgium or of those in which Mallarmé announced to perplexed audiences in Oxford and Cambridge that French prosody had forever been altered by experiments in *vers libre*. But recapturing more precisely the quality of those lost voices, both what they said and how they spoke, seems an elusive and utopian goal. Two recent studies published by Ashgate Press, however, reconsider on the one hand the creative value of such conversations and on the other the role of the spoken voice beneath and within the written text. Each of them, moreover, displays on the cover an illustration recalling the shared spaces of this kind of conversation, Helen Abbott's volume featuring an engraving of the Brasserie des Martyrs while Seth Whidden's shows Jean Gigoux's painting of the artist's studio, complete with sleeping dog as if symbolically to suggest the twenty-first century reader vaguely aware of voices speaking words that may now be beyond recall.

The question of how such exchanges, in the form of discussions or letters, could produce literary texts, is the focus of the collection of essays by a range of scholars that Seth Whidden has edited. It opens with Whidden's well-focused meditation on the nature of literary collaboration, of the ways in which works, even those purporting to be monographs, produce their dominant voice through a plethora of written or spoken exchanges, or what Blaise Cronin terms "a series of (essentially unplanned) interactions distributed over space and time" (quoted in Whidden, 9). Certainly Cronin's own surveys of academic life in Bloomington, Indiana, wittily reveal the power of such collaboration, witting or in his case largely unwitting or even (post-facto) unwilling. Indeed, as Joan DeJean argues, the notion of the individual author may be "the most flagrant misapprehension in today's vision of the history of French literature" (19). Her brief but powerful essay (which she nevertheless signs as single author) offers an authoritative rejection of the notion of single authorship for many works, especially of the early modern period, raising a series of difficulties associated with the study of literary

collaboration. A second, equally brief, essay by John R. Iveson also serves to establish a context beyond the nineteenth-century, by evoking the conviviality of the French Enlightenment, an age marked above all perhaps by its collaborative endeavors. As a closing bookend to these two openers, Daphné de Marneffe offers yet another riff on the central theme, this time both spatial and temporal, with a well-researched survey of small Belgian literary periodicals from the modernist and avant-garde movements of the early 1920s, bringing alive a world of cafés and cabarets, of ephemeral but influential journals, and of a productive exchange of ideas and convictions.

The heart of this collection of essays, however, is firmly situated in nineteenth-century France, indeed, in the closing decades of the century, for if Anthony Glinoe explores the strategies of the cenacle that gathered around Hugo and Vigny in the early days of Romanticism, most of the essays draw their material from the century's last three decades. Moreover, Glinoe's study reveals that for all French Romanticism's tactics of solidarity, its apparently warm dedications and almost frenetic references to other members of the group, its "abundance of signs of allegiance to and mythification of the cenacle" (52), the Romantic writer remains essentially a figure of isolation, and never more so than when surrounded and apparently supported by his or her peers. Thus, Glinoe argues, the race to glory is shared, but the glory itself goes to the individual alone.

Nothing could be more sharply at variance with the polished collaboration of Emile Erckmann and Alexandre Chatrian who, as Julia Przybos reveals in a characteristically well-honed analysis, blended their different life experiences and skills to uphold a central and unequivocal message, that of living life to the full, convinced that there would be no afterlife. The hyphenation of the two authors' family names becomes a symbol for an understated but nonetheless telling rejection of the race to individual glory, replaced here by an acceptance of the fact, central in this case to both narrative and narration, that it often takes two to find fulfillment.

If making sense of life dominates the Erckmann-Chatrian collaboration, it is often the desire to respond to a death that brings writers together. Pascal Durand takes as his focus the genre of the "Tombeau," the collec-

tion of literary tributes to a recently deceased colleague. The example he uses is one of the most famous, the anthology of some 80 poems (ranging, as Durand delights in reminding us, from the embarrassingly banal to the truly sublime), dedicated to the memory of Théophile Gautier. This is a quite different form of collaboration from that of, say, Erckmann-Chatrian, since each writer, despite the initial prosodic and thematic limitations placed on his or her contribution, wrote in silent isolation, not adding any kind of input to the contributions of others.

