Making it Familiar: Everyday Language and Old Rhetorical Modes in the Contemporary Avant-Garde

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One of the more intriguing diary entries in modern history reads: «Germany has declared war on Russia. – Afternoon swimming school».[1] This entry was written on August 2, 1914 by Franz Kafka. Much has been made of these two sentences, or rather, of the elliptic and «dashed» blank Kafka inserted in between them. Was he implying that war and a swimming lesson were events interchangeable? Was he withdrawing himself from public life as most exegetes assume? Readers of avant-garde poetry might be tempted to think here of a whole array of writers who before and after Kafka drew on the dash to «make it strange» — Pound's famous «it», naturally, signaling prosaic, everyday or conventional language. Kafka's dash will remind some readers of the proliferous use Laurence Sterne made of the punctuation sign in *Tristram Shandy*, where he introduced four different lengths of the dash (— the quarter-inch, —— half-inch, ——— three-quarter-inch, and ———— inch) to represent various meditative or wool-gathering pauses of diverging durations and qualities. To others Samuel Beckett's thoughts on the «literature of the unword» might come to mind.[2] Still others will no doubt think of Emily Dickinson, for whom the dash appears to have been short-hand for that one unutterable word that could make all others obsolete.[3] Yet Kafka's diary entry is at once the alpha and omega to all those vanguard poetic projects, as the entry marks how at times everyday language in itself is already utterly and horrifyingly strange. It is the linguistically overdetermined function of the dash in everyday writing that has raised so many questions

among Kafka exegetes. The *virgula plana* in Latin is historically a variant of the comma. Like the comma it can be used in a variety of ways—singly, in pairs to create parenthesis, or in infinite sequences. Moreover, in many languages but particularly in English it can be utilized as substitute for various punctuation signs. As such, this conventional linguistic item hardly requires poeticization, defamilarization or denaturalization for it to be strange.

The dash is of course but one of many instances in a far more encompassing blurry zone between everyday and poetic(ized) language. More often than not, what stands out in this nebulous zone is how unfamiliar we are with the most familiar aspects of language. Nearly all avant-gardists since the late nineteenth century have explored that zone in order to put forth ever different forms of poetry. Contrary to what Russian Formalists and other early twentieth-century theorists believed, this has not led to a situation in which the exact dividing lines between poetic and everyday language have become clearer under a less cloudy sky.[4] It has left us with a tremendously rich vanguard tradition, however, and with a profusion of poetic forms. Finding an opening within this vast archive to still different aspects of everyday speech that could lead to yet other poetic forms and thence to a *contemporary* avant-garde is like looking for a needle in a haystack. And yet, the potent work of poet Frédéric Boyer allows us to do just that, because (regardless of authorial intention) it turns to the history of avant-garde poetry as exegetes have turned to Kafka's dash. Vital in Boyer's work is the very everydayness of language itself, which for various reasons has been relegated to the outskirts of experimental writing. To Boyer the modes of writing that still beg to differ are those which are absent (or almost unnoticeable) among avant-garde poetic forms. And as I will suggest in the conclusion of this short essay, Boyer is probably not the only contemporary adhering to such a poetic.

Just how avant-garde is the *Bible*? This quintessential text in Western cultural history has certainly left a stamp on avant-garde writing. Many vanguard poets have been particularly drawn to the *Book of Genesis*, as it gives them a fictional narrative, a point of departure, to start toying with the idea of what happens at the origin of language, when language in its pure form is introduced in a prelinguistic world—or, the other way round, of what occurs after the moment upon which the divine Word of instantaneous creation is given to man and everything irrevocably declines as humanity starts to build its linguistic Tower of Babel.[5] Cases abound from Hugo Ball's mystical project onward to recover an Edenic, original language through sound poetry. Given the strong connection between avant-garde writing and the *Bible*, translating the latter may well be called an avant-garde act in itself. It is likely that Pierre Alferi, François Bon, Olivier Cadiot, Jean Echenoz and over a dozen other poets and writers thought precisely that when, led by editor and poet Frédéric Boyer, they recently set out to translate the *Bible* into contemporary French.[6] An endeavor coming in the spirit of avant-garde collective creation,[7] translating the *Bible* is also a restorative act. And it is this dual route which couples avant-garde poetic creation to linguistic restoration that Boyer in his own poetry, too, seems to follow. A case in point is his recent, sixty-page-long volume of prose-poems *Vaches* (2008).[8]

