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1985

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Recommended Citation

Cranmer, Jean. "Escargots and Oysters on the Half Shell: Francis Ponge à la Carte." *Romanic Review* 76.4 (1985): 429-443.

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Jean Cranmer

ESCARGOTS AND OYSTERS ON THE HALF SHELL:
FRANCIS PONGE A LA CARTE

In the works of Francis Ponge, in particular *Le Parti pris des choses*, published in 1942, and *Pièces*, the third volume of *Le Grand Recueil*, published in 1961, there are several poems whose titles would seem more inspirational to the esthetics of the culinary arts than the poetic ones. In fact, it is possible to compose an entire "menu" from among these titles to include "L'Huître," "Escargots," "Les Olives," "La Crevette dans tous ses états" (although we discover that the poet prefers them boiled), a "Plat de poissons frits," "Le Morceau de viande," and "La Pomme de terre." For dessert there are "Les Mûres," "L'Orange," "L'Abricot," and "La figue (sèche)." Ponge even supplies "Le Pain," "Le Vin," "L'Assiette," and a place to dine, "Le Restaurant Lemeunier rue de la Chaussée d'Antin." *Bon appetit!*

The selection of these particular poems, from among the hundreds that Ponge has written, and the arrangement of them in a series admittedly introduces a considerable critical bias, which presupposes the existence of a structural model. Here, that model is drawn from the tradition of gastronomic literature, a tradition which, by way of etymological aside, can be traced all the way back to the first appearance of the word "gastronomy" as the title of a heroicomic poem on the culinary arts written by Arcestratus, a Greek poet of the fourth century B.C.¹ As might be expected, not all the poems conform to this bias, proposed on the evidence of titles alone, but many do, even if those aspects which make the apricot, for example, an item for human consumption, constitute only one facet of the many explored by the poet in his rendering of the object.

How then does Ponge treat these objects, when they are not considered as food? Is it possible to uncover what Roland Barthes called "une cohérence de signes,"² that is to say a language of ordered relationships, among the various texts that will allow for the formulation of a poetic system which characterizes the Pongian universe? A close reading of selected poems will provide the answers to these two questions.

In general, the objects referred to in the titles of the poetic "lexicon"³ above are explored by Ponge for at least three characteristics: form, movement, and environment. It is through its form, its movement, or

1. "Arcestrate," *Grand Larousse Encyclopédique*, 1960 ed.

2. Roland Barthes, *Critique et Vérité* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1966), p. 64.

3. I justify the use of the linguistic term here by the fact that the list of poems could also be read as a list of things, which, in turn, is but a list of words.

lack thereof, and its environment that the object expresses itself. Likewise, for Ponge, these same three characteristics determine the expression of the poem itself. Since they are different for each object, each poem differs from every other. The poet states in *Méthodes* that "chaque objet doit imposer au poème une forme rhétorique particulière. Plus de sonnets, d'odes, d'épigrammes: la forme même du poème soit en quelque sorte déterminée par son sujet."⁴ Despite this assertion, there are generalizations that can be made about the form of Ponge's poetry. First of all, most of his poems are written in prose rather than in traditional verse form, and, secondly, they tend to be descriptive in nature. In regard to this last observation, Ponge contends that his poems in fact fall somewhere between description and definition:

Ne pourrait-on imaginer une sorte d'écrits (nouveaux) qui, se situant à peu près entre les deux genres (définition et description), emprunteraient au premier son infailibilité, son indubitabilité, sa brièveté aussi, au second son respect de l'aspect sensoriel des choses.

(*Grand Recueil*, p. 11)

If ever Ponge has produced a writing which is respectful of the sensory aspect of things, it is certainly in "Plat de poissons frits" from *Pièces*. The very first line of the poem evokes "goût, vue, ouïe, odorat,"⁵ the instantaneous sensory impressions produced by the plate of fried fish. The poet places a great deal of importance on the preparation of the fish, "cuit à l'huile . . . un caramel de peau de poisson bien grillée au fond de la poêle" (*Pièces*, p. 121). The poet adds a Gidean dimension to the pleasure of eating by deferring gratification and savoring the moment of expectation, "cet instant safrané . . . / C'est alors, au moment qu'on s'apprête à déguster les filets encore vierges" (p. 121). This instant is further prolonged by the evocation of the town of Sète, a Mediterranean setting whose poetic etymology enriches the text with images from "Le Cimetière marin." By choosing this particular fishing port in the south of France, Ponge also indulges his appetite for playing with the phonology of language: *c'est alors* in the preceding quotation is echoed in *Sète alors* in the following one: "Sète alors que la haute fenêtre s'ouvre, que la voilure penche vertigineusement sur les flots" (p. 121). The port scene is made complete with the image of a lighthouse beaming its metaphorical reflection in a glass of "vin doré," which is within reach ("à notre portée"), but, like the lighthouse, never actually touched.

