

Philippe Jaccottet: Nature as Threshold

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The impulse to find and restore a lost experience of connectedness, a palpable sense of place within the vast expanse of a threatening, eroded, or unfamiliar world, seems to gain special urgency in the theory and practice of many French and Francophone poets who came into their own in the wake of the events of World War II. Guillevic (*Terraqué*, 1942), Aimé Césaire (*Cahier d'un retour au pays natal*, 1949), and Jean Follain (*Territoires*, 1953) are cases in point. Certain poets coming after them, such as Franco-Swiss Philippe Jaccottet, make this search the central focus of their work and the justification of poetic writing. In poems, notebooks, journal entries, and essays, his reverential approach to nature creates moments of reflective wonder in the natural world while pointing to a world just beyond. This essay will examine how Jaccottet's portrayal of nature, and in particular of nature as threshold, stems from his deepest convictions and exemplifies a lifelong study of how the relation between distance and proximity can convey a privileged sense of place in representative works from the beginning, middle, and end of his career.

The characteristic questioning stance through which Jaccottet develops the figure of the threshold over a lifetime is seen in his early writings, where his perception of the relationship between the events of World War II and contemporary life both confirms his sense of the tenuous nature of human constructs and further orients him toward a broader, less tangible view of humanity's connection to the corporeal world. Within this context, Jaccottet's remarks in accepting *le prix Rambert* in 1956 express the importance of poetic writing that is ethically as well as aesthetically viable in the aftermath of World War II: "On cherche ainsi dans les immenses ruines: quand les colosses des montagnes s'écroulent, qu'est-ce qui peut prétendre à demeurer? Peut-être, s'il est possible de s'exprimer ainsi, le contraire de la pierre et des montagnes, le contraire du fort et du solide?" (*Transaction* 291). This destruction of foundations once thought to be unassailable orients Jaccottet toward their opposite, a poetics born of a profound sense of life's fragility and grounded in simplicity, balance, and modesty, and further situates his writing within what Isabelle Lebrat terms an "éthique de la voix" (23) and Scott Shinabargar extends to "a 'poethetics' that renders writing not merely an object of aesthetic judgment but a matter of conscience" (291).

Jaccottet's tentative yet persistent voice questions in the midst of destruction: "Les grands mots qui étaient censés nous servir de guides pour un véritable progrès ont fini par s'étendre au point de couvrir toutes les ignominies, et nous ne pouvons plus que nous en

détourner... Apprendrai-je seulement qu'il faut habiter ce qui ne se bâtit pas?" (*Éléments* 128).¹ Rather than attempt a definitive response to "l'atrocité des événements qui nous ont opprimés et nous oppriment encore" (*Transaction* 290), Jaccottet voices the need to seek another reality, a "réalité réelle" (292) in response to "cette question presque désespérée: 'que reste-t-il?'" (291). As Dominique Viart observes, "Contre les misères de ce temps et les rêves fallacieux qui en détournent, Jaccottet entreprend de montrer les réelles beautés du monde" (30). In this quest, Jaccottet recognizes that the perception of a more authentic reality during moments of "ouverture sur les profondeurs" (*Transaction* 295) requires a renewed and purified language.

Clearly aware of the tenuous nature of this poetic project, Jaccottet's thoughts upon accepting *le prix Ramuz* in 1970 reflect the doubts that led him to consider abandoning altogether his search for a language of *profondeurs* in a world where the light of presence has receded. And yet, his view of the contemporary poet as a *veilleur*, a watchman of sorts, places hope in the power of poetic language to indicate, however faintly, beacon-like intervals in a world threatened with extinction: "Les poètes sont ces veilleurs qui, en restant fidèles à l'antique lumière dont ils gardent la mémoire et le désir, en retenant des signes dans leurs poèmes, aident peut-être à la venue d'un nouveau jour..." (*Transaction* 302).²

Crucial to this quest is a renewal of poetic language as close as possible to the regenerative process that governs the natural world, what he terms "Des graines pour replanter la forêt spirituelle" (*Transaction* 336). This focus on the return to the beginnings of life can be seen to orient his work, as in the epigraph to his collections of journal entries, *La semaison* (1984), *La seconde semaison* (1996), and *Carnets 1995-1998 (La semaison, III)* (2001), "SEMAISON: Dispersion naturelle des graines d'une plante." Aligned with the urgent vocation to rebuild and heal is his vision of the poet's role as that of a *réparateur*: "Le travail presque absurde, chaque matin repris, si possible, de changer le mal en bien, ou en moindre mal; de réparer la demeure, comme les insectes leurs forteresses démantelées par la pluie; de remettre de l'ordre; de guérir" (*Transaction* 335).

As an important part of this process, for over fifty years Jaccottet has developed directional motifs such as *l'autre côté* and *le seuil* that suggest a potential reenchantment of

¹ Jaccottet's pessimism stems at least in part from his assessment that humanity has not progressed morally despite advances in knowledge, as shown in the passage that immediately precedes the quote above: "La science, si prodigieusement habile à peser les astres les plus lointains et à comprendre jusqu'aux mondes que nos sens ne perçoivent plus, échoue à calculer cette part d'innommable ou d'indicible qui devrait nous importer plus que toute autre" (*Éléments* 127-28).

² Jaccottet is careful to link the poet's role as "veilleur" to one who is vigilant for signs of "l'antique lumière," rather than to the concept of the poet as "berger de l'Être." He makes this distinction just before the cited passage: "... pour résister au vertige, on s'accroche à n'importe quoi; plus volontiers, bien sûr, à des paroles de philosophe, et combien plus si ce philosophe est illustre! Comment lui résister, d'ailleurs, s'il vole généreusement à notre secours? Songez donc: il écrit que le poète est le "berger de l'Être" (ou s'il ne l'a pas écrit, on l'a lu entre les lignes)... Mais l'Être est-il un agneau, un troupeau d'agneaux? Ne ressemblerait-il pas plutôt (bien qu'il ne puisse ressembler à rien) à ces souffles dont personne ne sera jamais le gardien?" (*Transaction* 301-02)

the world, with nature as the privileged place of this transition.³ At such times, space is felt to draw nearer to create a sense of connection that is otherwise absent:

Oui, on cherche à laver les yeux, on poursuit l'inconnu. Les yeux veulent boire de nouveau, enfin, à quelque chose de vif, de frais, de caché et d'inaltéré comme une source. Autour de soi, trop près de soi, on ne sait plus le trouver. Alors, comme un enfant, comme quiconque rêve et ne peut s'empêcher de rêver à ce qui est "de l'autre côté de la montagne" ou "derrière le mur," à l'invisible, on franchit les frontières en s'imaginant qu'aussitôt ce pas fait, tout sera différent. . . . (*Carnets* 51)

Such terms indicate an experience of the infinite within the immediate, "une magie particulière ancrée profond en nous" (*Carnets* 53) which for Jaccottet is "analogue à la poésie même."⁴