Vaches, too, comes with loud biblical echoes.[9] This booklet poses a simple question: what do humans have with cows and *vice versa*? As did La Fontaine in his fables and Rilke in his fourth and eighth *Duino Elegies*, Boyer in part draws on an animal to instruct, for *Vaches* does not quite hide that humans are monstrous animals when compared to cows. Yet unlike La Fontaine's fables and many other prosopopeia it neither humanizes nor endows animals with speech. Rather, it metonymically likens cows to speech and thereby invites its readers to imagine a language that exceeds human limitation: «Les vaches sont nos doubles, mais qui étaient les /

vaches? […] Une vache est l'idée adéquate d'autres existences qui / sont cause de la notre. / Il y a l'existence des vaches. Comme il y a l'existence / des langues étrangères à toutes les langues» (11). To link humanity, animals and language in such a way is to recall *Genesis* 2, 18-20, in which God witnesses the solitude of Adam and before creating Eve produces the animals. All species are presented to Adam so that he can name them. Conspicuously, this is the first time Adam speaks in the *Bible*. Hence, the invention of language in the *Book of Genesis* is inextricably tied to animals, and when Adam labels them, their names are not yet metaphors because there is no system of language yet that would allow for such tropes. Thus, contrary to many other poems, fables, epopees and narratives that have invariably endowed animals with human speech, *Vaches* takes its cue from the fictional biblical narrative, according to which our «speech» originally may have differed in no way from that of animals. Moreover, it makes the reader identify with the first and, at its close, also with the last human being on earth. Boyer's book is for various reasons not simply to be ranked under the rubric of eco-critical and environmentalist poetry. Yet when the closing poem invites us to consider what will happen when we finally will have exterminated the cow, the suggestion is clear: «C'est alors qu'en pleurs nous les appellerons dans / les bois, dans les prés, dans notre ciel vide». With the cow removed, humanity too may finally get the worst of it. As such, this booklet, a first reading of which is likely to take less than half an hour, casts out a thinned-out narrative that rushes us through humanity's history, from its inception down to its self-destruction.

The cow as a thematic nodal point hooks itself onto a large intertextual network, which in *Vaches* is never made conspicuous enough so as to bewilder readers. Interestingly, not many avant-garde texts form part of that intertextual network. Although bestiaries abound in avant-garde writing, with Max Jacob's «Le Coq et la Perle» (in *Le Cornet à Dés*) as a memorable instance, the avant-garde has given small place to the cow in

poetry. Many modern prose examples come to mind: Jules Renard's fabulous «La vache» from his *Histoires naturelles* (1894), Roland Dubillard's *Olga ma vache* (1974), and Valère Novarina's *Le discours aux animaux* (1987), the avant-garde continuation of the Franciscan tradition of preaching to animals. In poetry, however, Benjamin Péret's «Mémoires» is one of few examples.[10] Vasily Kamensky's book *Tango with Cows* (1914) is another.[11] Significantly, Kamensky used the absurd image of farm animals dancing the tango to evoke the clash in Russia between a primarily rural culture and a growing urban life. Perhaps, therefore, the relative absence of cows in vanguard poetry is in part due to the fact that the cow's iconicity is associated more with premodern and non-Western cultures: with the Cow in the *Rigveda* and Hinduism or in the Ancient Egyptian *Book of the Celestial Cow*, with ancient Minotaurs, or with the work of so many mystics who sought the divine emptiness of mind considered so typical of cows. It is this premodern world, then, that *Vaches* shoots back into the present, explicitly mentioning Homer, Empedocles and Diogenes of Apollonia, among others. In this older or other world cows lived among men. So what has happened since?

