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Review of Philippe Geinoz, Relations au travail: Dialogue entre poésie et peinture à l'époque du cubisme: Apollinaire-Picasso-Braque-Gris-Reverdy

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Philippe Geinoz *Relations au travail: Dialogue entre poésie et peinture à l'époque du cubisme: Apollinaire-Picasso-Braque-Gris-Reverdy* Histoire des idées et critique littéraire, Volume 480.

As a literary genre, the *thèse*- or *habilitation*-turned-book will have few genuine enthusiasts. These texts are long and often not very lively. Among the examples I've encountered, Philippe Geinoz's *Relations au travail: Dialogue entre poésie et peinture à l'époque du cubisme: Apollinaire-Picasso-Braque-Gris-Reverdy* [Relations at work: Dialogue between poetry and painting in the cubist epoch—Apollinaire, Picasso, Braque, Gris, Reverdy] is among the very best. Indeed, if I had encountered it sooner, it might have enriched some of my own recent work on Pablo Picasso's milieu. That's because the issues in which Geinoz and I are both interested revolve around the same formal and interpretive problems: what kind of work does a Cubist painting by Picasso or a poem by Guillaume Apollinaire require of its viewer/reader, and how does this demand raise methodological issues for us?

The problem is all the more intense, Geinoz writes,

because these poems and paintings do not offer themselves as the arrested movements of past constellations. If their structure often retains a reality from among the most contingent, which one approaches only via the reconstruction of a fugitive context, it is only to confide [the work] . . . into the care of those "men of the future" to whom Apollinaire addresses himself in the last poem of *Alcools*, to the active gaze of a benevolent reader or beholder, whom the discontinuity of the whole requires to realize in the present, by way of the play of the relations it is necessary to weave, of what inevitably seems . . . like a lost present, an archival item. (22; all translations mine)

This permits one "to recommence in each reading the process of putting-into-play and to preserve the contingent character of the various elements [of the work]" (22). In other words, paintings and poems are historical artifacts, but they are also combinations of pictorial and poetic elements existing in the present, where we encounter them, over and over, realizing them anew each time by placing their elements in sense-making relation to one another and to the whole. What unites the works of early twentieth-century modernism Geinoz discusses is their shared determination to make these facts about works of art central to the reader/viewers's experience. I agree completely about the significance of this issue and am grateful for Geinoz's thoughtful readings of many important works of pictorial and poetic art.

Writing about, for instance, Picasso's poor people and performers, Geinoz emphasizes the conventional nature of the subject matter, already freighted by the turn of the twentieth century with a heavy load of accumulated significance. Their pitiable forms recall pathetic stories, but—as in the case of the *Old Guitarist* (1903–4)—are so locked up within their compositions, so conspicuously bent to their frames' dimensions, as to make it impossible for you to imagine them playing out those sad plots or of communicating with or opening out toward the viewer (54–55). (I think there is a more complex dynamic at work in such paintings—especially in *Poor People on the Seashore (The Tragedy)* (1903)—but that is a small part of Geinoz's argument. Other pictures of stock characters, including those of street performers, such as *Young Acrobat on a Ball* (1905), seem to freeze time and abstract their figures from the barest indications of place and context so as to reduce them to their conventional significances and to stage, in their juxtapositions to one another, as-it-were scientific or archetypal comparisons (young/old, strong/agile) (47–50). The key notion here being that the painter unites in these conventional figures an abstracted and traditional iconography with an expressive and emotional directness that is at odds with the former (54).

Apollinaire figures in Geinoz's account of Picasso's early work as an astute observer and a kindred spirit, one who recognizes and feels the same impulses as the painter. In his responses to Picasso's important 1905 exhibition, Apollinaire speaks of magic, ritual, divinity, and mystery. The secular misery and profane nature of the performers' lives underscore the tension between artistic performance and convention, on the one hand, and something else, on the other. For Apollinaire, these works represent acts—each one sacred and exacting, even mystical—on the saltimbanques'

part, along with a demand for a mode of response that can be understood in analogical terms as (a similarly exacting) piety on the viewer's part (68–69).