This reenchantment restores a sense of presence where space and place are fused, as seen in an entry from one of Jaccottet's early notebooks where the recurrent motif of a birdsong signals an *ouverture* to a presence that transforms space itself: "Ce merle qui chantait en mars près des serres du Luxembourg, et un tel chant qu'en lui je redevais enfant, ne m'ouvrait-il pas un chemin doré dans la forêt des apparences?" (*Observations* 52). Similarly, we hear the voice of a newly discovered spring in the passage entitled "Sur le seuil," where the earth and heavens are characteristically linked by sound: "On dirait des paroles d'un autre monde et qu'on aurait à peine le droit d'écouter. Trop claires pour nous, trop nettes. Paroles du ciel à la terre" (*Paysages* 38-39).⁵

In extending these personal meditations on the transformative exchange between external and internal space in essays on haiku poetry and on poets as diverse as Hölderlin, Rilke, Hopkins, and Follain, Jaccottet has sought to express how poetic language can evoke a privileged sense of space through the simplest possible means. His remarks on receiving the *prix Montaigne* in 1972 reiterate the recuperative potential of the "simples lueurs" (*Transaction* 313) of haiku in contrast to what he sees as the excesses of the elaborate, often distorted figuration in Western literary movements such as romanticism, symbolism, and surrealism.⁶ Significantly, Jaccottet describes haiku as embodying a return to reality

³ I have taken the expression, "reenchantment of the world," from the title of Morris Berman's book, *The Reenchantment of the World*. Here Berman explores the reasons underlying the change from an "enchanted world" where "Rocks, trees, rivers, and clouds were all seen as wondrous, alive, and human beings felt at home" (16) to the "increasing entropy, economic and technological chaos, ecological disaster, and ultimately, psychic dismemberment and disintegration" (15) of the current Western world. These issues, and Berman's discussion of "the possibilities that exist for a modern and credible form of reenchantment, a cosmos once more our own" (24) clearly resonate with Jaccottet's poetic project.

⁴ "Dès que j'ai regardé, avant même—à peine avais-je vu ces paysages, je les ai sentis m'attirer comme ce qui se dérobe, ainsi que parfois dans les contes, en particulier dans celui, si beau, des *Mille et Une Nuits* où le prince Ahmed, ne retrouvant plus la flèche qu'il a tirée, est entraîné toujours plus loin à sa recherche pour aboutir enfin au lieu aride où se cache la demeure d'une fée. De la même façon, ma pensée, ma vue, ma rêverie, plus que mes pas, furent entraînées sans cesse vers quelque chose d'évasif, plutôt parole que lueur, et qui m'est apparu quelquefois *analogue à la poésie même*" (*Paysages* 21, the emphasis is ours).

⁵ Reflections on the way in which Jaccottet models spatial and temporal dimensions of his prose in "Sur le seuil" and other passages can be found in Laure Himy-Piéri's *Paysages avec figures absentes de Philippe Jaccottet* (29).

⁶ For a discussion of Jaccottet's writing of nature against the background of these literary discourses, see Joseph Acquisto's recent article, "The Place of Poetry: Nature, Nostalgia, and Modernity in Jaccottet's Poetics."

through spatial openings—"passages . . . fenêtres . . . perspectives"—that provide the light and air he seeks to convey in his own work:

Précisément parce que, mieux qu'aucune autre poésie, dans la plus grande simplicité et la plus raffinée pourtant, loin de poursuivre délire et rupture, elle réussissait, me semblait-il, à illuminer d'infini des moments quelconques d'existences quelconques. C'était plus extraordinaire à mes yeux que l'excès, le vertige, l'ivresse. . . . Au fond, c'étaient de simples lueurs, des éclaircies. Comme si, dans l'obscurité impénétrable de notre condition, *s'ouvraient des passages*, je ne puis mieux dire, des espèces de *fenêtres*, de *perspectives* par où pénétraient de nouveau un peu de lumière, un peu d'air. (*Transaction* 312-13)⁷

The notion of spatial, emotional, and poetic *perspectives* conveys an immensity in which the poet nonetheless remains grounded, an intersection of distance and proximity that might allow him to "habiter ce qui ne se bâtit pas" (*Éléments* 128). In addition to being a key expression of Jaccottet's spatial poetics, this sense of perspective offers an orientation distinct from the "délire et rupture . . . l'excès, le vertige, l'ivresse" (*Transaction* 312)⁸ of preceding literary directions as well as an essential element for the "justesse de voix" (38) that Hervé Ferrage accurately assesses Jaccottet requires of poetic writing.

Among the essays that reveal the most about Jaccottet's study of how poetic language can convey a privileged experience of space are those he has written on Follain. He has compared Follain's ability to evoke a sense of the infinite through seemingly simple means to the same quality he admires in haiku. As is consistent with his own poetic project, he emphasizes the non-metaphorical aspect of Follain's poetry, "qui approche *modestement*, comme *négligemment*, et *sans images*, une espèce de centre que je ne peux m'empêcher de situer au foyer de toute poésie" (*Transaction* 246).⁹ In this study, I will use the term "intersection" to designate Jaccottet's particular approach in placing elements of distance and proximity, detail and immensity, in relation to one another to create the sense of a possible threshold. His debt to Follain in conveying these privileged moments in spatial and almost geometric terms is seen in this assessment of Follain's recollection of ordinary encounters during a childhood in the countryside: "Les rencontres ressemblent aux paroles surprises à distance: elles disent un monde humain, tendrement habité, où toutefois les distances subsistent; elles sont le croisement de deux lignes, c'est-à-dire une autre façon de situer un point—dans l'espace, dans le temps" (*Entretien* 135).

Jaccottet elaborates on choosing a path outside these discourses and distinct from his poetic predecessors in accepting the *prix Montaigne* in 1972: "Il se trouve qu'au moment où j'ai commencé à écrire, toute une tendance de la poésie, qu'avaient illustrée à la fin du XIX^e siècle des génies fascinants comme Rimbaud ou Mallarmé, qu'avaient annoncée, plus tôt, Baudelaire, Leopardi et Novalis, et qui devait aboutir vers 1920 à l'explosion du surréalisme, se fondait sur un besoin, d'ailleurs très authentique et souvent légitime, de rupture; de rupture plus ou moins violente et totale avec le passé, la culture, la morale, la religion et la société existantes, avec le monde lui-même. . . . J'éprouvais, certes un peu vaguement, un sentiment différent; j'entrevois, vaguement, d'autres chemins; redoutant par-dessus tout les formules catégoriques, les refus tranchants ou les affirmations péremptoires, parce qu'il me semblait que l'homme qui hausse la voix ou qui frappe du poing sur la table le fait souvent moins par conviction réelle que pour couvrir la rumeur de ses propres doutes. . . ." (*Transaction* 309).

⁷ The emphasis is mine here and elsewhere in this article, unless otherwise noted.

