

Dream Imagery and the Dialectics of Consciousness in André du Bouchet's "Et (la nuit)"

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"Au coeur — et, en marge, toujours"
André du Bouchet, *Qui n'est pas tourné vers nous* (1972).

This opening line from his poem "Plus loin que le regard" summarizes, in some sense, the entire poetic project of André du Bouchet. Considered one of the most important poets of our time, du Bouchet pursues a *démarche* eminently distinctive among his peers. Poetry of discontinuity, of the solitary, of the vestigial, but also of the expansive and the persistent, the paradoxical nature of his discourse has long given rise to interest in the natural presence knowable in his work primarily through *rupture*. John E. Jackson, for one, argues that contrary to the poetics of Bonnefoy, that of du Bouchet solicits a being which is delivered only in separation, the approximation of a sense of fullness which can be felt only in its refusal to be known.¹ The disparate, uneven fragments of his poetry highlight the emptiness ever present—the gaping void whose very existence implies alterity. Indeed the continual breaking apart suggests, by the moment of the breaking along with that which is broken, a coherence, a relationship in which both terms implicit in that relationship depend upon, and give evidence to the other.

In a rare interview the poet affirms his belief that poetic writing extends well beyond the level of language itself in an attempt to open on something other than language.² This fascination with the alterity of

language is implicit in du Bouchet's expressed admiration for Reverdy and Tolstoy. What attracts him to their work is, he claims, the extraordinary center of their work, that focal point around which the writers situate themselves and which concomitantly attracts and yet resists comprehension (*PT* 148). Critics have seen in du Bouchet's own poetry a preoccupation with the center of the work. That is to say that despite the unformed immensity with which we have come to associate his poetic universe, a world of earth, rocks, wind, dust, and silence, and a world largely external to the perceiving self; there is nonetheless a hearkening back to some common point of departure. There is an ongoing movement from the periphery to the center, and a ceaseless crisscrossing of semantic opposites: thick / thin, inside / outside, before / after, darkness / light. "La marge est au centre,"³ the poet tells us outright and again privileges that center which is approachable only through layers of textual substratum: "... ligne s'ajoutant à ligne ... ligne sur ligne — pour porter le centre plus haut ..." (*Q* 139). The abundance of images arranged and rearranged on the razor-thin edge of the possible seek to imitate that which eludes direct expression and may be read as fulfilling a mediative role, one in which each figure, according to Jean Onimus, "est faite pour être traversée: c'est en lieu de passage `entre moi et moi', à l'interface de la conscience."⁴

The notion of the poetic word as purveyor of some inner truth is hardly new, however. Among others, Robert W. Greene views du Bouchet's artistic intention as one of building access routes to primal states such as innocence and immediacy. For Greene the operative poetic consciousness is reciprocal and dialectical: reciprocal as evident in the near-here, there-far polar dimensions; and dialectical as implied in the poetry's uncompromising ambiguity in embracing both reciprocal tendencies simultaneously.⁵ Furthermore Greene accepts the characteristic du Bouchettian propensity toward antinomy as evidence of a dialectic of consciousness: an independent consciousness operating apart from the world and a dependent consciousness functioning wholly in the world (127). He maintains that in du Bouchet the perceiving self pursues a "chasse à l'être" by means of an endless shuttling back and forth between