The poem seems calculated to whet appetites, both culinary and esthetic. To accomplish this, Ponge goes beyond the object itself, the plate of fried fish, to create a broader setting. The fish is the trigger that engages all of the senses responsible for the pleasure derived from eat-

4. Francis Ponge, *Le Grand Recueil* (Paris: Gallimard, 1961), Vol. II: *Méthodes*, p. 36. All subsequent references to this work will appear in the text.

5. Francis Ponge, *Pièces* (Paris: Editions Gallimard, 1962), p. 121. All subsequent references to this work will appear in the text.

ing. The image of the fishing boat bobbing among the waves with its sails clapping in the breeze is an important part of this enjoyment, bringing to mind, as it does, the freshness of the catch. Clearly Ponge's intention in this poem is to create, or to recreate, a gastronomic experience. The work is, in fact, reminiscent of a section of verse by Arcestratus, that "contriver of delicate dishes,"⁶ as he is called by Athenaeus in *The Deipnosophists*, in which he discusses the catching and preparation of the "Attic fish," the anchovy:

And take it fresh; just caught within the bays,
 The sacred bays of beautiful Phalerum.
 Good it is too, when by the sea-girt isle
 Of Rhodes you eat it, if it's not imported.
 And if you wish to taste it in perfection,
 Boil nettles with it — nettles whose green leaves
 On both sides crown the stem; put these in the dish
 Around the fish, then fry them in one pan,
 And mix in fragrant herbs well steep'd in oil.

(*The Deipnosophists*, p. 448)

The similarity between the two texts rests solely on the fact that both evoke the setting where the fish is caught and eaten, and both refer to the frying of the fish in oil. This is actually only one of a dozen or so of Arcestratus' "recipes" for fish dishes cited by Athenaeus in his own gastronomic work written some five centuries later.

Whether or not Ponge was familiar with the poetry of Arcestratus or the work of Athenaeus is not really the principal issue here. It seems highly likely, however, that he would have been, given his well-documented predilection for seeking the origin of things and words. What is certain from the juxtaposition of Ponge's text with that of the Greek poet is that the "Plat de poissons frits" falls well within the tradition of gastronomic literature, as we know it, from the time of Arcestratus.

In other works by Ponge, however, gastronomy plays a minor, almost incidental, role. For example, in "Le Pain" from *Le Parti pris des choses*, it is only in the last sentence of the poem that bread is treated as an object for consumption: "Mais brisons-là: car le pain doit être dans notre bouche moins objet de respect que de consommation."⁷ Otherwise, the crusty loaf is magnified by the poet to the scale of a small planet with its "vallées, crêtes, ondulations, crevasses" (p. 46). He seems particularly interested in the structure of the bread, in the planes of its hard outer surface as contrasted with the soft, sponge-like quality of its interior:

6. Athenaeus, *The Deipnosophists or Banquet of the Learned*, trans. C.D. Yonge (London: Henry G. Bohn, 1854), p. 448.

7. Francis Ponge, *Le Parti pris des choses* (Paris: Editions Gallimard, 1942), p. 46. All subsequent references to this work will appear in the text.

Et tous, ces plans dès lors si nettement articulés, ces dalles minces où la lumière avec application couche ses feux, — sans regard pour la mollesse ignoble sous-jacente.

Ce lâche et froid sous-sol que l'on nomme la mie a son tissu pareil à celui des éponges. (*Le Parti pris*, p. 46)

The shape of the inside of the bread is, like the outside, presented in macrocosm by way of a rather unusual simile:

Feuilles ou fleurs y sont comme des soeurs siamoises soudées par tous les coudes à la fois. Lorsque le pain rassit ces fleurs fanent et se rétrécissent: elles se détachent alors les unes des autres, et la masse en devient friable. (p. 46)

The image of the leaves or flowers conveys well the soft, delicate character of the interior, the "feminine" quality of which is further reinforced by the comparison to Siamese twin sisters. The pocketed structure of the bread's center is nevertheless held together quite firmly, like the Siamese twins attached at the elbow, by the past participle *soudées* (soldered). The passage seeks to create both verbally and visually the form being described. The construction of the text and the construction of the inside of the bread coincide, so that the two exist equally and simultaneously. This is a good example of Ponge's poetic technique as described by Philippe Sollers, who states that Ponge wants "to do what he says": "Ponge rassemble, veut solidifier une présence visible du texte égale à sa cause (ou à son but) extérieure. Il veut, à la lettre, 'faire ce qu'il dit.'"⁸

Another interesting aspect of this poem is that it is illustrative of what Ponge calls the cosmogony of his poetry. In fact, this loaf of bread is treated as if it were a planet or, at the very least, an object born into the cosmos. The poet describes its formation and transformation in cosmic terms: "Ainsi donc une masse amorphe en train d'éructer fut glissée pour nous dans le four stellaire, où durcissant elle s'est façonnée en valées, crêtes, ondulations, crevasses" (p. 46).