⁸ For a discussion of Jaccottet in a post-surrealist context, see Carrie Noland's 1990 dissertation, *Allegories of Rupture: The Legacy of Surrealism in the Poetry of Yves Bonnefoy and Philippe Jaccottet*.

⁹ The emphasis is Jaccottet's.

In seeking his own expression of these simple yet foundational moments in a way consistent with his view of nature as threshold, for Jaccottet, natural elements such as mountains, birds, and flowers often perform the intersection between “l'espace libre et . . . la porte fermée”¹⁰ to figure a threshold where the subject is literally ‘displaced,’ made to “changer d'espace . . . passer un seuil”:

Chose donnée au passant qui pensait à tout autre chose ou ne pensait à rien, on dirait que ces fleurs, si insignifiantes soient-elles, le “déplacent” en quelque sorte, invisiblement; le font, imperceptiblement, *changer d'espace*. Non pas, toutefois, entrer dans l'irréel, non pas rêver; mais plutôt, si l'on veut, *passer un seuil* là où l'on ne voit ni porte, ni passage. (*Et, néanmoins* 81)

Through this threshold, the subject moves beyond an insular subjectivity to reconnect to a larger world: “Elles [les fleurs] vous échappent; ainsi, elles vous font échapper: ces milliers de clefs des champs” (*Et, néanmoins* 82).

In this way, Jaccottet has sought to create gateways to a renewed space through writing that focuses on nature in a meditative and restorative way. Proceeding from his own perceptions, he carefully grounds this transformation in the *real*, guided by a poetics of immediacy and transparency. In this quest, he treats the earth and its components as thresholds to the truer world he intuits beyond appearances. The poet's role, for him, is to cede the enunciative space to the natural world.

Mountains, for example, are linked to his most basic intuitions of passing from the visible to something beyond. They can be understood as emblems of personal renewal, especially in their ability to embody, at times, a transformation where death is seen as passage rather than end-point. Although he experienced the mountains in his native Switzerland as oppressive, he feels an open yet sheltering enclosure in the mountains that surround Grignan, France, his home since the 1950s, which he has called “presque un lieu natal ou une patrie” (Personal interview). With its ability to embody the dynamics of distance and proximity, Jaccottet's own writings as well as those of many critics reflect that this site seems ideally aligned with his poetic project. It is, as Ferrage notes, “un territoire mesuré et clos où le sentiment de l'illimité naît d'une juste compréhension de la limite . . . où le ciel et la terre semblent venir à la rencontre l'un de l'autre pour sceller leur réconciliation . . . et . . . redonner un sens à la vie” (136). Aline Bergé further situates the actualisation of Jaccottet's poetic vocation with his decision to live in Grignan: “Pour Jaccottet qui ne saurait séparer l'esthétique d'une éthique, l'orientation vers le monde élémentaire est un geste qui engage l'existence tout autant que le projet de l'œuvre. C'est pourquoi elle ne se confirme et ne prend véritablement force dans l'écriture qu'avec la sortie de Paris et l'installation à Grignan” (109).

Visible from Jaccottet's home in Grignan, the atmospheric conditions that surround the Mont Ventoux often give the impression that it has turned to mist, despite its prominence.

¹⁰ Another example of the relation between open and closed space that is rendered immediate through poetry are Jaccottet's comments on a poem by Emily Dickinson in a 1986 journal entry: “Le poème retient l'attention avant même qu'on ne l'ait compris, qu'on n'ait cherché à le comprendre, peut-être par le rapprochement du jeu et des larmes, de *l'espace libre* et de la porte fermée. On éprouve un émerveillement, comme devant certains haïkus dans lesquels les choses les plus humbles font office de clefs ouvrant sur de *profonds espaces*” (*Seconde semaison* 91).

In a 2002 interview, he confirmed that this recurrent event parallels his intuition of a possible continuity between matter and spirit, and even between life and death:

. . . dans *La promenade sous les arbres* je parle du Ventoux, justement, comme aujourd'hui, qu'on ne voit plus. Certainement si ça m'a donné une impression de bonheur, c'est parce que ça entretient l'illusion qu'il n'y a pas de murs, donc que la mort elle-même—ce qui est évidemment une sacrée illusion. . . . On voit là, peut-être, le sentiment du seuil . . . que je franchissais un seuil pour entrer dans un autre espace, mais . . . réflexion faite, . . . ce n'était pas l'autre espace de la transcendance ou de l'au-delà de la métaphysique, que c'était le même espace dans lequel nous vivons, mais qui était vu ou ressenti autrement, ou compris autrement. (Personal interview)

Integral to Jaccottet's vision of the threshold, then, is his belief that it opens onto a *truer* perception of the world. Such experiences provide evidence of “ces moments où ce que j'appelle la réalité réelle nous fait signe” (*Transaction* 292).¹¹

Jaccottet's aim in studying the Mont Ventoux and other threshold images is to come closer to understanding our relationship to the world—what he calls in the following passage “nos rapports”:

Ce qui me reste en effet de tous ces instants où j'ai regardé les montagnes, où elles m'ont ému et rendu plus étonné d'être au monde, cela peut tenir en ces mots qui me sont venus plus haut sous la plume: “montagnes légères,” “rocs changés en buées,” en ces images qui, tour à tour, essayaient de dire la vérité, non pas sur le monde ni sur moi, mais peut-être sur nos rapports. (*Promenade* 66)

Awareness of these realms reflects a desire for reconciliation between earth and heavens, between matter and spirit, life and death. The subject of Jaccottet's poetic project is thus at once simple and immense, comprising both the visible and invisible as he aims to encompass the earth, the self, and beyond to convey the rapport that joins us. In this quest, as Danièle Chauvin observes, “la terre, symbolisée ici par la présence massive du Ventoux, appelle la légèreté, la clarté, la transparence des confins. Le fermé indique l'ouvert, la limite l'illimité, le visible l'invisible. . .” (53). The way in which Jaccottet seeks to render these seeming oppositions palpable will be the focus of the discussion that follows.

As noted above, for the past fifty years Jaccottet's writings have reflected a poetics of self-effacement and simplicity through language that becomes increasingly distilled over time. Much of his initial prose collection from 1957, *La promenade sous les arbres*, for example, focuses on an ascensional movement that embraces earth, heavens, and humanity, a theme that he has developed throughout his career, as Patrick Née has remarked, “on a pu noter qu'un puissant mouvement ascensionnel poussait la poésie-pensée de Philippe Jaccottet à élever la terre au ciel” (105). Here the poet's gaze encompasses his village, the distant mountains, and finally the planets and stars in an ascending hierarchy:

¹¹ As discussed above, from early in his career Jaccottet identified reality and simplicity as essential to his writing: “Il me parut que si les arbres et la rivière m'avaient fasciné, ce n'était pas parce qu'ils ressemblaient à autre chose. . . . Là, je découvrais non pas un mirage reflétant mes profondeurs et les dévoilant, mais un événement tout à fait réel et simple . . . à la portée de n'importe quel regard même distrait” (*Promenade* 120-21).