these two poles (130). These two centers interact reciprocally to suggest a "pre-reflexive" condition of consciousness, one in which the perceiving self is defined primarily by the world around it: "Je suis plus loin de moi que de l'horizon," the poet affirms. The necessity for the poet to project his orienting perception onto a world external to himself as a prerequisite for writing is corroborated by Michel Collot who, in editing du Bouchet's notebooks from the early to mid 1950s, remarks, "Tout se passe alors comme si, pour écrire, il fallait à du Bouchet commencer par SORTIR. Quitter l'espace limité du dedans, sortir de soi, essayer d'échapper aux représentations figées du réel, à l'emprise de la culture et du langage."⁶ Although the vocabulary of du Bouchet's poetry assumes overwhelmingly a material world external to the perceiving self, on two occasions references to dreams and to the process of dreaming point to the space of consciousness outside the perimeters of wakefulness. The briefer allusion to a dream state appears in a single paragraph from *Ici en deux* where we read of scrolling explanations which, in aspiring to the clarity of wakefulness, foreground the multiplicity of dreams: "rêve s'ajoutant à rêve, que pur et simple prolongement du rêve."⁷ As is the case here, dreams are often perceived as fulfilling a liberating function by virtue of their unbridled increase. In writing on the topology of spatial images in du Bouchet's *Dans la chaleur vacante* (1961), Jean Onimus speaks of the desire on the part of the speaking voice to advance without obstacle as a "dream", an ideal which would actualize the wished-for condition: "rêve d'une expansion facile, heureuse, qui échapperait aux discontinuités de la respiration (et du langage qui lui est lié)."⁸ The importance for the poet of the figure of the dream is not altogether dissimilar from that suggested by Onimus. A consideration of a major dream passage from *Qui n'est pas tourné vers nous* will yield a greater appreciation for the complexity of the dream image in du Bouchet and for its role in illustrating the dialectics of consciousness.

"Rêve de la nuit du : `aux questions les réponses sont soudées, les questions sont sans point d'interrogation, etc.' ..."(Q 130). In the poem "Et (la nuit)", these lines introduce an anomaly in du Bouchet's work, in that a figure of an inner state — that of a dream — forms the organizing

metaphor of the section. Over the course of twenty-four pages the dream image takes on the following characteristics: it is known as a sentence ("phrase de ce rêve," Q 132) and as a sentence is unwound interminably. The dream signals the passage of time through the succession of instants, and may invoke a completely different temporal framework from that of the present ("un rêve antérieur," Q 135) and is capable of engaging time in its most instantaneous element ("le rêve d'un instant," Q 136). Although the dream is known to be mute through references to "mutisme" (Q 139) and to "silence dans la mutité du rêve" (Q 143), it speaks through its silence ("parole silencieuse du rêve," Q 132). Much of what it speaks is not new; its function is to set into motion ("figure de phrase amorcée dans un rêve," Q 147) and to rehearse what has preceded (we read of the dream which "nombre d'années depuis, l'aura réitérée, retaillée," Q 144).

Additionally, the dream is evasive ("le rêve évasif," Q 130) but persistent ("il se prolonge," Q 132), despite the interrupting instant of awakening ("et tel que l'instant du réveil ne suffit pas, peut-être, à le suspendre, mais il se poursuit comme en sous-oeuvre ...," Q 133). The temporal status of the dream is equally tenuous. Although its unraveling suggests an infinite succession of intervals, the knowledge of its eventual demise keeps its experience sharp and fresh: "il s'était voulu porteur, se dévide en un intervalle, interligne, infini — ou tourne court sans parvenir à s'imprimer dans l'esprit ..." (Q 133). But that imminent demise promises to consist of more than a failure to be perceived: "Le rêve va mourir" the poet tells us (Q 150). The instability of the dream, its frequent associations with death and wakefulness, all succeed in implicating its place at the center of sleep and in so doing, perpetuates the question of consciousness and being:

Ce qui au profond — au centre — d'un sommeil (où le rêve est d'un tenant) se découvre comme soustrait de nouveau, silence dans la mutité du rêve, n'est jamais que parole opaque, parole de nouveau, substrat épais, sollicité de parole sur le moment rétive à ce qui est dit, que la parole à dire soit émise, ou tue, encore — jour qui froisse ... au plus près ..." (Q 143).