In "Le Vin," Ponge also presents the object in the process of becoming. Wine, like bread, exists only through the efforts of man, for the purpose of being consumed by man. Unlike bread, wine does not have so tangible or so palpable an existence. Its liquid property makes it more elusive. In the first part of the poem, the poet tries to solidify the wine so that he can study it. He does this by enumerating the properties it bears in common with leather. This association is not so strange as it may first appear, since the tannin in the skin of the grape is a substance used in the tanning of leather. Then there is the similarity in the processing of each:

Et, à ce propos, je dirai quelque chose de ce genre d'industrie (de transformation) qui consiste à placer la matière au bon endroit, un bon contact . . . et à attendre.

8. Philippe Sollers, *Francis Ponge* (Paris: Pierre Seghers, Poètes d'aujourd'hui, 1963), p. 48.

Un vieillissement de tissus.

Le vin et le cuir sont à peu près du même âge.

Des adultes (déjà un peu sur le retour). (*Pièces*, pp. 81-82)

Ponge does not belabor this comparison, but the brief and effective juxtaposition of the two terms is sufficient to make clear the underlying sympathy between them, a sympathy that, I think, the reader can instinctively sense, but probably would have difficulty verbalizing. The poet has made the connection for us through the tannin and this "aging of tissues"; but there is more: both leather and wine are produced through man and for man through a transformation of nature. It is at the end of this gradual and long transformation that the thing reveals itself. In the following passage the poet again "does what he says" by articulating the coming into being of wine:

C'est un produit de la patience humaine, patience sans grande activité, appliquée à une pulpe douceâtre, trouble, sans couleur franche et sans tonicité.

Par son inhumation et sa macération dans l'obscurité et l'humidité des caves ou grottes, du sous-sol, l'on obtient un liquide qui a toutes les qualités contraires: un véritable rubis sur l'ongle. (*Pièces*, p. 81)

This last expression, *rubis sur l'ongle*, is a good example of Ponge's use of language, wherein he emphasizes its ambiguities, but also, and above all, its primitive meanings. In order to appreciate the full significance of the phrase *rubis sur l'ongle*, we have to first look at it naively, term for term. The image that we get is that of a drop of red wine poised like a gem on a fingernail. It is precious because of all the effort that has gone into the production of just this one drop. Of course, the expression *faire rubis sur l'ongle* means to drink to the last drop, which triggers the reference back to man and his use of the object. Having drunk, the imbiber experiences the following effects:

Le bras verse au fond de l'estomac une flaque froide, d'où s'élève aussitôt quelque chose comme un serviteur dont le rôle consisterait à fermer toutes les fenêtres, à faire la nuit dans la maison; puis à allumer la lampe.

.....
Ce n'est pas grand'chose que le vin. Sa flamme pourtant danse en beaucoup de corps au milieu de la ville.

Danse plutôt qu'elle ne brille. Fait danser plus qu'elle ne brûle ou consume. Transforme les corps articulés, plus ou moins en guignols, pantins, marionnettes.

Irrigue chaleureusement les membres, animant en particulier la langue.

(*Pièces*, pp. 82-83)

The cycle has come full circle: man transforms grapes into wine, wine transforms man, prompting him notably toward speech. That, for Ponge, is the secret ontology of wine, its expression and articulation through man: "On peut le lui faire dire: il suffit de l'aimer, de le boire, de le placer à l'intérieur de soi-même. Alors il parle" (*Pièces*, p. 83).

This indomitable will to express, to create, to form is very often the "lesson" of things as seen by Ponge. Such is the case in the poem "L'Huitre," where the stubbornly closed world of the oyster, when opened, reveals the treasure of its self-expression: "Parfois très rare une formule perle à leur gosier de nacre, d'où l'on trouve aussitôt à s'orner" (*Le Parti pris*, p. 43). The poet plays very cleverly on the words *une formule perle*, establishing the link between the physical creation and a verbal one. On the semantic register the verb *perler* means to perfect a work, while morphologically it is but a verbalized form of the noun *perle*. Furthermore, the third person singular present tense of the verb, which is what is used here, is both orthographically and phonologically identical to the noun. As a diminutive of *forme*, the noun *formule* emphasizes the small shape of the pearl. By definition, on the other hand, it refers to a manner of expressing oneself according to accepted usage, as in *formule de politesse*. The dual values of the pearl as both work of art and means of expression are thereby inextricably intertwined.