Je vois le monde bâti de beaux étages; et du bas en haut une tranquillité, une immobilité presque absolue. . . . En bas, si l'on veut, est une foule endormie . . . en bas est une multitude assemblée sans désordre.

Et si je lève seulement un peu les yeux, mon regard sans aucun effort se trouve transporté vers les lointains plus simples et déjà plus clairs, vers ce qui marque les limites du pays visible, c'est-à-dire des montagnes basses dont la forme longue et calme s'accorde parfaitement avec l'idée du sommeil. . . .

Plus haut encore paraît Jupiter dans sa gloire, l'immense fraîcheur du ciel, la ronde lune qui efface les constellations mineures et ne laisse subsister que l'indication de quelques sources. (*Promenade* 75-76)

The subject proceeds from a global perspective, stating “Je vois le monde” as though keeping watch over a sleeping realm, a stance that characterizes Jaccottet’s view of the poet’s role as that of *veilleur* who attempts to make visible a fading light. Upward and downward movement traces an ordered universe in the first paragraph with expressions such as “beaux étages” and “du bas en haut.” The decasyllabic rhythm of the first three phrases confers a sense of nocturnal calm and order.¹² The second paragraph echoes the encompassing upward and downward movement of the first: the ascension and expansion in the initial three phrases balances the portrayal of the mountains as reclining bodies, with horizontal terms such as “basses” and “longue” preparing the image of sleep that ends the line. The sky, the earth and its inhabitants are thus aligned in a single, unifying movement.

This vision of a nurturing earth-heavens relation recalls some aspects of Rilke’s poetry, one of Jaccottet’s early influences.¹³ His book, *Rilke par lui-même*, describes the older poet’s sense of “[é]quilibre, dans la limpidité nocturne, entre le ciel et le visage qui se lève vers lui” (107) in terms that parallel Jaccottet’s own experience. The subject in Jaccottet’s passage, already foregrounded in the first two paragraphs (“Je vois le monde”; “si je lève seulement un peu les yeux”) expands into a telescopic vision in the third, focusing on different celestial features to create the impression of an almost infinite depth. The sense of immensity stems in part from the understated expression “ne laisse subsister que l’indication de quelques sources.” Here “ne ... que” performs a grammatical reduction that frames the muted brightness of distant constellations. In voicing the persistence of these bits of light despite distance, in making palpable their ambient traces in a way that suggests their generative potential, it is possible to see a reflection of the “dispersion naturelle des graines” noted earlier that serves as epigraph to Jaccottet’s three *Semaison* collections and characterizes his approach to writing.

Jaccottet’s vision of an ascensional movement that intersects each life it touches prefigures other geometric references that evoke moments when vast space is transformed into habitable place: “C’est bien une ascension des choses que je considère, ou comme la montée d’un angle dont la pointe irait toucher l’énigme de nos vies” (*Promenade* 77).¹⁴ This

¹² Recognizable metric patterns such as these occur frequently in Jaccottet’s prose, demonstrating what Andrea Cady calls the “fine balance between ordinary discourse and lyrical eloquence which is a distinctive feature of Jaccottet’s writings” (94). For an insightful discussion of these and other prosodic features in Jaccottet’s work, see Cady (89-114).

¹³ “Rilke a été, avec Claudel et Ramuz, l’une des trois admirations majeures de mon adolescence” (Jaccottet, *Écrits* 234).

¹⁴ As discussed earlier in this article, Jaccottet’s wish to understand the privileged moments of human experience in a spatial and even geometric sense such as this parallels his assessment of such moments in

figure of ascent conveys an ideal order in the world that recurs throughout his writing: “. . . la beauté de la terre, en ces moments-là, c'était que son désordre s'effaçât au profit d'un simple mouvement de bas en haut, mouvement élémentaire, profond. . .” (*Promenade* 118).

In its capacity to exemplify the earth-heavens relation, ascensional movement is also essential to a poetics of simplicity for Jaccottet. As Christine Bénévent notes with regard to the 1958 collection, *L'ignorant*, “Comment apprivoiser cet espace, comment le rendre habitable? En l'arpentant, en l'architecturant . . . en l'étagant de haut en bas, en le 'cloisonnant' ” (83). Jaccottet himself expresses his quest for a poetry distilled to a purer state, one that would allow him to forgo adjectives and images, in this way: “Je sens que, pour dire cela, il faudrait un poème presque sans adjectifs et réduit à très peu d'images; simplement un mouvement vers le haut, et non point un mouvement brusque, ni intense, ni rapide, mais une émanation, une fumée de fraîcheur. . .” (*Promenade* 77).

As discussed above, Jaccottet's desire to express depth and elemental movement with few images found a model in haiku poetry, where images are rare and nature has a prominent role. In reading a collection of haiku poetry just after writing *La promenade sous les arbres*, he discovered the possibility of a poetry “sans images, d'une poésie qui ne fit qu'établir des rapports” (*Promenade* 144) that corresponded to the poetics of self-effacement he had always sought. The ability to put such a poetics into practice, he wrote, depended on “l'effacement absolu du poète, grâce à un sourire, une patience, une délicatesse fort différentes de celle que le christianisme a enseigné au moyen âge occidental” (145).

Jaccottet experienced a renewal through this non-metaphorical poetic language, which had the transparency and immediacy he sought in his own writing. As he put it, “tout redevenait possible . . . j'éprouvai le bonheur d'une renaissance” (*Promenade* 146-47).¹⁵ It is revealing that Jaccottet describes the haiku masters as invisible passers-by, following a path similar to his own aspirations: “Ni des héros, ni des saints, ni des génies comme le XIX^e siècle les a rêvés, comme il en a produit aussi d'admirables. Des passants invisibles. Et parce qu'ils étaient invisibles, le monde pouvait transparaître à travers eux; leur passage même semblait révéler une lumière inépuisable” (*Transaction* 314).

As Cady further notes, an important influence of haiku is “a move in the direction of a minimal and concise poetic form” (69), which also provides a means to achieve his goals of “self-effacement, modesty, simplicity, avoidance of rhetoric and lyrical indulgence, the dream of a poetry without images, a desire for immediacy of perception, an unmediated language” (69). Importantly, in addition to the aesthetic qualities that draw Jaccottet to haiku, his view that this poetry creates a potential vision of transparency and immediacy for each reader further aligns haiku with his ethical view of the poet's role as that of *veilleur*, where “[u]ne vision particulière permet à n'importe quelle existence, serait-elle

Follain's writing: “Les rencontres ressemblent aux paroles surprises à distance . . . elles sont le croisement de deux lignes, c'est-à-dire une autre façon de situer un point—dans l'espace, dans le temps” (*Entretien* 134).