Not unlike the rest of the poetry, this "dream" passage reflects the poet's tendency to perceive the one in terms of the "other," forever asserting and retracting, venturing and correcting, offering and withholding. In speaking of "la réitération dynamique" in du Bouchet's poetics, Pierre Chappuis notes that for the poet it is impossible to be outside without also being inside and that, in short, "toute réalité est double."⁹

The dual nature of reality and the center of being to which the poet alludes, along with attendant conditions of death, opacity, sleep, and cohesion recall the strong tradition in France of imbricating poetry and philosophy, and would seem to suggest that the poet is not far from the contribution of one of the most trenchant philosophers of this century, Emmanuel Levinas.

Inspired by Husserlian phenomenology which understood consciousness to exist prior to reflection; that is, to constitute the primary domain contextualizing the notions of subject and object, Levinas shifts attention to relationship as the fundamental philosophical principle.¹⁰ In his view the first and foremost challenge is an ethical one: that of responsibility toward the Other. The preoccupation of Levinas with alterity takes form over time with the philosopher's discussion of topics such as consciousness, existence, time and eros. From Levinas' understanding of consciousness, in particular, we may note three points of intersection with du Bouchet's dream passage. The first finds its context in the philosopher's notion of "there is," and centers on his discussion of night.

Influenced early in his career by Heidegger, Levinas developed the notion of "there is" as a way to account for the Heideggerian ideas of "being" and "nothingness." For Levinas, "there is" comprises being in general and transcends all distinctions between inwardness and exteriority as well as defies — or is oblivious to — regular philosophical considerations of subject / object.¹¹ Interestingly, Levinas illustrates the experience of "there is" with a discussion of night: a darkness full, but full of nothingness. Just as the contents (or defining features) of night are

unavoidable, so — according to Levinas — the "there is" constitutes an inescapable presence (*EE* 58-59).

The figure of night, as used by du Bouchet in conjunction with the dream image, reflects some of the features which Levinas attributes to night. First of all, the passage begins by situating the dream within a nocturnal context: "Rêve de la nuit du" (*Q* 130). Much of what follows privileges the labyrinthine progression of the dream to any perceivable content. In fact du Bouchet's dream of the night is full (as it is for Levinas), but emptied of all being — present or future: "l'insatisfaction de ce qui, à écrire au plus vite, ne l'est pas encore — et, peut-être, ne le sera pas ..." (*Q* 134). We read, as well, that absence and its renewal (construed as fullness of truth) has already been the object of the dream word: "Ce qui, en revanche, apparaît alors comme plénitude de vérité complémentaire à un tel manquement (encore que le fait lui-même — sans un mot — 'en silence' — par une lacune renouvelée, ait déjà été, dans le rêve même, objet de parole" (*Q* 133). Just as for Levinas night challenges received notions of subject / object, inwardness and exteriority, so for du Bouchet does the night dream seek to pursue its course oblivious to all vestiges of duality: "aux questions les réponses sont soudées, les questions sont sans point d'interrogation etc' (*Q* 130), a refrain that reappears several times throughout the passage. Similarly, any perceived dialectical *chasse à l'être* typical of du Bouchet, seems to fall flat here under cover of night: "(et comme sur l'éclat de quelque intervalle illuminant à perte de vue — jusqu'à l'oblitérer: un 'etc' infini ... Ce qui est tu s'y révélant aussi distinct, à l'occasion, qu'une parole à laquelle il ne revient pas moins de taire que prononcer," *Q* 136). Relentless, aimless, and yet insidious in its bursting asunder, the dream testifies to that "anonymous current of being" — that "there is" — which "invades, submerges, every subject" (*EE* 57-58).

The anonymity of being in "Et (la nuit)" can be perceived through the poet's use of "etc.," on at least three levels. First, in signaling the sphere of the content of poetic discourse, the word "etc." functions as augmenting material, rehearsing the said without repeating the saying, suggesting the presence of something without positing anything for certain. Thus, in preferring imprecision to specificity, yet all the while insisting on the