In this poem the potential of the oyster to be eaten is not its main feature, and is only mentioned in passing: "A l'intérieur l'on trouve tout un monde à boire et à manger" (*Le Parti pris*, p. 43). What interests the poet is the description of the oyster, which he carries out almost scientifically. He is first struck by its exterior, its size, its roughness, and its uneven color ("brillamment blanchâtre"). The oyster, isolated from everything around it, is depicted, like the bread, in cosmic terms as a body in the universe with the same relative importance as a star or a planet. This little planet appears as "un monde opiniâtrement clos" (p. 43). Man's efforts to overcome this "stubbornness" bring him injury: "Les doigts curieux s'y coupent, s'y cassent les ongles." The tool he uses to open the oyster is also damaged: "un couteau ébréché et peu franc." The nicks and chips in the knife, the cuts and scrapes on the hands are "rhymed," so to speak, with the marks left on the oyster shell: "Les coups qu'on lui porte marquent son enveloppe de ronds blancs, d'une sorte de halos." In these lines the encircling of the oyster with a halo reaffirms its roundness and reinforces its image as a planet, while at the same time marking it as a martyr to man's intrusion.

The treatment of the oyster as a planetary body is further supported in the second paragraph when, opened, it is described as being under a "firmament . . . de nacre," between two skies, "les cieus d'en-dessus s'affaissent sur les cieus d'en-dessous." The soft, liquid aspect of the interior contrasts with the hard exterior. Even though the amorphous mass of the oyster, "un sachet visqueux et verdâtre," is situated in the midst of what is described as a pond (*mare*), this small body of water is given the proportion of a sea through the use of the verbs "flue et reflue."

A final image of roundness occurs in the evocation of the pearl itself. The fact that it is formed in the throat or "gullet" (the poet uses the word *gosier*, which carries a more animal connotation) of the oyster triggers a

reference to the use of the pearl as an ornament to adorn the throat of the wearer. A more abstruse reference to the throat is as the place where speech originates, here the place where the oyster "expresses" itself through the pearl, the manifestation of its creative impulse.

The poem is structured as is the oyster, with an emphasis on images which convey its shape, its hermetic, hard exterior, and its liquid, soft interior. Not only is its physical shape reiterated in this poem, but the orthographical shape of the word *huître* is also echoed throughout. The adjectives *blanchâtre*, *verdâtre*, and *noirâtre*, and the adverb *opiniâtement*, with their circumflex accents, followed by the letters *t*, *r*, *e*, form a kind of rhyme scheme which unites the three paragraphs of the poem. This repetition serves yet another more Pongian purpose, and this is, to use the terms of Ferdinand de Saussure, to refer simultaneously to the properties of the oyster as "signified" and to the word *huître* as "signifier."

In *Le Parti pris des choses*, Ponge's fascination with the mollusk is expressed in three other poems: "Le Mollusque," "Notes pour un coquillage," and "Escargots." In all three works the poet takes the production and architecture of the animal's shell as evidence of its self-expression; as such, the shell becomes analogous to language in man. Language gives shape and structure to man's world just as the shell gives shape to the relatively formless mass of the animal it envelops. This relationship, as it is treated in "Le Mollusque," is somewhat like "la couleur dans le tube" (*Le Parti pris*, p. 50); the shape of the tube of paint gives form to the otherwise amorphous pigment. The very word *mollusque*, from the Latin *molluscus*, meaning soft, refers to this lack of solidity. But the poet hastens to point out that there is more to the mollusk than this: "Ce n'est donc pas un simple crachat, mais une réalité des plus précieuses." What makes the *mollusque* precious has to do with the fact that it is also, by some felicitous chance of phonology in which Ponge so delights, a *muscle* "doué d'une énergie puissante à se renfermer." The phonetic similarity between the signifiers *mollusque* (/mɔlysk/) and *muscle* (/myskl/) in French brings together the two signified characteristics which are of interest to the poet: the softness of the creature and the "powerful force for locking itself in."⁹ This force is concretized in the physical dimensions of the shell, the animal's enclosure which is secreted from within itself: "Ce n'est à vrai dire qu'un muscle, un gond, un blount et sa porte./ Le blount ayant sécrété la porte. Deux portes légèrement concaves constituent sa demeure entière."