Apollinaire's commentary opens onto the larger topic of his response to various themes of his new painter-friend's work, which in turn raises the issue of "productive reception" (courtesy of Karlheinz Stierle, "Babel und Pfingsten: Zur immanenten Poetik von Apollinaires *Alcools*," Rainer Warning and Winfried Wehle, eds., *Lyrik und Malerei der Avantgarde*, Munich: Fink, 1982, 61–113). Geinoz discovers this issue at work in Apollinaire's poem "Spectacle," and particularly in the form of the poem's linked oppositions between passivity and activity, the representation of nature and the creation of a new and willed reality, and the distinction (courtesy of Luc Fraisse) between knowing and making (see Luc Fraisse, "Apollinaire et l'esthétique de la perte," *Studia Romanica Posnaniensia*³⁴ (2007): 187–200). In choosing to privilege the second element of each binary, Apollinaire turns out to be advancing a theory of poetry that privileges the creative work of the audience. This shows itself in the audience *in* the poem: an audience of magicians—conjurers, not passive observers—who are then artists, like the members of Apollinaire's (and Picasso's) circle (85). By building an aesthetic of reception into his work, Apollinaire is stipulating the importance of reader response to his own sense of what it means to read his poetry. The notion of "productive reception" further identifies Apollinaire's appropriation of figures and themes from others (Paul Verlaine, for one) as an analogous generative principle at work in his own writing. If reading one of Apollinaire's poems means transforming it in the cauldron of your readerly sorcery, it is important to note that Apollinaire concocted his poetry similarly, by transmogrifying Verlaine's.

This is but a taste—all the present format will permit—of a thesis that wends its way through Cubism and related literary matters and carries into its scope Juan Gris, Georges Braque, Pierre Reverdy, and others. The leitmotif, so to speak, is an opposition between the work's reference to its author's reality and the work's self-sufficient status as a thing—a thing that poses a challenge to reality, or to a shared understanding of it, by permitting or demanding that the reader/viewer make sense of it without the kind of referential closure one might suppose to be the target of interpretation.

Friedrich Nietzsche, William James, and Henri Bergson (and Catholic modernism!) help historicize the challenge. Classic art-historical readings aid in establishing *Les Femmes d'Alger* (1907) as both a face-off with the viewer that breaks the integrity of the fictional world and a narrative that exists as a lateral axis, not as a drama; as a space of potential intelligibility rather than one of expression. The painting becomes at once a thing that thematizes its mode of address, which apostrophizes its viewer, and a progression—something like the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel, in which directionality, temporality, and binary oppositions diagram onto one another. Truthmaking in such a space proceeds from the intelligibility of the oppositions afforded and contends with the limitations placed on intelligibility by an outward turning, which undermines reference and insists instead on the work's autonomous, thingly character. The shared character of reality shows itself to be in tension with a new, personal, creative way of encountering the world and the work of art (231).

One might see this kind of reading as placing Cubism and its literary *confrères* somewhere between Russian Formalism and phenomenological criticism, which would be both historically apt and interpretively persuasive. These paintings and poems *do* demand that the reader/viewer go to work, enter into relations with them—understand and construct their worlds. And that work is also, and fundamentally, a meditation on self and on time and on truth. And doubtless these are timeless meditations, but they are woven deeply into the extended moment (to borrow a turn of phrase from Geinoz's conclusion) this book considers. Consequently, Geinoz discovers analogous tensions functioning in the work of the painters and poets he considers, often recurring to the "philosophie nouvelle" of Nietzsche, James, and Bergson for historical and philosophical backup. (For a concise example, see the compact discussion of Reverdy's "*réel absent*" and "*réel présent*" [233–41]. For something more sustained, see Geinoz's redeployment of semiotic research [notably Yve-Alain Bois's] into Synthetic Cubism [347–78].)

Relations au travail is a valuable and carefully considered argument, filled with close readings, wide-ranging and thoughtful use of existing literature, and a framework of pertinent intellectual-historical context. If, as I mentioned, the literary genre of the *thèse*- or *habilitation*-turned-book can be off-putting, the intelligence and erudition of Geinoz's study more than repays the effort.

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