

Richard Stamelman.
***Lost Beyond Telling. Representations
of Death and Absence in Modern French Poetry.***

Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell Univ. Press, 1990. 293 pages.

For many years now Richard Stamelman has been offering us his finely meditated and elegantly voiced appraisals of the work of modern and especially contemporary French poets. And he has been drawn, too, to the varied intersections of writing and art, and has given us translations of balance and maturity. *Lost Beyond Telling* gathers together and considerably amplifies certain earlier essays, contemplating their inter-pertinence and weaving a subtle and immensely insightful discourse on what he calls 'representations of death and absence' in some of our great modern poets, thinkers, artists: Baudelaire, Apollinaire, Jouve, Bonnefoy, Dupin, Du Bouchet and Giacometti, Jacottet, Jabès, Barthes. Here cannot be the place to offer an even concise summary of the many precious analyses Stamelman provides, many of them being not only broadly conceptual but also textually particular, coloured by context and elements of a larger poetics in which his own discourse finds its source roots. Suffice it to say that the book goes distinctly beyond what we may call essentially structuring thematics to penetrate the now explicit now, and more often, implicit factors underpinning the why, the what and the how of modern poetry, situating the latter, moreover, in the wider philosophical, ethical and aesthetic discourse of our age: Blanchot, Derrida, Benjamin, Freud, Kristeva, etc. In extremely broad terms, we may say that the myth of the aesthetic ambitions of possession, retention, repose and transfiguration is exploded and yields to, or at least sets itself in tensional, dialectic relation with, a complex logic of continued loss and death, absence and ephemerality, unsayableness and non-accomplishment. All, however, is not lost, in this multi-textured and ever individually perceived and articulated modern poetics of loss upon loss. Whilst the latter may breed or compound the melancholia of original lack, alienation, absence and death — the poetic or textual 'tombality' does not seal in and secure a transcendent form of being —, a lucid and very buoying sense of liberation may accompany a creative gesture seen finally rather as *parole* than as *infaillibilité*, to use Ponge's terminology. The poem can, just — caught as it is between the sadness of its relativity and the vigour and 'confidence' of its surging emergence and subsequent subsidence —, become a simple and emblematic place of this struggle, of this consciousness of the tensions of search and mortality, hope and imperfection. Modern poetry, thus, as the place of (self-) contestation, (self-)revision, a place and a small but crucial rite of passage. A place, like Richard Stamelman's book, of mediated meditation, of transition, without origin or end.

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