Humanity, of course. In one of his prose-poems Boyer makes the reader a companion to René Descartes—founder of Western rationality in so many ways—as he embarks on a nightly stroll through Leiden while he is finishing *La Géométrie*. Depuis longtemps «les vaches marchaient avec / Descartes dans la nuit de Leyde comme un homme / qui marche seul et dans les ténèbres et résolu / d'aller si lentement». Yet although cows were a witness to the birth of modern rationality too, «nous avons jeté les vaches dans la nuit comme si / jamais fanatisme n'avait quitté notre cœur» (25). Put differently, we have forgotten about cows, no longer witness them, as we have constructed our own language regardless of cows. We have mentally erased their existence from ours, and are on the brink of exterminating them physically as well. Thus, a companion that has been

with us as long as we can remember — «Dans une grotte pas loin ont été découverts des / crânes de plusieurs squelettes de vaches colorés en / rouge. Près des nôtres» (56)—the cow now marks a space of radical negativity and alterity.

This alterity extends into the wider realm of avant-garde poetry, where cows have so far not been elaborately fêted thematic nodal points. As such *Vaches* is also a metapoetic text reflecting on its own status within the avant-garde tradition. A first, superficial reading does not allow us to claim, however, that formally too it reflects on avant-garde writing, except maybe in the negative as well. For regardless of how absurd certain patches in this booklet might sound, it is the deceptive simplicity—it is tempting to say: the everydayness—of Boyer's diction that strikes us first. There is hardly anything formally remarkable about demonstrative patches as: «Les vaches aimaient la pluie. Elles auraient pu faci- / lement aimer autre chose comme nous: l'esprit, la / méthode, la puissance. Mais c'est l'eau du ciel / finalement qu'elles aimaient» (8), «Les vaches ont des robes pleines de ronces et de / fleurs et de poudre des champs. Elles ne savent rien / de l'exception de la vie terrestre sous les étoiles» (9).

Such patches illustrate that *Vaches* avoids metaphors and other rhetorical tropes not traditionally situated upon the syntagmatic axis of language. Sticking with the biblical moment upon which Adam named the animals, and with the exception of fixed phrases (never triticisms), its language is superficial: semantic ambivalence is avoided, and as a result readers can easily reconstruct and identify with the synthematic realm Boyer's prose-poems set out. It is as if Boyer's prose-poems simply go back to language's everydayness and turn their back to avant-garde experimentation. Despite this, however, few elements in the booklet are as difficult to identify with as the generic cows that occupy the booklet's semantic core. The more Boyer embeds the cow in everyday characterizations, the harder it becomes to pinpoint what place this animal,

which we all know, (often) eat and, as *Vaches* repeatedly stresses, murder in masses, actually occupies. This is an age-old trick of course: critical repetition of everyday expressions as a rule tends to draw attention to those expressions' innate strangeness. Sum up all fixed expressions in which the noun «vache» occurs, and *une vache n'y trouverait pas son veau*. All the more strange, therefore, is that *Vaches* nonetheless keeps us trying to identify with these strange animals. How could that be? Which textual triggers compel us toward identification?

Vaches sets up a complex syntagmatic structure that pragmatically enforces readers to follow through an (ever forestalled) identification with cows. «Mais est-ce qu'une vache pense comme sien son / corps de vache? Se reconnaît-elles chaque matin / comme nous croyons nous reconnaître dans le miroir?» (11). I could go on to enlist many more such rhetorical questions, all of which stand to illustrate the radical difference of cows from men. (Cows after all do not desire, murder their children, commit adultery or rationalize. They simply are, exist—as Descartes might have noticed as well during his nightly stroll through Leiden.) More importantly, however, is that Boyer's many rhetorical questions, which constantly reengage a reader into the poetic texture, form part of what *Vaches* introduces (back) into the avant-garde canon, namely an element of both poetic and everyday language that has suffered a bad reputation throughout the foregoing century in avant-garde poetry: rhetoric, understood as the art of persuasion.