experience itself of poetry, "etc." coincides with the Levinasian idea of an inescapable, albeit undefinable presence, — a presence which is there, although impervious to scrutiny. Second, with regard to the temporal dimension of poetry, "etc." anticipates that which is yet to come in terms of that which has already transpired. In fact, from almost the beginning of his career as poet, du Bouchet has held to the ability of poetry to transcend time and to transpose the past onto the present: "La poésie rétablit inlassablement au présent le verbe qui est au passé."¹² In projecting an implied discourse, the "and so on" of "etc." is possible only in the context of a lived discourse, a known expression. For Levinas "there is" exceeds all modes of conceptual and temporal perception. In a very real sense, therefore, insofar as it transcends all temporal bounds, du Bouchet's "etc." recalls the philosopher's concept of the "there is." In addition, and also touching temporality, "etc." implies for the poet an endless deferral, a repetition *ad infinitum*: "réitérée toujours comme attenante, par ce point même où elle s'enlèvera, à un sol à l'infini" (Q 137). Third, as a signifier, du Bouchet's "etc." may be said to embody concomitantly the movements toward reduction and expansion. In its abbreviated form, "etc." truncates the full measure of its graphic articulation (despite seeing only "etc.". we read "et cetera"). The complete expression "et cetera" denotes, however, an abridged reality: "more of the same." The three letters and a period of "etc." can thus be seen as presenting, through reduction, the paradox of expansion.

Although in this dream passage the expansive, ever-returning backdrop of presence finds indication in the "etc." phenomenon, that presence is also suggested by the poet's frequent recourse to ellipsis. The interstitial whiteness which we have come to associate with du Bouchet's poetry and which, by extension, represents in itself a variant of the "etc." phenomenon, arises here in the dream of the night under the sign of ellipsis — grammatically, the omission of that which is requisite for fullness, but poetically, the tacit acknowledgment of that which supercedes the perimeters of our perception. For du Bouchet any ellipsis, any point of linguistic syncope signals an enveloping presence: "le défaut de parole imputé à ce qui sans repos, sans fin, 'nous' entoure, n'étant pas plus différenciés qu'une blancheur interlignant, de la ligne noire sur blanc

qui jouxte... Cela, oui, le rêve" (Q 148). Thus, in epitomizing the "défaut de parole," du Bouchet's dream of the night sums up for the poet all of the indeterminateness, all the anonymity of the "something is happening" of which Levinas speaks.

The second area of connection between Levinas and du Bouchet centers on the evident belief on the part of both that deliberate consciousness emerges from that anonymous current of being. In Levinas' scheme of things, the "there is" forms the backdrop against which consciousness stands out by means of separation or willed discontinuity. To be conscious implies the presence of a subjectivity, an ability to forget, to interrupt and to enter into sleep (EE 67). That the act of sleeping belongs to consciousness evidences the philosopher's broader conception of consciousness, one whose domain extends beyond the field of active, awakened consciousness to include the sphere of possibilities implicit in the actual life of consciousness. Thus for Levinas, both the actual and the potential are subsumed under the rubric of consciousness. The inactive dimension of consciousness is further illustrated by sleep which, Levinas affirms, participates in consciousness. The possibility of being closed up into oneself, of retreating into complete rest, marks its event in consciousness as position.

In du Bouchet's poem, the relationship of dream to sleep (and more specifically, to the center of sleep) both recalls the writer's fascination with the center of the literary work as well as allows us to read the poet in light of Levinas' conception of consciousness. By its very designation, the substantive "dream" implies the state of the "Other" — that which is not-dream, be it dreamless sleep or wakefulness. Whereas in most of du Bouchet's poetry alterity finds expression in the realm of the physical world, here the dream passage recasts that relationship in the context of the impersonal "there is," which is torn by the separation of consciousness. Therefore, when we read "Ce qui au profond — au centre — d'un sommeil (où le rêve est d'un tenant) se découvre comme soustrait de nouveau, silence dans la mutité du rêve ..." (Q 143), we sense that sleep, associated with a place, — here, the place of infinite attraction and elusiveness, — shares in philosophical consciousness. Moreover, dream, in juxtaposition

to sleep, signals the potentiality of consciousness, that dimension knowable only by its relationship to the actual.