The determination of the animal to retain its shell, and hence its form and its self-expression, is such that it remains inside until after its death: "Rien à faire pour l'en tirer vivant." The lesson of the mollusk can be

9. Francis Ponge, *The Voice of Things*, trans. Beth Archer (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Co., 1972), p. 41. All subsequent references to this work will appear in the text.

found in this tenacity, which is comparable to that of man holding on to language: "La moindre cellule du corps de l'homme tient ainsi, et avec cette force, à la parole, — et réciproquement." The relationship is reciprocal because while man stubbornly clings to his words as the *sine qua non* of his existence, that which he uses for creation and for structure, the inverse is also true: language can exist only through man. Without him, it is not.

In yet another poem, "Escargots," dealing with shell-bearing animals, Ponge introduces his gastropod subjects in a very unusual manner, through a negative comparison based entirely on accident of phonology: "Au contraire des escarbilles qui sont les hôtes des cendres chaudes, les escargots aiment la terre humide" (*Le Parti pris*, p. 51). The association between *escargots* and *escarbilles* (cinders) is made solely on the basis of the fact that they share the same orthographic sequence *e, s, c, a, r*, as well as the same phonological one /*ɛskaR*/. The resemblance between the two words is accidental and superficial, for even their etymologies are different; *escarbille* comes from the Latin *carbo* (carbon), and *escargot* is traced back to the Provençal *escarogol*. The phonological link brings the two words together as signifiers just long enough to signal their opposition to each other with respect to the environment in which each is found. By completely disregarding the intrinsic differences between cinders and snails, the poet makes these differences seem unimportant.

The snail, then, makes its first appearance from out of the mud in which it lives. The poet emphasizes the total identity between object and environment. In the following passage, the pronouns, *en*, *la*, and *elle* refer to "la terre humide":

Ils en emportent, ils en mangent, ils en excrémentent. Elle les traverse. Ils la traversent. C'est une interpénétration du meilleur goût parce que pour ainsi dire ton sur ton — avec un élément passif, un élément actif, le passif baignant à la fois et nourrissant l'actif — qui se déplace en même temps qu'il mange. (p. 51)

The ambivalence of this moist earth, a mixture of solid and liquid, is also echoed in the amorphous quality of the snail, who only holds a shape because of its shell. As the poet puts it: "Leur coquille préserve leur quant-à-soi" (p. 52). The shell, like that of the oyster, is a pure creation of the snail, an architectural monument which enobles the creator because it is a work of art which is not frivolous, but an essential part of the snail's existence:

Ce sont plutôt des héros, c'est-à-dire des êtres dont l'existence même est oeuvre d'art, — que des artistes, c'est-à-dire des fabricants d'oeuvres d'art.

.....
 Leur sécrétion même se produit de telle manière qu'elle se met en forme. Rien d'extérieur à eux, à leur nécessité, à leur besoin n'est leur oeuvre. Rien de disproportionné — d'autre part — à leur être physique. Rien qui ne lui soit nécessaire, obligatoire. (p. 54)

The didactic lesson conveyed through the *escargots* is quite clear; in fact, in this poem one can properly speak of a moral. What endures of the snail is its shell, that is, its self-expression that comes from within and gives structure to its existence. The parallel to the poet and to man in general is drawn in a litany of sententious and familiar maxims which conclude the poem:

Perfectionne-toi moralement et tu feras de beaux vers. La morale et le rhétorique se rejoignent dans l'ambition et le désir du sage.

Mais saints en quoi: en obéissant précisément à leur nature. Connais-toi donc d'abord toi-même. Et accepte-toi tel que tu es. En accord avec tes vices. En proportion avec ta mesure.

Mais quelle est la notion propre de l'homme: la parole et la morale. L'humanisme. (p. 55)

What differentiates this moral from traditional morality is that there is no promise of everlasting or terrestrial happiness for obeying its precepts. What moral self-perfection, achieved through simple and clear expression, *does* promise is the esthetic reward of the perfection of form. This "moral" is easily recognized as a call for a return to the classicism of Malherbe, the seventeenth century poet whom Ponge so deeply admires and to whom he dedicated an entire work, *Pour un Malherbe*.

And if there be any doubt as to the literary intent of the moral, the poet affirms this intention quite clearly in a second lesson he draws from the snail, this time a negative one related to its motion. As the snail moves it leaves behind it a trail which Ponge alternately describes as a "bave d'orgueil" and as an "expression de leur colère." These tracings, made by emotions, are also works of art in that they make the world richer and more "silvery" (*argenté*); on the other hand, as these wakes sparkle in the sun, they signal the snail's destruction by catching the eye of predators. Furthermore, the trails are ephemeral since they are washed away by the rain. Thus, the poet warns, the wages of romanticism are death and, worse, oblivion:

Ainsi en est-il de tous ceux qui s'expriment d'une façon entièrement subjective sans repentir, et par traces seulement, sans souci de construire et de former leur expression comme une demeure solide, à plusieurs dimensions. Plus durable qu'eux-mêmes. (p. 54)

As evidenced in the two preceding quotations, there is something of the fable in this work. There are two clearly-stated and complementary morals, drawn by the poet in a didactic tone, using sententious language and the clichés of proverbial morality. But there is more. For one thing, Ponge uses prosopopoeia, a rhetorical device which he generally eschews, in a short paragraph in which the snail expresses itself in the first person:

A la fois si collé au sol, si touchant et si lent, si progressif et si capable de me décoller du sol pour rentrer en moi-même et alors après moi le déluge, un coup

de pied peut me faire rouler n'importe où. Je suis bien sûr de me rétablir sur pied et de recoller au sol où le sort m'aura relégué et d'y trouver ma pâture: la terre, le plus commun des aliments. (pp. 52-53)

Not only is the snail personified, as above, but it is further anthropomorphized; for example the poet explains its motion as a manifestation of its sense of modesty: "Sa pudeur l'oblige à se mouvoir dès qu'il montre sa nudité" (p. 51).

Without going so far as to say that this poem is a fable, one can certainly make the case that it contains certain elements of the fable form. If, as Ponge maintains in his statement quoted above, it is necessary that "la forme même du poème soit en quelque sorte déterminée par son sujet," what is it about the snail that lends itself to fable? There is certainly no strong traditional link between the snail and the fable; for instance, we do not find any *escargots* in the most popular works of La Fontaine. When they do appear in literature, for example in Jacques Prévert's "Les Escargots qui vont à l'enterrement," it is primarily the cliché association of their slow pace, as in the expression *aller comme un escargot*, which is exploited. In Ponge's poem this particular characteristic is mentioned only incidentally. The fabular quality of the snail seems to emerge from within the context of Ponge's own poetic universe, and this because of his obsession with the shell as an expressive form. For Ponge the shell of the mollusk, be it that of "Le Mollusque" in general, of "L'Huitre," of "Escargots," or one he simply finds on the beach, as in "Notes pour un coquillage," is the perfect embodiment of the classical ideals of restraint, proportion, and form, and, as such, lends itself easily, here in the persona of the snail, to allegorical treatment. The metaphor of the mollusk is so clearly expressed in "Notes pour un coquillage" as to leave no doubt as to its importance in Ponge's poetic universe:

De ce point de vue j'admire surtout certains écrivains ou musiciens mesurés, Bach, Rameau, Malherbe, Horace, Mallarmé —, les écrivains par-dessus tous les autres parce que leur monument est fait de la véritable sécrétion commune du mollusque homme, de la chose la plus proportionnée et conditionnée à son corps, et cependant la plus différente de sa forme que l'on puisse concevoir: je veux dire la PAROLE. (*Le Parti pris*, pp. 76-77)

As for the gastronomic potential of the escargot, the poet is silent. He has described the snail in many ways, as a creature in harmony with its environment, as creator of an architectural monument, as an animal who obeys and conforms to its own laws of being, as an allegorical figure, but not as a suitable pretext for consuming great quantities of butter, garlic, and parsley. The "moral" value of the escargot seems to preclude any mention of its base exploitation by man.

Perhaps no other creature in Ponge's descriptive dictionary merits so much attention as the shrimp. It first appeared as the subject of the poem, "La Crevette," in *Le Parti pris des choses*, which was later inserted,

with a few minor changes, as the last selection of a long suite in *Pièces*, "La Crevette dans tous ses états," under the title "La Crevette seconde."

The wording of the title of the suite, "La Crevette dans tous ses états," is interesting as an example of Ponge's use of puns in his poetry. The expression *être dans tous ses états* means, of course, to be in a state of excitement or confusion provoked by some tension or fear. This is, in fact, the way that the shrimp appears to the poet because of its jerky, nervous movements. The words *dans tous ses états* refer also to the fact that the poet presents the shrimp in different perspectives, under different circumstances and in the related forms of its species, as the gray shrimp or even the lobster, which he calls "La Crevette exagérée."