This is not the place to repeat *in extenso* how rhetoric thus defined became suspect to the modernist avant-gardes. As Antoine Compagnon has argued it is no exaggeration to claim that the early twentieth-century avant-gardes committed a veritable «murder of rhetoric» — only to witness its gradual restoration in literary theory as the century progressed.[12] Indeed, it is a truism to state that precisely *le refus de la rhétorique* incited many poets to drive a wedge between poetic and everyday prosaic language. It is

to «grammar» in the widest sense and away from rhetoric that the historical avant-gardes turned. For, drawing its strength from *topoi* and commonplaces, rhetoric was used not only to commercial and journalistic ends. It was also used in popular literature looking to please the masses,[13] and, obviously, was an inevitably defining feature of political oration.[14] This is not to say, of course, that rhetoric was ever fully absent from avant-garde writing. Yet it is rather safe to assert that rhetoric was not «the dominant», as Roman Jakobson called it, of vanguard poetry, however diverse and versatile it shows itself in the first half of the twentieth century. René Ghil's plea to see a return of the *Rhétoriqueurs* after reading Mallarmé's *Un Coup de Dés*, for example, was not met with cheers in the avant-garde parlor.[15]

Similarly, although it would be incorrect to claim that there were no critics commonly associated with modernist experimental writing who between, say, 1880 and 1945 wrote at the intersection of rhetorical and literary theory (think of Kenneth Burke), for most New Critics and, elsewhere, Formalists, too, rhetoric was *bête noire*. As far as avant-garde poetry goes, this did arguably not change fundamentally after the Second World War. While rhetoric in a narrow sense as the stylistic study of tropes may have bloomed in academia, avant-garde poets by and large extended the suspicion of rhetoric displayed by precursors. Within the confines of this essay, I can impossibly lay out the complex grid of axioms that helped sustain that suspicion. But let me at least point to one element crucial within French literature. As Denis Roche, one of few poets associated with the Tel Quel group, made clear: «La poésie est inadmissible, d'ailleurs elle n'existe pas».[16] Echoing similar assertions by Jude Stéfan and many others, Roche's statement specifically takes issue with the metaphysics of presence, with the expressive speaking subject in poetry. Among other things, this widespread anathema to the metaphysics of presence made rhetoric in post-1945 avant-garde poetry not particularly cherished. After

all, does the art of persuasion not necessitate the voice and presence of an orator? Is not the presence of a speaking subject prerequisite to rhetoric?

Boyer's *Vaches*, far from a return to expressive lyricism, seems unbothered by these critical concerns.[17] Pitting «nous», «l'homme» against «les vaches» — who on occasion address the reader as «nous les vaches», too — Boyer's horizon seems to stretch far beyond the past century and a half. For it is difficult not to notice how through the deceptive simplicity of his diction Boyer at once reinstates the avant-garde's anathema to rhetoric — most explicitly by denouncing the «sophisme humain» (55), thus including the Ancient sophist orators who frequently claimed to be able to convince anyone of anything by means of rhetoric — and moves beyond it by turning to rhetoric as an object of poetic play. Yet it is not just any rhetorical mode *Vaches* seems to single out as a playful model, for the book comes in the form of a homily.

That Boyer recently translated Saint Augustine's *Confessions* as *Les Aveux* is perhaps no accident in this context.[18] *Vaches* shows no structural affinity with the autobiography of the famous Church Father, which has often been called a founding text of modern thought. But things begin to fall in place when we recall that Augustine also brought rhetoric back to its ancient concerns for truth by recreating a platonic view of it in the midst of fourth-century sophistic. Boyer's message in *Vaches* is arguably not a Christian one. (Nor is Boyer is televangelist—though the very existence of such persons suffices to highlight the quaint everydayness of homilies.) Yet *Vaches* does restore the sort of rhetoric Augustine professed.

Homilies in Augustine's day were still largely defined by their absence of form and anti-theory. *Homilia* in Greek originally meant «conversation», designating a relatively straightforward oral interpretation of scriptural text. Readers of the *Confessions* might recall how Augustine was initially convinced of the incompatibility of Christianity and rhetoric because of the extreme difference in the styles of the *Bible* and Cicero.