¹⁵ As Jaccottet himself has noted in collections such as *Une transaction secrète* (1987) and *Haïku, présentés et transcrits par Philippe Jaccottet* (1996), his first exposure to haiku through Reginald Horace Blyth's translations of Japanese haiku into English was a profound revelation. In addition to these reflections, a number of critics, including Cady (65-69), Ferrage (184-95), and Bénévent (104-09) also provide detailed commentaries of haiku's influence on his poetics.

aussi difficile et démunie qu'apparaît par exemple celle d'Issa, d'être, en dépit de tout, la vie pleine et lumineuse à laquelle tout homme aspire" (*Transaction* 129).

In the collection born of the revelation Jaccottet experienced in haiku, fittingly entitled *Airs* (1961-64), the persistent "je" of *La promenade sous les arbres* cedes to the disembodied "voix la plus pure" that sings "les distances de la terre" (*Poésie* 95).¹⁶ Jean-Claude Mathieu characterizes the clarity and lightness of *Airs* as follows:

D'un côté une diction affirmative, d'une netteté presque gnomique parfois, qui use de déictiques pour designer (paradoxalement) ce qui s'offre à la vue, l'invisible dans le visible, souligner des évidences éblouissantes mais fuyantes. . . . De l'autre, le mouvement ascendant, suspensif et sans insistance du chant, qui loin de cerner d'un liseré les apparences, allège, fluidifie, illimite. (81)

Writing in this cleared poetic space with phrases such as "De plus loin que le plus loin / de plus bas que le plus bas" (*Poésie* 113) and "du plus profond au plus lointain / du plus sombre au plus pur" (114), the absence of verbs and nouns creates an expanse against which a few carefully selected elements from the earthly realm resonate.

The poems of *Airs* thus express Jaccottet's vision of an essential rapport between the heavens and earth, but with a greater distillation than in prior collections. The following poem, for example, can almost be seen as a condensation of the rural nightscape from *La promenade sous les arbres* (75-76) considered above. In contrast, here the first-person subject cedes the enunciative space to the earth, the sky, and a single feather in one of several "formes-visions du *suspens*" (80) noted by Mathieu that serve as links between these realms in *Airs*:

La terre tout entière visible
mesurable
pleine de temps

suspendue à une plume qui monte
de plus en plus lumineuse (*Poésie* 132)

The poetic lineage of this recurring state of privileged equilibrium in *Airs*, where a small element is portrayed as "suspended" against an immense expanse, can be seen in Jaccottet's admiration of this practice in Follain. His essay on Follain, "Une perspective fabuleuse" (*Entretien* 131-38), for example, shows this practice ("c'est une sorte de *suspens*" [134]; "Les rencontres ressemblent à des paroles surprises à distance . . . elles sont le croisement de deux lignes, c'est-à-dire une autre façon de situer un point—dans l'espace, dans le temps—une autre forme de *suspens*" [135]) to be essential in creating moments where "le *détail* le plus humble, le plus insignifiant, mis en relation avec quelque chose d'immense . . . résonne soudain, touche à l'obscur de l'être" (132). This dynamic operates in several ways here. Rising against gravity and presumably supported by the poetic "souffle," the feather's striking movement against the sky suggests its relation to several things—to a bird's feather, an angel's wing, a poet's quill—all embodied in a single element. In keeping with this dynamic, the sole verb, "monte," translates a force through

¹⁶ *Airs* was included in *Poésie: 1946-1967*. Paris: Gallimard, 1971.

which the feather paradoxically draws the earth upward, as though illustrating the power of the natural world and language to realign an essential balance. As Ferrage understands this ascensional image, “ce distique finale . . . évoque métaphoriquement un mince croissant de lune, dont il fait une sorte d’aile capable d’enlever la terre toujours plus haut” (216). And this last line in fact conveys an expanding radiance through which we feel the sun, and thus the relation of distant bodies in space to earth, thereby reflecting the intersection of distance and proximity he so admires in Follain and aims to achieve in his own work.

This poem conveys Jaccottet’s vision of poets as “ces veilleurs . . . fidèles à l’antique lumière” (*Transaction* 302) by bringing out the effects of light in several ways. Firstly, the recurrent <u>, sounded seven times in the last two lines, intensifies the sense of suspended luminosity on which the poem ends. As shown in Shinabargar’s analysis of Jaccottet’s earlier collection, *L’ignorant*, when patterned in this way the “anterior [y]” (296) creates a sustained impression of light within a “cohesive textual structure” (296),¹⁷ an effect achieved in *Airs* as well. Further, in addition to passing from one word to the next through semantic and rhythmic patterning as a series of torches might be lit from one to another, the <u> voices the semantic and auditory resonance associated with light from the Latin origin, *lumen*, of French words such as *lumière* and *lumineux* (*Robert* 1471-72). Finally, the front rounded [y], when spoken, performs the poem’s ascensional movement and further intensifies the poem’s luminous resonance in modulating through the rhythmic and sonorous patterns of the repeated consonant sequences [l], [m], [n] and [p], [d], [s].

In a poem that evokes movement and stillness, distance and proximity, the brilliance of this transitory moment thus *outwardly* deploys through the movement of pronunciation and *inwardly* resonates through sound each time the poem is recited, thus exemplifying a moment where, as Jean-Pierre Richard has observed of light in Jaccottet’s work, “l’objet devient lumière” (316), a light that is “à la fois source et but . . . vers l’ouverture infinie de l’être” (317). In this way, the poem can be seen to reflect what Catherine Langle refers to as “des polyphonies neuves,” (7) and Bénévent reads, in a description of Jaccottet’s poems of this period, as “des effets de rythmes, d’assonances, d’allitérations qui conduisent à musicaliser le poème” (119). In Jaccottet’s own terms, such an approach can be seen as “un chantonement, plutôt qu’un chant” (Preface, *Philippe Jaccottet: Tous feux éteints* 16) that is all the more striking due to its spare composition and muted components.

While the feather in the poem just considered provides the sole earthly element against which space seems larger, other poems in *Airs* evoke immensity without this contrast by insisting on distance itself:

La parfaite douceur est figurée au loin
à la limite entre les montagnes et l’air:

distance, longue étincelle
qui déchire, qui affine (*Poésie* 129)

The successive designations of distance (“au loin,” “à la limite,” “distance”) seem to lighten and dissolve the mountains. As Élisabeth Cardonne-Arlyck discusses this practice, “Le

¹⁷ Shinabargar provides an analysis of the “anterior [y]” (296), other “bright anterior vowels” (295) and further textual patternings in Jaccottet’s earlier collection, *L’ignorant*.

paysage, notamment dans les poèmes d'*Airs*, est structuré par la distance" (129). Through the designation of distance as an incandescent spark ("étincelle") it becomes a beacon in a continuing journey and further echoes the thematics of light in the poem just examined. The opposition between "douceur" and "déchire" is sharpened by "affine," suggesting that distance itself makes us keener to perceive the world around us.

