

Bernard Noël.

L'Ombre du double.

Paris: P.O.L. 1993. 127 pages. 120 FF.

La Chute des temps.

Paris: Gallimard. Collection Poésie. 1993. 283 pages. 44.50FF.

La Castration mentale.

Plombière-les-Dijon: Ulysse Fin de Siècle. 1994. 141 pages. 100 FF.

The work of Bernard Noël stands today at a staggering amplitude: a poetic *oeuvre* that goes from *Extraits du corps* (1958) and *La Face de silence* (1967) to *Bruits de langue* (1980), *L'Été langue morte* (1982), *La Chute des temps* (1983) and, now, *L'Ombre du double*; prose writings that move from the novelistic (*Le Château de Cène*, 1969, or *Le 19 octobre* 1977, 1979, or *URSS aller retour*, 1980) to the ethico-philosophical (*Le Sens la Sensure*, 1985, or the present *La Castration mentale*); extensive critical reflections on other writers, language and, above all modern artists (books, for example, on Blanchot, Magritte, Moreau, Matisse, Debré, Wou-Ki, David, Géricault, Masson, Voss, Jaccard, Dorny). And this is not to mention so much that remains frankly unclassifiable — *Portrait du Monde*, for example (1988). Little wonder that the work of Noël — “the most intelligent person I have ever known,” a celebrated contemporary French writer once described him as to me — has provoked increasing response amongst critics (Jouffroy, Bénézet, Dhainaut, Daive, Carn, Bishop, Prévost, Esteban, Brophy and, especially, Winspur, for example): his is a major literary and philosophical enterprise of our time.

1993 and 1994 have offered us an excellent opportunity to take stock of this enterprise. The Collection Poésie edition of *La Chute des temps* provides us with the definitive versions, also, of *L'Été langue morte*, *La Moitié du geste*, *La Rumeur de l'air* and five other, shorter, relatively recent texts. *L'Ombre du double* digs persistently, and ever deeper, into many of those preoccupations that Noël's poetry and, indeed, his larger reflections have wrestled with for nearly forty years: the tensions and paradoxes of identity's precariousness and multiplicity; the "smoke" of being and the will dynamising the latter; the relationships of the visible, speech and the unspoken; the foldings and interleaving of interiority and externalness; "Y'aveugle / dialogue du oui non" to which we can overcommit ourselves and which art, poetry, philosophy tend to deconstruct, and which, further, is undermined — one might even say, overwhelmed — by a certain feasible, livable self-sufficiency or intrinsic adequacy, self-adequation, of a nameless being-there; the abuse of language that saps our simplicity and our infiniteness before "l'obscur / pays le profond dehors;" the disappointments of knowledge and its ever assumable, ever new options; the question of the other, of that "passenger / de notre passage:" my sister, my brother, that other residing deep within myself, too, all too oblivious as I am of that "something preceding us / within us."

La Castration mentale is a powerful meditation — most of its constituent chapters were given as talks during various sessions organised by the États Généraux de la Culture from 1987 to 1993 and have appeared in print at least in part in newspapers and in Claudine Joseph's *Le Journal de la Culture* — on meaning, free speech, power, contemporary "cultural" criteria, "mental castration." It is a book that could be read with profit in tandem with Noël's own 1985 *Le Sens la Sensure* or with various recent books by Michel Deguy. *La Castration mentale* spells out the folly of attaching to economic criteria — their insistence upon, for example, pure productivity, efficiency, competitiveness, fatalistic or cynical "reliance" upon unemployment, and so on — an absolute faith that pushes aside notions — indeed, realities — of fundamental human equality, of fraternity-sorority-love, of social decency, even freedom. Here it is not possible to elaborate the wisdom and implicit solutions generated in *La Castration mentale*. The book is not a catalogue of problem and obstacle, let it suffice to say; it possesses, as does all of Noël's writing, and especially his poetry, a visionary quality that, ultimately, affirms faith in the human capacity for self-transformation, self-liberation and self-affirmation.

Michael Bishop
Dalhousie University