While some of the contributions to Gautier's "Tombeau" were not surprisingly more or less imaginative and admiring pastiches of the poet's style, in itself a kind of collaboration, overt parody offers more fertile and certainly more amusing ground for working with others while working someone else over. Seth Whidden's own essay turns to the often obscene verses of the Cercle Zutique to trace some unexpected variations on this particular form of collaborative gesture before moving on to investigate a much wider question, that of collaborations between poets and painters, most notably that of Mallarmé and Manet working together on Poe's "The Raven." Whidden touches here on a broader and more complex area of collaboration, that of translation, a field that is clearly too full of prickles to be dealt with in this particular volume but that is rightly pinpointed as related to the issues under discussion.

The interplay of the verbal and the visual is, however, further developed in Joseph Acquisto's exploration of what he terms "the case of André Gill and Louis de Gramont." Here we find that ragtag group of poets, artists, and café lizards known, at least to themselves, as the *Hydropathes*, the haters of water. Acquisto's subtly argued study of their collaborative volume insists on the central difficulty inherent in such a venture, for "in order to preserve the texts or the spirit of the cabaret scene, the poets have natural recourse to the printed volume of poetry, but once they graft their verses onto that tradition, the uniqueness of the venture is lost along with the traces of the poetic process" (101). As he argues, moreover, however much the cabaret poets are celebrated for mediating between bourgeois and bohemian culture, middle-class individualism had by the end of the

century become so deeply entrenched as to be inescapable for artists and poets of the time.

The primacy of the individual over the group dominates the next essay, too, which studies the fact that although the Naturalists also pursued a collaborative agenda, seeking not to uphold a certain culture but to introduce new ways of thinking and writing, their underlying goal was to discover themes and approaches that would distinguish them as individuals from the great novelists who had preceded them. Although Jennifer K. Wolter's survey of the *Soirées de Médan* treads familiar territory, it offers this collection of essays another aspect of the topic of collaboration, that associated with the cleft stick of promoting a certain shared ideology while maintaining individual identity. Frédéric Canovas's chapter, which returns to the subject of word and image collaboration, incidentally raises the question of the order of the essays, which seems to be primarily made on chronological grounds, as though there were some teleological development never fully revealed or analyzed within the collection itself. Groupings around schools, genres, or specific kinds of collaboration, such as that between word and image, might have facilitated the reader's task while strengthening the book's overarching argument. Canovas's piece delves into the background of the illustrations produced by Maurice Denis for both Verlaine's collection *Sagesse* and Gide's *Le Voyage d'Urien*. There is a useful contrast here, for while Verlaine's active collaboration with Denis was minimal, that between Denis and Gide was both close and sustained, a fact echoed in the artist's subsequent choice of the term "décoration" rather than "illustration" for his part of the contribution, suggesting a more active and imaginative role. As Canovas argues and as is borne out by the work itself, Denis was indeed able to create a new type of visual language in *le Voyage d'Urien*. It is unfortunate that no reproductions appear in Whidden's edition: it is hard to become convinced of this argument without recourse to the illustrations, which are not widely available in libraries but which can, as Canovas indicates in a note, be accessed online through Gallica (<http://gallica.bnf.fr>). (But this raises unstated though by now fa-

miliar problems of seeing something on screen versus perceiving it on paper, as a virtual rather than the physical construct the artist had in mind.)

In her essay Pamela Genova returns to the area of the late-nineteenth-century review, a field in which she has shown herself to be deeply versed through her fine monograph on symbolist journals. Here she turns her attention to *La Revue Wagnérienne*, rehearsing the complex path of Wagner's fame in France and the rich blend of figures with whom it was associated. Far from being the in-house journal of a group of dilettante devotees to Wagner, the review, as Genova insists, was an "important voice of literary Symbolism" (147) and a vehicle for one of the central debates of the time, that which sought to explore, refine, and harness the tensions between literature and music. If it is associated above all with Edouard Dujardin, Genova also indicates the roles played by other contributors, notably Teodor de Wyzewa and Houston Stewart Chamberlain. While it would have been interesting to learn more about how the collaboration operated, Genova provides a scintillating view of the outcome of that joint endeavor.