The genesis of the shrimp as a physical being and a poetic creation is accomplished by Ponge with one masterful stroke in the initial sentence of the first poem of the suite, "La Crevette dix fois (pour une) sommée": "C'est alors que du fond du chaos liquide et d'une épaisseur de pur qui se distingue toutefois mais assez mal de l'encre, parfois j'ai observé qui monte un petit signe d'interrogation, farouche" (*Pièces*, p. 15). The creature is formed from out of a watery chaos which is confused with the ink from the poet's pen. Its shape is that of a language sign, a question mark. The association between the contour of shrimp and that of punctuation marks also appears in "La Crevette seconde":

... parfois il arrive qu'un homme à la vue troublée par la fièvre ... subisse une passagère ... hallucination: par bonds vifs, saccadés, successifs, rétrogrades suivis de lents retours, il aperçoit d'un endroit à l'autre de l'étendue de sa vision remuer d'une façon particulière une sorte de petits signes ... à forme de bâtonnets, de virgules, peut-être d'autres signes de ponctuation, qui, sans lui cacher du tout le monde, l'oblitérent en quelque façon, s'y déplacent en surimpression, enfin donnent envie de se frotter les yeux afin de jouir par leur éviction d'une vision plus nette. (*Pièces*, p. 33)

The perception of these signs is due to the distortion of rational function; they exist only as hallucinations. This inevitably calls to mind the poetic function expounded by Rimbaud, the famous "dérèglement de tous les sens" of the so-called "Lettre du voyant." Although Ponge is not a direct descendant of the poet of "Le Bateau ivre," he does hint at the role of the poet as seer. On the other hand he does not strive to see anything beyond what is there. In fact, he rubs his eyes to get a clearer picture of what is before him.

In addition to the similarity in the shape of the shrimp and the imagined forms of the punctuation marks, they resemble each other in their movement. The sporadic, jumpy motion of the shrimp finds a parallel in the spots that dance before the eyes of the hallucinating poet:

Or, dans le monde des représentations extérieures, parfois un phénomène analogue se produit: la crevette, au sein des flots qu'elle habite, ne bondit pas d'une façon différente, et comme les taches dont je parlais tout à l'heure étaient l'effet

d'un trouble de la vue, ce petit être semble d'abord fonction de la confusion marine. (p. 34)

The agitated motion of the shrimp is caused by its environment: the swirling waters around submerged rocks: "Ils se montrent d'ailleurs le plus fréquemment aux endroits où, même par temps sereins, cette confusion est toujours à son comble: aux creux des roches, où les ondulations liquides sans cesse se contredisent" (p. 34). All of these characteristics, its form, its motion, its environment, combine to make the shrimp an elusive, but fascinating object of contemplation.

When not in motion, the shrimp is all but invisible because of the diaphanous quality of its body. In this immobile state it is often compared to a crystal chandelier, hanging in mid-air: a translucent object, lacking continuity and distinction of outline. The very existence of the shrimp is thus called into question by its transparency, as well as by its shape in the form of a question mark. The ambiguity of its being is partially resolved, however, in two ways: by the creature itself, through its activity and movement, and by the poet, through language. Ponge brings together the dual ontology of the shrimp as both referent in the physical world and poetic object when he proposes "de laisser s'engager de son mouvement propre . . . dans le conduit des circonlocutions, d'atteindre enfin par la parole au point dialectique où le situent sa forme, son milieu, sa condition muette et l'exercice de sa profession juste" (p. 33).

It is through repetitive patterns of language, of images, and of descriptions that the poet achieves the expression of his subject. The poem keeps returning obsessively to the same places, just as the shrimp, "condamné par ses moeurs" (*Pièces*, p. 20), returns obsessively to the rocky crevices where it lives. The jerky, halting bounds and jumps of the *crevette*, which make it so difficult to contemplate and hence so elusive, find parallels in the structure of the text, which jumps from image to description and back again, slightly altering the form of each recurrence of a particular passage. While this technique is a familiar one in film and in some contemporary novels (one thinks of the *ciné-romans* of Alain Robbe-Grillet or the works of Nathalie Sarraute), it is innovative in poetry. Perhaps such a technique could be considered as a modern-day descendant of the refrain, serving to make the work more cohesive and to emphasize certain themes or, in this case, important attributes of the shrimp. It is nevertheless clear that the form of this work was inspired by its subject, in particular, by the type of movement associated with it. In enumerating the characteristics of the shrimp, Ponge places this jumpy motion at the top of his list: "Primo: le bond de la crevette, motif de cinématique" (*Pièces*, p. 17).

In addition to its movement, the shrimp expresses itself through its environment, "ce milieu de la pire confusion marine, au creux des

roches" (*Pièces*, p. 20), and through its form. Besides its general appearance in the shape of a question mark, there are also its "pattes-mâchoires, pattes ambulatoires, pattes-nageoires, palpes, antennes, antennules: soit en tout dix-neuf paires d'appendices différenciés" (*Pièces*, p. 15). These numerous "organes de circonspection" provide the poet with an appropriate lesson to draw from the shrimp: "Elle [la crevette] est le lustre de la confusion. / Elle est aussi un monstre de circonspection. / (Ainsi, à son instar, dans les époques troublées, le poète)" (*Pièces*, p. 29). The comparison pertains to the function of the poet as a point of stability in times of religious, literary or political confusion ("dans une époque privée de foi, de rhétorique, d'unité d'action politique") (p. 28). Because of a profusion of receptors which are highly sensitive to his surroundings the poet is an enlightened presence amid the confusion.