In signaling that which is not actual, the unreality inherent in futurity, dream as potentiality always occupies a tenuous space. At any moment the dream may be interrupted or may take an unexpected turn. It is of no small significance, perhaps, that the entire dream passage, with its forward looking impulse or its proclivity for looking away and beyond, appears in a collection entitled *Qui n'est pas tourné vers nous*. Furthermore, as if to emphasize both the poem's edge constantly venturing into the domain of the unreal as well as its vulnerability, the title "Et (la nuit)" signals by its coordinating conjunction the commitment to augmentation or at least to the movement towards amplification. That which is added in the title — the designation of night — finds itself set off from the coordinating conjunction "Et" by a single introductory parenthesis. From the absence of a concluding parenthetical marker we may infer the instability inherent in the dream.

The instantaneous dimension of the dream in du Bouchet parallels the distinction Levinas draws between existence and the existent, thus marking the third point of relevance between the philosopher and the poet. The existent denotes that which exists — be it an individual, the collective, or any being designated by a substantive — while existence speaks of the event or act of the existent — its "pure deed" (EE 17). Levinas emphasizes the understanding that the existent enters into a relationship with its existence just as a being (something which exists) exercises over its Being (its pure verb) the domination of a subject over its attributes (EE 18). Similarly the being of the dream in du Bouchet may be said to be in relationship with, and to dominate, the instant of its Being. This relationship assumes the presence of an interminable Other and ultimately, the fact of this alterity forms the story of du Bouchet's poem.

In tracing the course of the dream, "Et (la nuit)" presents the adherence of beings in Being. Throughout the passage the speaking voice is never far from the relational mode, observable most directly through explicit references to gaps, to interruptions, to parts of a larger unit, and to

moments of cohesion. Questions soldered to answers (Q 131), attention fixed on each passing instant (Q 132), intervals reiterated ceaselessly (Q 132), an awareness that interruption marks both death and imminent awakening (Q 133), an obsession with alternating lines and spaces (Q 134) as well as with words aligned in succession in the course of their displacement (Q 136): these and countless more images suggest that the dream being ever approaches, within the field of consciousness, the moment of its enactment.

The considerable attention which Levinas gives to existence and existents sheds light on the dialectics of consciousness in du Bouchet on yet another dimension: that of the relationship of presence to void. From his understanding of the universal "there is," Levinas derives the vigilance of insomnia. This condition contrasts with the notion of attention which, he maintains, is guided by a free ego and directed towards some object (EE 65). He characterizes the vigilance of insomnia as that state during which we keep our eyes open as if attentive, but completely unfocused. This is a moment of vacancy and represents for the philosopher the return of presence into the void left by absence (EE 65). This undefined, even divergent, vigilance is what the poet alludes to when he writes: "J'écris comme on marche — à l'aveuglette — même en plein jour; comme on va devant soi, sans songer même à marcher....points aveugles de ma poésie / — c'est par eux que je veux voir" (C 33, 34). Advancing from void to void, finding sight in a labyrinthine absence: these are among the hallmark characteristics of du Bouchet's poetics. Similarly, when the poet speaks of the dream known by its silence (Q 143), and when he refers to dreams in which further identifying features are absent ("ce rêve du," Q 132), he is expressing the awareness of a presence which is knowable only by the void it fills. In the rush of images the perceiving self, vague and unfocused, records impressions of the earth beneath: "...le sol, comme sous un pas, tant que je vais — obscurci au regard..." (Q 140). Obscured to the eye, the "tracé poétique" nonetheless accompanies the speaking voice riveted to the experience of poetry. Indeed, throughout "Et (la nuit," the face of the dream shows itself to be without object ("la parole de rêve découverte sans objet," Q 133) and to be the very embodiment of a

presence which is none other than the filling of a void left by absence: "le rêve — rentré, comme bu ..." (Q 146):

Le rêve: il va mourir. **Cela** — où à l'extrémité, le rêve lui-même se découvre à plusieurs reprises comme près de s'interrompre — est au plus loin, au plus près — **au pire** — vacuité critique du compact, réfractaire à la parole... (critique du gouffre, du toujours plus haut) ...Et destituée de cette parole qui, au départ, aura mis le rêve en mouvement: 'j'ai quelque chose à dire...' (Q 150).

