

# “A FORMAL TYPE OF WORK”<sup>1</sup>: REREADING EMMANUEL HOCQUARD

NORMA COLE

“une . nue”<sup>2</sup>

—Emmanuel Hocquard

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Dear Stacy,

In the airport, at the gate, very early for the flight leaving Philadelphia to come home to San Francisco. Leaving Philly, where I saw Jena and Laynie. We spoke about you, missing you.

I’m reading, in Hélène Cixous’s *Ex-Cities*,<sup>3</sup> the introduction by Eric Prenowitz, where he gives a brief yet thorough account of her bio. I’m reflecting just now about the relationship(s) between biography and fiction because of the anthology Laynie is editing, about poets who write novels, poets who also have written a novel. Laynie has just written a novel herself—she’s in New York this weekend for her book party.

I am writing, or will be writing about Emmanuel Hocquard’s *AEREA*, imagining I need to think more about this palindrome, how it must parallel the text in terms of ... characters? narrative? setting, which proliferates and becomes characters? Ah, grammar. *AER*, air.<sup>4</sup>

**CONTEMPORARY  
PRACTICE**

What, if anything, does this “AER” have to do with *AEREA*? Is it true that more literal means more abstract?

§

Dear Stacy,

I’m rereading the book as if in a dream, as though haunted by past readings, or rather feelings; at the same time, as though never having read these words before even though recognizing every sentence in its order. Surprised and not, I pluck from the pages of the book a photo I took of Emmanuel Hocquard in my sunroom or living room when he came to visit in 1986 or ‘87, not much in the room, a wicker armchair, a small table beyond it—I’d just moved into the house. Sitting in the wicker chair, he looks directly at the camera or at me, his right hand on his forehead, unsmiling, “time frozen in space.”<sup>5</sup>

“Imagine, reader, Ulysses far away from his own people...”<sup>6</sup>

Ulysses. Not Odysseus, the Greek name, but Latin for the character from ancient Greek literature.

§

Dear Stacy,

Remember how he’s reading Lucretius? I mean, all the time? Emmanuel once asked me how that book, *De Rerum Natura*, was translated into English. I said, “On the Nature of Things.” He snorted and said something in French like “you can’t be serious!” When I got home to SF, I xeroxed the cover and sent it. That was of course before you could go online and just send the link.

Emmanuel Hocquard, who writes in poetry, in prose or in between, thinks about the fiction of grammar, works on it. Doesn’t need or use “genre” as his port of call. Reads Wittgenstein, Reznikoff and Chandler, as in Raymond.<sup>7</sup> Always trying to get closer to literality, word = thing, tautology. “The world is a collection of letters.”<sup>8</sup>

There’s a paragraph, a close-up, near the end of *AEREA*, where Hocquard communicates in detail the movement of the fishing line, the fish, the water, the air, the lava rock, “a business concluded by death,”<sup>9</sup> where the literal transforms abruptly into metaphor, as Francis Ponge’s *Savon* (*Soap*), begun in 1942 but not completed until 1965. This pivotal work, in its literality veers with its/his address to the French, to the Germans—during WW2, when Germany had marched into

France and taken over—becomes at once metaphor and metonymy. And yet, “The sound of the leaves is just the sound of the leaves.”<sup>10</sup>

As the photo of the Lucas Cranach painting of “Eve Tempted by the Serpent,” on the covers of both French and American versions, means all the words in the book. “Night has fallen on the trees and on the great plains of the middle of the world. As I listened to the icecubes clink in my glass, I admire the delicate nudity of my smooth-bodied companion, Eve by Cranach the Younger.”<sup>11</sup> On the back cover of the P.O.L edition (1985), c. 1350 is given as the date for that painting, whereas on the back cover of the Lydia Davis translation, published in 1992 by The Marlboro Press, the dates for Lucas Cranach the Elder are 1472-1553. Younger, older, the thirteen hundreds or fifteen hundreds, disparities abound. What is literal?

§

Dear Stacy,

I am writing about Emmanuel Hocquard, whom we both adore and love to think about, about whom we say to one another the next time we’re both in Paris we’ll make a plan, rent a car, drive south and west to the Pyrénées, find that farmhouse where he’s living with Juliette Valéry. I’m writing about Emmanuel Hocquard and “the novel.” And other things.