Wishing to convert an audience of gentile intellectuals repugnant towards the rustic, plain and humble character of scripture, he tried to get across that writing lacking rhetorical showiness could deliver great truths. To this aim he reformed old rhetorical practice. In Book IV of *De doctrina Christiana* the eloquence of words (*verba*) is constantly pitted against the immeasurably greater eloquence of realities (*res*). But because *eloquentia* (literary expression in general[19]) may be used for both good and evil, Augustine allowed Christians to learn to be eloquent. Skill in eloquence, that is, true rhetoric in the widest sense of art of persuasion, to Augustine importantly preceded narrow rhetorical (tropological) rules; great rhetors do not speak well by consciously thinking of the rules. Thus Augustine further went against the teaching of rhetoric which at that point was extremely formalistic, pointing ahead to a more modern approach in the arts' of language education. In part respecting the colloquial character of homilies before, Augustine turned to Cicero in Book IV of *De doctrina* adapting his *ut doceat, ut delectet, ut flectat* and changing them to *ut veritas pateat, ut placeat, ut moveat*. The latter were laid down as the rules by which a sermon is to be judged. In so doing, Augustine was time and again at pains to warn against all too exaggerated display of tropes, which merely please and pleasure an audience. A good homily combines, again following Cicero, both *eloquentia* and *sapientia*. Augustine did thereby not give the homily a fixed rhetorical shape, but advised to stay true to everyday language.

I can probably not stress enough that *Vaches* is not a *Christian* sermon. But as will be clear from my evocation of its tenor so far, it does look to push through a rather epic narrative. Like the typical homily, moreover, it in part takes off from a passage of scripture, which is subsequently commented and elaborated on. For as we saw, in line with the Book of Genesis *Vaches* provocatively invites us to think beyond human (linguistic) limitation. As prescriptions in homiletics after Augustine would

stipulate, Boyer's collection of poems also begins by setting out its topic prothematically in the first, opening poem («Les premières à mourir ce sont les vaches […] Depuis nous n'avons jamais réussi à oublier / la mort certaine des vaches», 7) suggesting that the relationship between humanity and cattle will be explored further. As a trunk planted in the ground, this first suggestion is thereafter indeed further refined and branched off so that in the end *Vaches* starts to draw near to what happens in the work of contemporary novelist Eric Chevillard or many modernist grotesque prose writers: it begins with a simple idea, and keeps tossing it around so that a stroboscopic collection of utterances all begin to imbricate and cross-fertilize one another.

In this process, readers get the impression that an argument is being built up, in a language that is always clear and never aloof. Yet, although the book ends with hinting at man's self-destruction, the text also has readers constantly looking back to that fictional moment of origin upon which humans and cows were both just animals sharing the birth of a language. Drawing on Aristotle's *Rhetoric*, therefore, we could say that rhetorical *pathos* dominates above all. This text's *logos* or argument is simple (though peculiar), and the *ethos* of the lyrical *je* is relatively unimportant. But the more this book persuades readers to identify with cows — «Les yeux des vaches sont faits non pour que l'uni- / vers puisse voir ce qui se passé à l'intérieur des / vaches mais pour que l'on voie dans les yeux des / vaches le vaste et cruel univers» (45) —the more melancholy sets in. If cows are indeed like mirrors to men, as poem after poem suggests, then the world of humanity is not looking bright. All the more compelling becomes the suggestion that we should maybe retrieve the language lost. «Les vaches sont […] des écrivains silencieux», Boyer expounds, going back to a moment upon which humans still believed cows could speak and write:

> L'alphabétisation des vaches a constitué un lent
> processus dans l'histoire des vaches. Avec de
> nombreux revers. Certains temples anciens ont
> représenté des vaches scribes. Des vaches cou-
> chées sur leur écritoire. Épuisés de fatigue. Des
> vaches folles d'inquiétude devant les mots écrits.
> Attachées à leur table de travail. Des vaches
> pleines d'encre et de mots qui ne disaient plus
> rien à personne. Ni à aucun vivant sur la terre. (31-32)

Today still humans assume that cows know their language: «Nous disons: si la vache maîtrise le langage / – et donc son application – elle doit forcément / savoir ce que signifient les mots. Et nous la frap- / pons sans retenue quand elle ne sait pas et / qu'elle ne vient pas à l'appel de son nom de vache» (18). Indeed, what a strange name «vache» is.