This same proliferation of receptors, antennae, and feelers serves as the basis for Ponge's treatment of the shrimp in a mock-heroic manner. In the following passage the creature is cast as a mythological hero who evolved as the result of an encounter between a god, who had been chased into the sea, and a sunken galley ship whose oars are metamorphosed into organs of circumspection:

Un dieu traqué entra aux flots.
Une galère ayant sombré évolua.

De la rencontre de ces deux désastres
une bête naquit, à jamais circonspecte:

La crevette est ce monstre
de circonspection. (*Pièces*, p. 22)

As demi-god, the shrimp is entitled to a fatal flaw; and that flaw, too much circumspection, brings us back, in a circumlocutory way, to the topic of gastronomy. With all of those feelers to slow him down, the shrimp is easily caught by fish or in fishermen's nets. Once it has been caught, Ponge firmly plants his tongue in his cheek and tosses his hero into the boiling pot, not, however, to an ignominious death. On the contrary, it is described as heroic, a revelatory death, reserved for the happy few:

Quarto: mais, justement, trop d'organes de circonspection la conduisent à sa perte.

Révélation par la mort. La mort en rose pour quelques élues.

Chaque crevette compte un million de chances de mort grise, dans la gueule ou la poche à sucs digestifs de quelque poisson . . .

Mais quelques élues, grâce à une élévation artificielle de la température de leur milieu, connaissent une mort révélatrice, la mort en rose.

Le révélateur de la crevette est son eau du cuisson. (*Pièces*, p. 17)

And what is revealed in this death? The shrimp reveals itself in another

form: pink, opaque, substantive, and motionless, instead of transparent, ambivalent, cautious, and apprehensively jumpy.

In these "description-definition-literary art works" (trans. Archer, p. 88) which are the poems of Francis Ponge, the gastronomic potential of the bread, the wine, the oyster, the mollusk, the snail and the shrimp is either, as in the case of the snail and the mollusk, not exploited, or is but one of the many facets of the object revealed by the poet. Only the "Plat de poissons frits" can be justifiably placed in the tradition of gastronomic literature. What Ponge proposes in these other texts goes far beyond this limitation. The objects and beings whose form, movement, and environment he describes are unique in that they have all found the means to participate in a creative, expressive universe. In some cases this participation is accomplished by the physical creation of a shape or substance totally different from that of the object-creator. In all cases some change has been brought about through the existence of the object, a change which the poet interprets as its means of self-expression. The bread, for example, changes from an amorphous mass into the metaphorical microcosm of a planetary body, thereby asserting its existence and its importance in the cosmic scheme of things. In the instance of "Le Vin" a transformation is accomplished first through the intervention of man, but then the wine, in turn, does some transforming of its own: it makes an overindulging human being appear in the form of a clown or a puppet. It also loosens man's tongue, causing him to speak. The oyster, of course, produces its pearl, a brilliantly shining, white, hard object of beauty generated from within a greenish, blackish, viscous soft interior. The snail and the mollusk, in a similar manner, secrete their shells, of a different form and substance from their bodies. The case of the shrimp is a bit more difficult to grasp; but that is because the creature itself, with its evasive motion, its circumspection, and its transparency make it a difficult object of study for the poet. One gets the feeling that it is this very elusiveness which so fascinates him and which explains the many pages written trying to discover the secret of its being. For Ponge everything about the shrimp seems calculated to belie an affirmation of existence. It is only when it ceases to exist, when it is transformed through an "artificial elevation of the temperature of its surroundings" that the shrimp reveals itself to the poet.

What binds these objects together, in what Roland Barthes called a "cohérence de signes", is their will and their ability to "express" themselves in a form other than their own. This pattern in the world of things inevitably brings us back to man, who uses words as his means of self-expression.

In the works of Francis Ponge, words express things and things struggle toward that expression. This is the relationship implied in Ponge's succinct formula, "PARTI PRIS DES CHOSES égale COMPTE-TENU DES MOTS" (*Grand Recueil*, p. 19). The text, then, is the place where the

boundaries between language and the world disappear. "De l'objet et du mot, qui est, pour lui, signifiant, et qui signifié?"¹⁰ asks Jean-Pierre Richard. There is, of course, no answer, for the two are inseparably intertwined to produce the *pièce de résistance*: the TEXT.

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10. Jean-Pierre Richard, *Onze Etudes sur la poésie moderne* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1964), p. 180.