Along with these musings I’m also thinking about how early in my writing life I knew writing a novel wouldn’t work for me because I believed it would have to skate too close to reality, too familiar and familial. And now, suddenly, coming up to map’s edge, finding purpose in remembrance of things that happened, sliding horizontally into the mental landscape like rocks on a platter,<sup>12</sup> “To be at the same time somewhere and nowhere.”<sup>13</sup>

In his interview with Henri Deluy,<sup>14</sup> Emmanuel Hocquard speaks about how, from the time of his editing (and making with his own hands, i.e., typesetting, etc.), with Raquel, the Orange Export series, from 1969 to 1986, he did not see himself as “part of a generation” or his writing and the writing of others as one genre or another, “poetry” for instance, but as writing: writing as an instrument, a tool for experimentation, to push against the rules of the game. No interest in boundaries. Erasing the circumscription between prose and verse; liminal.

*AEREA* reads rhythmically but lines up as normative prose in narrative or quasi-narrative little sections, with tiny line drawings or icons between the sections (like these asterisks, but small trees, apples). No lines of verse. A “broken series.”

Dear Stacy,

I'm sitting at a table in Café Fiore, where Samantha and Yedda just came in to have a belated birthday lunch for Yedda; all the May birthdays, hers, Michael's, yours, mine. When they came in, I was reading a piece by Youssef Ishaghpour in his *Archéologie du cinéma et mémoire du siècle*,<sup>15</sup> mostly an interview with Jean-Luc Godard, but at the end, his fine text called "J-L G cinéaste de la vie moderne: Le poétique dans l'historique," a significant reference to Baudelaire's famous "The Painter of Modern Life."

I have come to think of *AEREA* as a suite of scenes, vignettes instead of *récits*. Actually, Emmanuel Hocquard makes a shift over time from thinking of *récit*, that elusive French genre, as narrative prose (I'm thinking here of his "Il rien,"<sup>16</sup> where he writes about Treasure Island as a *récit*, and there is nothing more narrative than that novel) to a paratactic form, with no chronology, no causality<sup>17</sup>—montage, in fact. Emmanuel Hocquard doesn't care or want to think about genre(s). Unless of course he's writing a grammar. He and his sometime collaborators, for example Juliette Valéry and Alexandre Delay, work in video, photo/text, sculpture/text, architecture, installations, etc.

Take *Allo Freddy?*<sup>18</sup> for instance, in which the first half of the book is pages of blank frames or windows with bits of narrative or dialogue in them; the second half, photographs, kind of helter-skelter on the page. You don't have to but the movement of the narrative tells you to find the photo that "goes with" a particular frame with the bit of text in it. It's a fictional piece, a "noir" mystery with characters, but with real people in the photographs, including one or two I could swear are Emmanuel seen from behind, his hair, the trench coat, the set of his shoulders, etc.

I always relate *Allo Freddy?* to Godard's *Lettre à Freddy Buache: à propos d'un courtmétrage sur la ville de Lausanne*.<sup>19</sup> There is no quick association between the two, besides having the same name in the title, but there are many deep and pertinent affinities between Hocquard and Godard, as in the foregrounding of the address. Godard's "*Lettre*" begins with an address (in remembrance of) to Robert Flaherty and Ernst Lubitsch. I knew Lubitsch but had to look up the other guy. Robert Flaherty (1884-1951) was an American filmmaker who directed and produced the first commercially successful feature length documentary film, *Nanook of the North* (1922). I knew that title, may have even seen it way in the past, in Canada. Flaherty is the one who pioneered ethnofiction and ethnographic film. In other words, his work was the wellspring from which the ethnographic film work of Jean Rouch *et al* began. And then Godard, who, addressing Freddy and everyone else ("Dear Reader," as Emmanuel Hocquard is wont to say; he

addresses texts to Claude, Olivier, Juliette, Oscarine, Norma, Paul, Alexandre and others; his *Grammaire de Tanger* to Juliette de Laroque, his daughter), by detours, points out the signs, the signatures that figure into his vast undertaking, Bonnard, Picasso, Wittgenstein, Baudelaire to name just a few in the first pages of the unpaginated *Lettre*.