Within its fictional universe *Vaches* points to a language lost. As with the main character from Kafka's last short story «Josephine the Singer, or the Mouse Folk», we are never sure whether humans and cows once jointly sang, whistled or «meuhed». But through *Vaches* we become a witness to the possibility of that language. As such *Vaches* also poignantly points to the possibility of still other languages. Falling back on an (antirhetorical) rhetorical mode of writing like the homily, it shows how the avant-garde's anathema to rhetoric need not oppose the very everydayness of language. Quite, instead of making «it» strange, Boyer's work sets out to make poetic language familiar again by drawing as close as possible to everyday language — in one and the same move making that language irrepressibly unfamiliar when raising the idea that it can also evoke a language once spoken by cows and humans alike. All the same, instead of turning its back to the long lineage of avant-garde experimentation, *Vaches* could be said to extend the avant-garde's project by injecting it with the

homily and other, thematic elements previously repressed or simply omitted. As such, Boyer comes with the radical suggestion that within avant-garde literature's very own conventions and axioms there still lies the means by which vanguard poetry may be utterly reconfigured. Like Kafka's exegetes who try to come to terms with the elliptic dash in his diary, Boyer's poetry, too, looks to the past and searches for ellipses and «dashed» blanks *within* the avant-garde so as to take its exploration of (poetic) language further.

Clearly, isolating a contemporary avant-garde is like writing on water: nothing is fixed yet, and as a result putting forth general observations is always precarious. Even so, mainly looking backward, the poetry of Boyer displays a strikingly consistent temporal orientation. Like Paol Keineg and Edouard Glissant whose recent work returns to epic poetry,[20] Boyer is salvaging what got lost along the way. In short, he is looking to the past—and this may well be emblematic of a more encompassing phase in current (French) avant-garde poetry. In a long and insightful encyclopaedic entry on the notion «avant-garde», Karlheinz Barck isolates two broad and consecutive phases in the twentieth-century avant-garde, two distinct yet related ways in which poets have tended to inscribe their work into an irreversible tension between the future and the present tense.[21]

Early twentieth-century vanguard writers most frequently projected the present into the future by claiming to be ahead of their time. Deforming everyday language here equaled exploring another possible form of life, and thus a narrative of progress, however ambivalently, was launched. Post-World-War-II avant-gardes, by contrast, more often implied to project the future into the present. Observing that not all that much came about from their predecessors' projected unification of other languages and life forms, they thematized the future-anterior, that which *will have been*.[22] This second phase, too, however, increasingly lost appeal. Poets today

wishing to extend the project of the twentieth-century avant-gardes therefore are like «oarsmen on a rowing boat, not knowing where they are heading, merely where they are coming from».[23] Of course, noting that the work-immanent futurity, which in various guises has been so central to the twentieth-century avant-gardes, might have reached a point of exhaustion, is not the same as saying that repetitions in difference of older avant-garde poetics are today no longer encountered. But what such repetitions at first sight often seem to lack is a temporal vantage point from which to criticize the present.

If Boyer brings across anything, however, it is that contemporary poets may already have found that vantage point *in the past*. As his work sets out to make poetic language familiar again, it reopens an archive of forms, genres and modes of (poetic) language that for various reasons have been driven out of the avant-garde canon. In so doing, it also takes the avant-garde's exploration of language's potential further, thus also restoring the futurity of the avant-garde. For thought through, any attempt to make poeticized language familiar again is obviously destined to fail today, as it is quite impossible to erase the inter- and intratextual poetic realm onto which all poetic utterances inevitably hook themselves. Thus trying to suppress the strangeness of poetic language also shows itself as a typically avant-garde act, recalling Renato Poggioli's *agonism*, a function he associated with all instances of avant-garde writing.[24] As Poggioli saw it, there is a «masochistic impulse in the avant-garde» since it always foresees its failure but decides to act nonetheless, so that others may benefit from it later on. Poggioli here cites Rimbaud's *Lettre du voyant*: «Qu'il crève dans son bondissement par les choses inouïes et innommables: viendront d'autres horrible travailleurs; ils commenceront par les horizons où l'autre s'est affaissé».[25] Indeed, already prefiguring its failure, Boyer's attempt to downplay the strangeness of the poetic continues an important

quest set out in poetry ever since Mallarmé: to recognize the ever fluid boundary between poetic and everyday language.