The final chapter in the nineteenth-century section of the book is a typically hard-hitting, amusing and well-researched piece by Lawrence R. Schehr, with an equally characteristic title: "Rhyparographers: Les Frères Goncourt and Monstrous Writing." The brothers are first seen projected into the twenty-first century, frantically blogging and self-publishing electronically in their bicephalous endeavor of dirty writing. While the chapter is primarily an insightful reading of the product of their collaboration, in this case the brothers' 1867 novel *Manette Salomon*, rather than a study of the act of collaboration itself, this is a lively presentation of how the Goncourt brothers found their single voice "at the expense of their own novel's aesthetic vision" (166).

Given what Schehr terms twenty-first-century readers' familiarity with multiple authorship, rhizomatic productions, and shared writing spaces, it comes as something of a shock to find a work dedicated to analyzing collaboration ironically created by writers apparently working alone. Apart from Julia Przybos's passing reference to Schehr's use of the term bicephalous, I found no traces here of contributors reading and reacting to es-

says by the other scholars, no confirmation of or contrast with the other scholars' findings, no concluding debate on what had been collectively discovered through this series of separate explorations. Even a brief section after each chapter set out as a discussion between editor and writer would have been an imaginative and appropriate touch. As a result, for all the value of the individual pieces, the whole falls short of the aim implicit in the title, that of revealing the process as well as the product, and it leaves this reader at least wondering if it might not have been better conceived as a monograph, in which the writer could have filled in some of the more glaring gaps – Gautier and Nerval, for instance, or Dumas and his stable of hacks, or collaborations between publishers like Hetzel and the writers he invited to contribute to his collection of books for children. Such a monograph would have provided transitions between the chapters, references back and forth among the various sections, and a conclusion tying it all together, if merely to insist on the impossibility of any kind of neat knot binding such a heterogeneous cluster of rhizomes.

The question of process is central to Helen Abbott's monograph, which puts a quite different kind of collaboration under the microscope, that of reader and poet. She is above all interested in the poem as something to be voiced, whether silently, in the head, or aloud in the solitude of the reader's room, or recited to a group of friends, or performed to an audience of strangers. How do poems change when attention is paid to how they feel on the mouth and the tongue, as something created not just by the mind but also by the body?

If Baudelaire and Mallarmé have been selected as her two models here, it is above all because they offer such a large body of critical in addition to creative writing, allowing for a more sharply focused analysis than that offered for instance by a similar study of Verlaine, whose poetry certainly indicates a fascination with the spoken voice but whose mind was not given to the kinds of scrutiny furnished by his more cerebral compatriots. Drawing not merely on the large body of literature devoted to her two chosen writers, but also on such areas as prosody and neuroscience, Abbott investigates the ways in which both poets "contend with the various resonances that are established

between different senses, sounds, meanings and sensations created by words” (6) and traces to Mallarmé the beginning of a marked shift in poetry toward a greater emphasis on the sensation of language. She convincingly demonstrates that the aesthetics of voice revealed in the works of her two poets counters claims that the dominance of vocal practices had been dealt a death blow by the rise of printing. Both poets, in fact, were determined to find ways of capturing within poetry echoes of the spoken word, not merely by continuing Romanticism’s enlarging of the lexical possibilities available to them, but also by finding ways of reproducing vocal sounds.

As has often been noted, both poets were drawn to music, and as Heath Lees has recently convincingly demonstrated, Mallarmé at least had a firm grounding in basic musical techniques and theory. Abbott uses this shared fascination to argue that “by bringing music back into such close contact with poetry on an aesthetic level, and by granting it the same authoritative status as rhetoric or prosody, for ‘governing’ the poetic art, Baudelaire and Mallarmé undermine any assumption that the reading of poetry can be a purely individual and silent activity” (47). The influence of Edgar Allan Poe, whom both translated and revered, is also usefully adduced, above all through his definition of words as movements created in the air. After an excellent section on prosody, rhetoric and music, Abbott moves on to explore more specifically the role of the body in the performance of poetry, as her two poets conceived it, especially with regard to the special effects the voice can create. There are sparkling sections here on the dynamics of the voice, on the conventions of prose poetry, on the challenges of representing laughter in poetry (as Mallarmé for instance does so beautifully and memorably in several poems, most notably perhaps “Feuillet d’Album” but also in “Autre Eventail,” and as Baudelaire does far more grumpily in “Semper Eadem”). This in turn leads to an ambitious if all too short exploration of “Un coup de dés” as performance and more precisely as a complex response to vocal practices. Here one would have welcomed a reference to Mallarmé’s Australian contemporary Chris Brennan, whose brilliant pastiche of the “Coup de dés,” the *Prose-Vers-Poster-Algebraic-Symbolico-Riddle: Musicopoema tographoscope*, is presented