Godard is looking at, bringing into focus, things “scientifiquement,” trying to find rhythms in movements of the crowd; finding the origins of “fiction” because the city is a fiction. The sky (blue) and the forest (green) become the “roman,” the novel, which becomes abstraction. Godard states, “C’est juste une note d’intention. Ça ne fait pas une mélodie. Mais Rome ne c’est pas faite en un jour.” (“It’s just a note of intention. That doesn’t make a melody. But Rome wasn’t built in a day.”) The first showing of the film that was to celebrate the 500 years of Lausanne’s founding was at the Swiss cinématèque, 19 October 1981, but the book about its making came out in 2001. No one liked the film.

Unlike *récit*, something called *la dérive* comes into focus, détournement, poetry as drift, as presentation, not representation. Assembling fragments, phrases. Arrange together equals syntax. Not exactly fiction, not exactly non-fiction. Forest, mountain, lake (or sea perhaps). In the fiction of *AEREA*, memory is everywhere, “empty recollections, which can’t be tied to anything.” Think of Médé and the pears, Médé and the Great Sokko, Médé and the grasshoppers, the coal fire and his smile; of Montalban and his table, on it some fragments of a fresco. The book could be a hymn to Médé, who is or was a real person in EH’s young life in Tangiers, as well as an elegy for Aerea (a fiction?) who says at the book’s close:

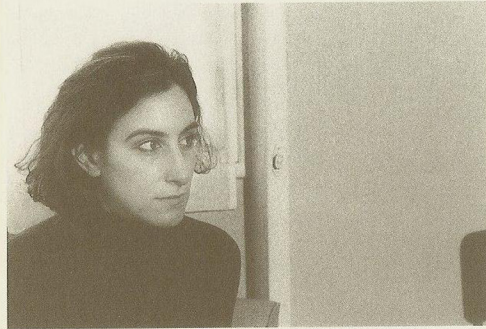
“these words in which honey was tenderly mingled with venom:  
‘Don’t forget me! Don’t forget me!’”

§

Dear Stacy,

Looking through another book by Emmanuel Hocquard and Juliette Valéry, *Le Commanditaire: Poème* (a private eye, Thomas Möbius is the “I” in the story, if it is a “story”: “Here, Thomas Möbius, you will not have anything to do with pronouns, just people.”) A noir b/w photo/text work. Flipping pages, there you are, or there is you:

d'une toute autre couleur.  
– Mais non ! s'indigna Madame Sakaze. Il faut le  
peindre tel qu'il est !



– Dans ce cas, répondit le peintre, laissez ce petit animal  
tranquille. A quoi bon le peindre ? Il est très bien tel  
qu'il est. »

§

Dear Stacy,

Osip Mandelstam, in his major essay, “Talking about Dante,” “mean(s) to say that a composition is formed not from heaping up of particulars but in consequence of the fact that one detail after another is torn away from the object, leaves it, flutters out, is hacked away from the system...”<sup>20</sup> whereas in his “Addenda to Journey to Armenia” he says, and this is substantively how Hocquard writes about writing, “Prose which corresponds to reality, no matter how expressly and minutely, no matter how efficiently and faithfully, is always a broken series ... a broken sign of the unbroken continuum.”<sup>21</sup>

Giorgio Agamben writes in his elegant “Preface” to *Infancy & History*, “Every written work can be regarded as the prologue (or rather, the broken cast) of a work never penned and destined to remain so, because later works, which in

turn will be the prologues or the moulds for other absent works, represent only sketches or death masks. The absent work, although it is unplaceable in any precise chronology, thereby constitutes the written works as *prolegomena* or *paralipomena* of a non-existent text; or, in a more general sense, as *parerga* which find their true meaning only in the context of an illegible *ergon* ... the counterfeit of a book which cannot be written.”<sup>22</sup>

In various of his texts (novel, poems, chronicle) Hocquard writes about this particular absence in terms of his old friend, the archeologist Montalban, who is forever trying to piece together shards of a fresco that once existed and now exists in his mind or in the mind’s eye. The continuum is not about origins but about rhyming space/time, as in timelessness—the everpresent.

§

Dear Stacy,

The more I reread *AEREA*, the more of a dream I find myself in. In each section, more of a sense of smell, touch. As though touching each letter, as in Emmanuel Hocquard’s “Comment j’ai écrit une (chronique)” [“How I Wrote One (chronicle)”].<sup>23</sup> “I learned how to write with the help of an alphabet whose letters, cut out of heavy cardboard, were painted with red varnish. From one letter to the next, the red was not exactly the same. I learned to trace each letter by walking my index finger over the smooth surface.”