NOTES:

[1] Franz Kafka, *Tagebücher: Kritische Ausgabe* (Frankfurt am Main: S. Fischer, 1990), 543, my translation.
[2] Samuel Beckett, *Disjecta: Miscellaneous Writings and a Dramatic Fragment*, ed. Ruby Cohn (New York: Grove Press, 1984), 54.
[3] See Jerome McGann, *Black Riders: The Visible Language of Modernism* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1993), 26-41.
[4] See Sascha Bru, «Modernism Before and After Theory», in Peter Brooker, Andrzej Gasiorek, Deborah Parsons and Andrew Thacker (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Modernisms* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), forthcoming.
[5] See Michel Pierssens, *La Tour du Babil: La Fiction du signe* (Paris: Minuit, 1976).
[6] *La Bible*, translation directed by Frédéric Boyer (Paris: Bayard, 2001).
[7] Vincent Kaufmann, *Poétique des groupes littéraires. Avant-gardes 1920-1970* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1997).
[8] Frédéric Boyer, *Vaches* (Paris: P.O.L., 2008). Subsequent references to this book occur in parenthesis in the main body of the text.
[9] Partly spelled out by Boyer himself in «Un Animal dans sa Tête», a paper read on November 14, 2009, during the forum *Le Monde* – Le Mans: Qui sont les Animaux?
[10] Benjamin Péret, «Mémoires de Benjamin Péret», in *Le Grand Jeu* (Paris: Gallimard, 1977), 77ff.
[11] Vasily Kamensky, *Tango s korovami: zhelezobetonnyia poemy* (Tango with Cows: Ferro-concrete Poems, Moscow, 1914)
[12] Antoine Compagnon, «La Rhétorique à la Fin du XIXe Siècle», in Marc Fumaroli (ed.), *Histoire de la Rhétorique dans l'Europe moderne, 1450-1950* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1999), 1215-47.
[13] Alain-Michel Boyer, «Questions de paralittérature. La paralittérature face à la tradition orale et à l'ancienne rhétorique», in *Poétique* (98, 1994), 131-151.
[14] See, among others, Marc Angenot's *La Parole Pamphlétaire* (Paris: Payot, 1995).
[15] René Ghil, *Les Dates et les OEuvres* (Paris: Crès, 1922), 228-229.
[16] Denis Roche, *Tel Quel: Théorie d'ensemble* (Paris: Seuil, 1968), 221.

[17] Whereas the volume talks about cows in the generic, a lyrical persona does on occasion crop up in the form of a *je*. Most often associated to *l'homme* or humanity, the role of this expressive lyrical persona is not dominant however. It allows for the inscription of a singular voice in the act of reading. Yet this *je* most often retreats to the background — on occasion yielding the floor to hypothetical thoughts of «nous les vaches» –– and thus letting the rhetorical underpinnings of the book surge forward.
[18] Saint Augustin, *Les Aveux*, trans. Frédéric Boyer (Paris: P.O.L., 2008).
[19] Henri-Irénée Marrou, *St. Augustin et la fin de la culture antique*, 2 vols. (Paris: Boccard, 1949), vol. 1, 498 ff. I rely strongly on this book in my discussion of St. Augustine here, and on James J. Murphy, *Rhetoric in the Middle Ages: A History of Rhetorical Theory from Saint Augustine to the Renaissance* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1974).
[20] See Jean-Jacques Thomas and Steven Winspur, *Poeticized Language. The Foundations of Contemporary French Poetry* (University Park, Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1999), chapter 11.
[21] Karlheinz Barck, «Avantgarde», in: Karlheinz Barck *et al.* (eds.), *Ästhetische Grundbegriffe*, vol. 1, Stuttgart 2000, 544-77, here 548.
[22] Jean-François Lyotard and Hal Foster have asserted as well.
[23] Niklas Luhmann, *Die Kunst der Gesellschaft* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1997[1995]), 199, my translation.
[24] Renato Poggioli, *The Theory of the Avant-Garde*, trans. by Gerald Fitzgerald (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1968), 65-68.
[25] Poggioli, *The Theory*, 68.