"Le rêve va mourir." It would be a mistake to think of the dream passage solely in terms of unending continuity. That du Bouchet's dream speaks of imminent death draws attention to the pure act — the event — of the dream's existence. In signaling the disruption of the dream, poetic discourse approaches the very moment of dissolution and, thereby, puts into question the **stance** (to use Levinas's terminology) of an instant. For Levinas the instant is the event — the act of Being — which initiates a being. That being dominates, paradoxically, the act of its engendering, its pure verb. Insofar as we catch a glimpse of this event at the center of an instant, that beginning, that origin, — and inversely, that dissolution, represents a dialectic (EE 18).

Dream / sleep, being / Being, presence / void, "there is" / consciousness: for du Bouchet all of these signal, in one way or another, the poet's ongoing fascination with the centering of the work, the demarginalization of poetic discourse, and ultimately, the dialectic "Cela." In his dream of the night du Bouchet's "Et (la nuit)" privileges a Levinasian relationship, an otherness discernable for the poet in the very language of poetry. In a study of the metaphoric mode in another of du Bouchet's poems, "Rapides," Michel Collot attempts to categorize the nature of the semantic transfer between the terms of the metaphors. For him, *in praesentia* — that mode in which the compared and the comparing are linked in the same syntagm—privileges immediacy as the defining feature of the semantic transfer, especially as that immediacy is realized in an instant.¹³ So it is that in "Et (la nuit)" the poet's "parole de rêve" evidences on the part of the speaking voice the constant attention given to the

moment of poetry's Being. In this poem, as well as throughout the rest of du Bouchet, the perceiving self does indeed find its definition in the dialectical nature of consciousness; a consciousness which, while understood generally as the juxtaposition of that external to itself, constitutes at a more fundamental level the very essence of alterity. For du Bouchet poetry can do no more than point the way to Otherness, keep before us its compulsion, and serve as a reminder of the poet's task: "Parler encore, par toute parole dite, comme à venir... et, à des lèvres entr'ouvertes, silence encore" (Q 175).

Notes

¹L'Étranger dans la langue," *Autour d'André du Bouchet*, ed. Michel Collot (Paris: Presses de l'École Normale Supérieure, 1986), 16.

²Andre du Bouchet," *Poems and Texts*, ed. Serge Gavronsky (New York: October House, 1969), 146, hereafter cited in the text as *PT*.

³*Qui n'est pas tourné vers nous* (Paris: Mercure de France, 1972), 148, hereafter cited in the text as *Q*.

⁴"Progression, obstacle et franchissement," in *Autour d'André du Bouchet*, *op. cit.*, 69.

⁵*Six French Poets of our Time* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1978), 130.

⁶Michel Collot, afterward, *Carnets: 1952-1956*, by André du Bouchet (Paris: Plon, 1990), 99.

⁷*Ici en deux* (Paris: Mercure de France, 1986), 101.

⁸"Progression, obstacle et franchissement," in *Autour d'André du Bouchet*, *op. cit.*, 71.

⁹"La réitération dynamique," in *Autour d'André du Bouchet*, 140.

¹⁰For a helpful discussion of the relationship of Levinas to ontology and phenomenology, see Sean Hand, introduction, *The Levinas Reader*, by Emmanuel Levinas (Cambridge: Basil Blackwell, 1989), 1-8.

¹¹*Existence and Existents*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1978) 57, hereafter cited in the text as *EE*.

¹²*Carnets 1952-1956* 36, hereafter cited in the text as *C*.

¹³"Rapides, ou la rapacité de la fraîcheur," in *Autour d'André du Bouchet*, *op. cit.*, 153.