From the same book, “Assis à ma longue table...” (“Sitting at my long table...”), first published in 1981 as a limited Orange Export chapbook, with an original watercolor by Raquel. And in the beginning of *AEREA*, we see him “Sitting today at my long table...”

As Wittgenstein has written, “We are asleep. Our life is a dream. But we wake up sometimes, just enough to know that we are dreaming.”

I just saw on Youtube a poem I don’t think we’ve seen from Emmanuel Hocquard, “Je ne sais pas si Fernando Pessoa a vraiment existé,” read by him on May 10, 2010, in Merilheu. With a photo. “I don’t know whether Fernando Pessoa has ever existed.”

Who has?



## Notes

- 1) From an interview with Emmanuel Hocquard in Serge Gavronsky's *Toward a New Poetics: Contemporary Writing in France* (University of California Press, 1994).
- 2) Emmanuel Hocquard, *Album d'images de la Villa Harris* (Hachette, 1977) 59.
- 3) Edited by Aaron Levy and Jean-Michel Rabaté, foreword by Eric Prenowitz (Slough Foundation, 2006).
- 4) Latin *aer*: air, atmosphere, ether, weather. Emmanuel Hocquard, *Album d'images de la Villa Harris* (Hachette, 1977) 61.
- 5) Emmanuel Hocquard, *AEREA dans les forêts de Manhattan* (P.O.L, 1985) 30.
- 6) *Ibid*, 7.
- 7) cf. epigraph to Emmanuel Hocquard, *Un privé à Tanger* (P.O.L, 1987).
- 8) *Ibid*, 45.
- 9) Francis Ponge, *Le Savon* (Gallimard, 1992); *Soap*, tr. Lane Dunlop (Jonathan Cape, 1969).
- 10) Emmanuel Hocquard, *Un privé à Tanger* (P.O.L, 1987) 19.
- 11) Emmanuel Hocquard, *AEREA dans les forêts de Manhattan* (P.O.L, 1985) 7.
- 12) Barbara Guest, *Rocks on a Platter* (Wesleyan, 1999).
- 13) Emmanuel Hocquard, *AEREA dans les forêts de Manhattan* (P.O.L, 1985) 37.
- 14) "Les maîtres chanteurs," *Action poétique* 131, 31-34.
- 15) Jean-Luc Godard and Youssef Ishaghpour, *Archéologie du cinéma et mémoire du siècle* (Farrago, 2000).
- 16) Emmanuel Hocquard, *Un privé à Tanger* (P.O.L, 1987) 51-58.
- 17) "Le récit," *Une grammaire de Tanger* (cipM/Spectres Familiers, 2007) unpaginated.
- 18) Emmanuel Hocquard and Juliette Valéry, *ALLO, FREDDY?: Elégie 9* (cipM/Spectres Familiers, 1996).
- 19) Jean-Luc Godard, *Lettre à Freddy Buache: à propos d'un court-métrage sur la ville de Lausanne* (Editions Demoures, 2001).
- 20) Osip Mandelstam, "Talking about Dante," tr. Clarence Brown & Robert Hughes, *DELLOS* 6, 1971.
- 21) Osip Mandelstam, *The Collected Critical Prose and Letters*, tr. Gary Harris & Constance Link (Ardis, 1979) 394.
- 22) Giorgio Agamben, *Infancy and History*, tr. Liz Heron (Verso, 1993).
- 23) Emmanuel Hocquard, *Un privé à Tanger* (P.O.L, 1987) 41.

Norma Cole's most recent books of poetry include *Win These Posters and Other Unrelated Prizes Inside* (Omnidawn, 2012), *Where Shadows Will: Selected Poems 1988—2008* (City Lights, 2009), *Natural Light* (Libellum Books, 2009), and *Spinoza in Her Youth* (Omnidawn, 2002). *TO BE AT MUSIC: Essays & Talks* made its appearance in 2010 from Omnidawn. Her translations from the French include Danielle Collobert's *It Then* (O Books, 1989), Collobert's *Notebooks, 1956-1978* (Litmus, 2003), *Crosscut Universe: Writing on Writing from France* (Burning Deck, 2000), and Jean Daive's *A Woman with Several Lives* (La Presse, 2012). *Actualities*, her collaboration with painter Marina Adams, is forthcoming from Litmus Press. She has been a contributor to SFMOMA's blog "Open Space" and also to the Poetry Foundation.