A key element in Jaccottet's aim to render distance nearer, in fact, is the cry of an unseen bird. As birds pass between the seen and the unseen, they offer hints of a place beyond our limited perception while fully participating in *this* world. As living thresholds, they confirm his intuition that there are no barriers between our immediate surroundings and the unseen space beyond them. Jaccottet has used Rilke's term, "l'Ouvert," to indicate his own treatment of an 'opened' space:¹⁸

... il y a là un moment où l'espace est vu autrement que par ... la perception occidentale où le sujet est séparé de l'objet, où il y a des limites, et là on a l'impression justement que, tout d'un coup, c'est ce que Rilke appelait dans des termes tout à fait précis, "l'Ouvert" ... c'est-à-dire cet espace où tout d'un coup les limites s'effaçaient. (Personal interview)

In *Rilke par lui-même* (1970), Jaccottet traces the development of the bird cry's transformative power for Rilke. As seen in the earlier poet's writing, it emblemizes the reconciliation of inner and outer worlds in ways that closely parallel Jaccottet's own experience. In reflections such as the following, for example, Rilke writes of the bird's cry as creating a sense of connection within an unlimited yet protected space: "... un *cri d'oiseau* était là soudain, *accordé au-dehors et en lui-même*; c'est-à-dire qu'il ne se réfracta pas aux limites du corps, qu'il *concilia* les deux directions en *un espace ininterrompu* où, mystérieusement protégée, ne persista qu'une tache de la plus pure, de la plus profonde conscience" (100). Here Jaccottet sees, in terms that recall the interview quoted above, "le moment mystérieux où naît ce que Rilke appellera le *Weltinnenraum* (espace intérieur du monde), qui est à la fois monde intériorisé et moi extériorisé, où s'abolissent les limites fatales entre dedans et dehors" (100). Jaccottet's focus on Rilke's recurrent reference to this event in his correspondence ("ce cri, pour un instant peut transformer le monde tout entier en espace intérieur" [101]) shows its importance for his own view of space and for his view of poetic expression generally. He notes: "Le chant d'oiseau (comme d'autres signes encore) ouvre l'espace total, transparent, qu'il appellera bientôt l'Ouvert, un espace aussi intact que l'intérieur d'une rose, un espace angélique'..." (101). For Jaccottet, this sound from a hidden source exemplifies the poetic experience of reaching across boundaries in a moment of seeming reconciliation between subjective space and the external world. Jean-Marc Sourdillon understands the threshold quality of the bird's cry in Rilke's poetry as being further reflected in Jaccottet's poetics, "c'est comme si un passage s'ouvrait dans l'ouïe" (123).

Jaccottet's expression of "l'Ouvert" is often in the context of the countryside surrounding Grignan, which in the late 1950s and early 1960s was still a relatively pristine

¹⁸ The term "l'Ouvert" is Jaccottet's translation of the German "das Offene" in Rilke's "8th Duino Elegy." The beginning of Jaccottet's translation of the elegy is as follows: "De tous ses yeux la créature voit / l'Ouvert. Seuls nos yeux à nous sont / comme retournés et disposés tout autour d'elle / en pièges, autour de sa libre sortie" (Qtd. in Clerval 164).

space of wooded hills and fields ringed by distant mountains. This terrain remains a source of simple elements, such as birds and the sky, through which he expresses an intuition of something beyond. In the following poem, the juxtaposition of a harvest scene against a sudden cry from above, together with other carefully composed elements, creates what I will term the *mise en rapport* between the earth and the heavens toward which Jaccottet strives:

Au moment orageux du jour
au moment hagard de la vie
ces faucilles au ras de la paille

Tout crie soudain plus haut
que ne peut gravir l'ouïe (*Poésie* 117)

Several contrasts in the choice and arrangement of the poem's elements illustrate the *mise en rapport*. An inherent drama arises in the first three lines: placed parallel to each other, the adjectives "orageux" and "hagard" underscore the harsh effect of the heavens on human endurance, while the harvest tools at rest create a kind of still life of momentary respite from toil.¹⁹ The absence of verbs creates immediacy and stillness. Temporal elements placed parallel to each other, "au moment . . . du jour / au moment de la vie," pinpoint this as an exemplary moment. The demonstrative adjective "ces" of "ces faucilles" focuses on *these* particular tools in *this* particular time, heightening the dramatic effect of the bird's cry that will at once alter and unify this scene.

Because Jaccottet rarely uses elements from the human realm, the sickles are especially striking here. As when these objects appear elsewhere in his poems, they often register a generative or nurturing relation to humanity. Here the sickles are presented such that they reflect a heroic humanity despite their modest purpose.²⁰ Their disposition against the straw also suggests writing implements momentarily at rest against a field of evolving possibility, as occurs elsewhere in his work in images such as the "plow of the rains" (*Pensées* 22) and the "blue plowing" (39) of the sky.

When the unanimity of sound ("Tout crie") rings out against the stillness of the first three lines, this sudden contrast expands the still life into a larger landscape. Too high to be heard, the cries further extend the sense of space to a place *beyond* perception yet within

¹⁹ A comparison can be made between Jaccottet's poetic practice here and that seen in Victor Hugo's "Saison des semailles" (783). In Jaccottet's poem, the human figure itself is notably absent, its presence discernable from harvest tools at rest at the end of an arduous day, as read through the adjective "hagard." While both poems address the connection between human toil, the poet's work and the heavens, Hugo foregrounds the human presence through repeatedly inscribing the figures of the "vieillard qui jette à poignées / La moisson future aux sillons" and the poet himself. The final line of Hugo's poem further distinguishes the two poets, as "Le geste auguste du semeur" casts the sower and the poet as heroic figures, while Jaccottet's poem shifts the final emphasis to a depiction of the cosmos itself and our ability to perceive it.

²⁰ One can see a possible homage to the harvester ("le moissonneur") within this harvest scene, as it is a key figure in the work of Jaccottet's early mentor, Gustave Roud. In a 1966 article, Jaccottet admires Roud's text, *Pour un moissonneur* (1941), for its sense of "continuité composée" formed of each text's adherence to "une saison de l'année paysanne" within a deep "plénitude intérieure" (*Éléments* 99).

The sickle is also an important part of agricultural as well as cultural life in the area around Grignan, as seen in seasonal festivals that feature competitions in its use.

our understanding. In this moment, the bird's unheard cry, rendered palpable in the poem, imparts a timelessness to an otherwise ordinary harvest scene of straw and sickles.