as a piece for "eight voices, one Bass, one Tenor, one Soprano, four Baritone, one Alto, & no Audience."

Abbott is particularly good at examining the various traces of voice – laughter, shouting, weeping, exclamations, conversations, and so forth – in specific poems, looking at the multiple resonances set in train not just by individual poems but by individual readings and re-readings of these poems. But, as she is also eager to insist, while the poet may control the auditory and oral space of the poem, external voices have a habit of infiltrating it. Think, for example, of the voice suddenly proclaiming in Mallarmé's ear the words "La Pénultième est morte" or the voices filtering through to the child's cradle from the library next door in Baudelaire's "La Voix". This threat, she argues, is countered in Baudelaire by strategies of personification, in Mallarmé by a conscious recognition of how his poetry is affected by such alien voices. Thus, in "Le Chat" Baudelaire eulogizes the wordless voice of a cat, acknowledging its penetration of his mind but responding to that invasion by a virtuoso display of his own verbal skills in recreating and thereby dominating it. In contrast Mallarmé seems more passive, recording the various voices of objects in his room, for instance, without the same apparent need to subjugate them, or welcoming Méry's solution to his search for a word that will most adequately evoke her by offering instead a kiss.

This investigation of foreign voices leads naturally into a section on music, that outsider that most threatened to take over poetry's role. As Abbott is keenly aware, the musical metaphor in both poets' work is "a precarious and multi-faceted one which requires detailed attention" (184). She facilitates such attention by setting their poetry in the context of contemporary prosodic theory especially as demonstrated by Théodore de Banville in his *Petit Traité de poésie française* and René Ghil in his *Traité du verbe*, while acknowledging that there is little direct correlation between Ghil's eccentric theories and Mallarméan practice. More interestingly, perhaps, she establishes parallels between some of their poems and particular elements of song practice, especially large-scale repetitive patternings. Here one might have liked more on the music inspired by both poets, but this particular study is already sufficiently complex and lengthy, and one can merely hope

that Abbott will turn to this topic in subsequent works. She has already shown the extent to which Baudelaire and Mallarmé exploit the closeness of singing voice to speaking voice.

If I have a small quibble, it concerns what we know about these poets' performances of their own poems, for while Abbott refers to these as "readings," the anecdotal evidence suggests that in both cases, that of Baudelaire to his young friends and of Mallarmé to those who attended the Tuesday gatherings, what took place was not a reading but a recitation from memory. It would have been interesting to read her speculations on the differences between the voice reading and the voice reciting, when as we know from theatrical praxis, the body plays such an important role in the act of remembering, especially through movement and specifically gesture.

That notwithstanding, this is a finely-written, well-researched, and firmly-argued exploration of an aspect of both poets that has not hitherto received sufficient attention. As such it makes not just a useful but a highly enjoyable contribution to our knowledge of Baudelaire and Mallarmé, of the period in which they wrote, and of poetry more generally.

Both studies, then, draw attention to the multiplicity of voices in a single text. If Thomas de Quincey could argue that "no one ever will unfold the capacities of his own intellect who does not at least chequer his life with solitude" and if the models of collaborative writing indicate that when all the discussion is done, someone still has to sit down alone and do the writing, it remains the case that that solitude is not silent but populated with voices. A.S. Byatt, evoking the "intense pleasure of reading" in her novel *Possession*, demands that we "Think of this: that the writer wrote alone and the reader read alone and they were alone with each other." These two studies reveal that such companionable solitude is most likely to be inhabited not just by Byatt's twosome, but by an innumerable and highly vocal crowd.

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