In the following poem, the process of opposition and juxtaposition again conveys the earth-heavens relation. Here a single leaf is all the more striking, as its isolation magnifies the surrounding immensity:

Tout un jour les humbles voix
d'invisibles oiseaux
l'heure frappée dans l'herbe sur une feuille d'or

le ciel à mesure plus grand (*Poésie*130)

A telescoping effect that alternates vast space with a single, precise detail occurs in moving from the voices of unseen birds (l. 1, 2) to one sun-bronzed leaf (l. 3) and then back to a larger sky (l. 4). The open, fragmentary nature of the lines, not limited or directed by verbs, contributes to the sense of expansion. The temporal dimension is doubly "struck" ("frappée") into the leaf, which bears the imprint not only of the particular moment ("l'heure") but whose golden hue and position on the ground further reflect the seasonal effects of the autumn sun. As elsewhere in Jaccottet's work, the voices of invisible birds correspond to a sense of responsive life and possible redemption just beyond our perception.

A key element of Jaccottet's poetics is at work in the poems just considered. As shown above, many poems in *Airs* create the effect of a still life in that they are formed of careful compositions of a few significant items against a vast expanse, thus reflecting a way in which Jaccottet puts into practice a relation he admires in Follain's writing: "Ainsi le détail le plus humble, le plus insignifiant, mis en relation avec quelque chose d'immense ... résonne soudain, touche à l'obscur de l'être" (*Entretien* 132). As individual elements framed within simple settings, the feather (132), sickles (117), and leaf (130) examined above serve several purposes. They are first *themselves* and thereby voice Jaccottet's desire for a poetry accessible to all that is stated as simply as possible. At the same time, through composing these elements in relation to darkness and light, movement and stillness, distance and proximity, they become conduits with the potential to express the intersection between the finite and the infinite that Jaccottet seeks to express in moments where, as he writes in *La semaison*, "la limite et l'illimité deviennent visibles en même temps, c'est-à-dire quand on voit des formes tout en devinant qu'elles ne disent pas tout, qu'elles laissent à l'insaisissable sa part" (22).

Although twenty years separate *Pensées sous les nuages* (1983) from *Airs*, in this collection of poems Jaccottet continues to use the sound of unseen birds as a conduit that aims to convey a mediating force between the heavens and earth. As its title indicates, the collection is characterized by an awareness of barriers that sometimes obscure the sense of limitless expanse in *Airs*. In the following poem, the heavens and earth are balanced through scattered bird cries that resonate against the silence of the autumn day, despite the impending cold front that seems already to make itself felt:

en passant, nous aurons encore entendu
ces cris d'oiseaux sous les nuages

dans le silence d'un midi d'octobre vide,
ces cris épars, à la fois près et comme très loin
(*ils* sont rares, parce que le froid
s'avance telle une ombre derrière la charrue des pluies)
ils mesurent l'espace...

Et moi qui passe au-dessous d'eux,
il me semble qu'*ils* ont parlé, non pas questionné, appelé,
mais répondu. Sous les nuages bas d'octobre. (*Pensées* 21-22)

Occurring in alternating lines within the broader agricultural metaphor of the “charrue des pluies,” the birds’ cries, as italicized above for emphasis, visually suggest seeds in the successively unfolding furrows of the poetic line. Further, their defining sound punctuates the auditory field, especially when heard at a distance as in this instance. As for Rilke, these sounds herald threshold moments that are at once purifying and galvanizing for Jaccottet. Like poetic words, the birds’ cries “measure space” through proximity and distance (“à la fois près et comme très loin”) and reassure the subject of his own place within the landscape: he is careful to gauge his position “below them” just as they are “below the clouds,” where they serve as intermediaries through the response (“ils ont . . . répondu”) of their cries. Given the importance Jaccottet attributes to the act of sowing, as discussed above regarding the three collections of journals entitled *La semaison*, the birds’ cries resonate yet further in this scene of potential regeneration.

Here the “plow of the rains” brings the skies into the generative process as well,²¹ as in the image of “blue plowing” (39) considered below. The motif of ‘passage’ (“en passant,” “Et moi qui passe”) reinforces the fleeting nature of the scene while placing the subject and his surroundings within a continuum, as further seen in the implied movement of the plow across the sky. In addition to joining the heavens and earth in a productive relation, the plow may reflect a muted tribute to Jaccottet’s early mentor, Swiss poet Roud. In his commentary and anthology, *Gustave Roud*, he quotes Roud’s thoughts on the poetic potential of the plow: “Elle [la charrue] ne cesse pas de se relier à quelqu’un et à quelque chose, d’être indéfiniment vivante. Je sais qu’en laissant sur elle errer quelques instants mon regard, une main de laboureur naîtrait de l’air. . .” (25).

The gesture of such a hand is felt in the sense of reassurance and companionship at the end of the following poem. As elsewhere in Jaccottet’s writing, light intensifies and space expands as barriers become transparent, producing a sense of reconciliation:

La lumière se fortifie, l’espace croît,
les montagnes ressemblent de moins en moins à des murs,
elles rayonnent, elles croissent elles aussi,
.....

Qu’avons-nous franchi là?
Une vision, pareille à un labour bleu?

Garderons-nous l’empreinte à l’épaule, plus d’un instant,
de cette main? (*Pensées* 39)

²¹ Jaccottet develops the theme of the plow throughout his career. The 1997 notebook entry, “Deux milans volent côte à côte vers le nord; des charrues ailées” (*Carnets* 87), gives a sense of speed and grace to the plow in the sky, as well as a feeling of community in an otherwise solitary effort.

Crossing the threshold of a “blue plowing” (“un labour bleu”) implies a potential harvest from the heavens. Although the plow seems incongruous when applied to the sky, it suggests that the poet-plowman must apply a sustained effort in order to craft poems from lightness and transparency. The communal “nous” contributes to the sense that the subject has passed into a space of community, where the presence of a comforting guide or companion is felt, if only for a moment, through a gentle touch on the shoulder.²² Jaccottet’s characteristic framing of these last three lines through the oblique approach of inversion and interrogatives conveys the tentative nature of this vision.²³

Space is again brought close through the hand that seems to infuse the entire sky with presence in the poem that immediately follows the one considered just above:

Il se dessine une veine rose dans l’air
et peu à peu plusieurs, comme sous la peau
d’une main jeune qui salue ou dit adieu.
Il s’insinue une douceur dans la lumière
comme pour aider à traverser la nuit. (40)

Here an underlying circulation that links humanity to the heavens appears in the veined sky and in the communicative gesture it offers. Although Jaccottet has been associated with a poetics of the impalpable (“l’insaisissable” [*La semaison* 22]) much of his writing evokes embodied scenes such as this that register a palpable presence. Such threshold experiences express his intuition that there is no “other side” from which we are separated, but rather degrees of awareness that reveal or obscure a more complete perception of the world. The poet’s delicate task resides in conveying such moments through a process of “listening and gathering signs” (“écouter et recueillir des signes” [26]).

Other poems in *Pensées sous les nuages* express Jaccottet’s intuition of a communicative link that circulates between the heavens and earth, and that sometimes surpasses these limits to express an even greater expanse, as when the human voice blends with the stars (63);²⁴ a comet returns from the realm of death to sow seeds from past centuries (67); voyagers (perhaps the departed, perhaps wandering souls) pass through the “last door” to look down upon a constellation from a realm somewhere beyond it (68,) and their voices then descend from the heavens to circulate among trees “constellated” with April (“les arbres constellés de leur avril” [69]).

It is fitting that nearly twenty years after *Pensées sous les nuages* (1983), even the title of Jaccottet’s *Nuages* (2002) reflects at once the continued distillation of poetic expression and his ongoing reflections on the eternal within the ephemeral. True to his belief in the primacy of immediate experience, the extended meditation in *Nuages* reflects Jaccottet’s

²² The fleeting image of the shoulder in this poem recalls Roud’s recurrent use of this image to evoke a momentary bond between people, especially in contrast to solitude, in several texts of *Pour un moissonneur* (1941), including “Épaule,” where the shoulder appears three times in this context. Jaccottet calls this book Roud’s “livre de la maturité . . . le résultat le plus proche de son idéal d’harmonie” in his preface to Roud’s *Air de la solitude et autres écrits* (13).

²³ Perhaps this delicate approach is fashioned in the hope that, as Rilke expressed it in a letter translated by Jaccottet, “telle ou telle face plus cachée de l’existence demeure, dans l’espace d’un poème, tournée vers nous” (*Rilke* 175).

²⁴ “Ecoute: comment se peut-il / que notre voix troublée se mêle ainsi / aux étoiles?” (*Pensées* 63).

evocation of haiku as “extraordinairement tranquille et merveilleusement naturel. . . . Le contraire même de ‘n’importe où hors du monde.’ On est dans ce monde-ci: mais ce monde est une maison ouverte. . .” (*Haïku* 3).²⁵ As such, *Nuages* is situated in present reality and evokes the commonplace practice of watching clouds, an activity accessible to all, as he aims for his poetry to be. In addition to being a confirmation of the *real* for Jaccottet, the clouds impart a sense of familiarity and reassurance:

. . . leur apparition inattendue, véhémence, sauvage, m’avait exalté par sa seule intensité, son relief, sa force de réalité, avant toute autre chose . . . tout se rapprochait; c’était pareil à un assaut, mais sans rien d’effrayant, ni d’agressif; pour me conquérir, pour me convaincre que j’étais bien au monde et le monde était bien autour de moi; que rien de cela n’était du rêve ou de l’inconsistant; même, justement, ces nuages qui changeaient si rapidement, imprévisiblement, de forme. . . (23-25)

The force of reality he feels in the clouds seems to stem from the strong emotion they create, causing the world to draw closer (“tout se rapprochait” [24]) in what feels like a comforting gesture. In a further passage, he extends the experience of affirmation and reassurance he feels in the clouds to other “choses de ce monde.” In so doing, he confers a sense of contentment upon the totality of his life that reinforces the tone of a peaceful testament that continues in the final passage, as though Jaccottet would bequeath to us an awakened awareness of each lived moment through words:

Mais que signifie, ici, “réalité”? Rien de plus que: ce qui ne peut pas ne pas paraître tel, dans la limite de mes sens et de ma pensée, de mon corps, du monde qui est le mien, parce que le froid qui nous fait frissonner tout à coup, la chaleur qui nous a fait d’abord transpirer au moindre effort, l’ombre qui éteint les formes, le temps qui vous use lentement, rien ne permet de le mettre en doute. . . . (Il se peut donc que jamais je ne me fusse senti aussi réel dans un monde lui-même aussi réel que dans cette période-là—alors qu’il me faudrait bien quitter l’espace et le temps.) (26-28)

The simplicity and sparseness of Jaccottet’s vocabulary evokes a wide scope of reference that comprises both the universal and the personal, conveying Jaccottet’s view of the porous boundary between individual experience and the realm in which it occurs. At the same time, the impulse to share this personal experience with others has a profound ethical imperative as insistent in this 2002 text as in the 1957 collection *La promenade sous les arbres*, regarding which Cardonne-Arlyck remarks, “On note le glissement au *nous*, récurrent dans ce texte: . . . aux lecteurs et à tous, le désir que la poésie aide à vivre déploie sa pleine envergure dans la mesure où il est ultimement tourné vers autrui. . .” (118).

As elsewhere in his work, in *Nuages* Jaccottet voices an inclusive view of the natural world and humanity, one that extends the range of human experience in lessons from nature. While ephemeral, these perceived links between earth and heavens—clouds,

²⁵ In his 1972 remarks upon accepting the *prix Montaigne*, Jaccottet contrasts what he views as the excesses of nineteenth-century French poets who sought escape from present conditions with haiku’s persistent valuing of the present moment as follows: “Comme si, à l’affirmation désespérée de Rimbaud, ‘la vraie vie est ailleurs,’ répondait non pas une affirmation contraire (qui ne m’eût pas davantage convaincu), mais comme une floraison de signes discrets témoignant d’une vraie vie possible ici et maintenant” (*Transaction* 312).

flowers, birds, or mountains that disappear in the mist—become thresholds that dissolve boundaries between inner and outer worlds to open onto a renewed and habitable space. In this way, the poet seems to affirm that he has, through a truer reality, found sanctuary within the immediacy of life, the natural world, and poetic writing.

In thus emerging from the destruction of World War II and continuing to voice a fragile yet persistent vision of possible renewal in a threatened world, Jaccottet awakens an awareness of a restorative connection in nature. While he conceived this poetic project over fifty years ago, the prescience of his mission seems the more evident now, as we sense when he references, in a 2002 preface, “ce ‘temps de détresse’ dont a parlé Hölderlin prophétiquement—et dont nous ne sommes pas sortis, loin s’en faut” (*Philippe Jaccottet: Tous feux éteints* 16). In sharing a vision of nature as threshold, Jaccottet’s work offers the possibility to view a world beyond individual limits. As Cardonne-Arlyck observes, “L’exigence éthique de sa poésie, la décision d’établir en elle sa propre vie et celle des siens, le souci de trouver des raisons partageables de vivre dans la lumière que la poésie tire de notre séjour, tout cela nécessite que Jaccottet dégage des *leçons*, patientes ou promptes, de ce qu’il a perçu: qu’il offre en partage non pas seulement des rencontres de paysages ou de choses, mais des possibilités de sens, des *directions*. . .” (118).²⁶ The value of this legacy can be seen to move beyond individual meditative renewal to voice a societal ethics through poetry, a *poethics* whose potential to indicate a path forward depends on our attentiveness to nature’s lessons.

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²⁶ Through the term “*leçons*,” Cardonne-Arlyck references Jaccottet’s noted collection of poems, *Leçons*, which addresses the final agony of a loved one and its aftermath. Jacques Réda has written of the “humbles, terribles et très hautes *Leçons* de Jaccottet” (67), and evokes their “vacillement de dernière extrémité” (69). For him, these poems convey “à quel point l’homme peut être démoli . . . et sauvant jusque dans ce malheur l’espoir incapable de comprendre” (69).

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