

Title of paper

Keeping out: Presence through absence in contemporary French literature

Abstract

Parler, c'est faire figure. Écrire, c'est disparaître.¹

This statement made in 2002 by French writer Pascal Quignard puts forward a paradoxical equivalence between writing and disappearing, suggesting that the writer is driven by the ambition to efface himself rather than to leave a mark. Quignard's prolific and successful career — 2002 is the year he was awarded the Prix Goncourt for his text *Les Ombres errantes* — is repeatedly presented by the writer as dependent on a personal disengagement from the world, from the social and professional obligations it entails.² Similarly, Michel Houellebecq, also a recipient of the Prix Goncourt for his 2010 novel *La Carte et le Territoire*, is renowned for leading a retreated existence and for frequent bouts of disappearance, the most recent of which happened in 2011, when the writer was reported missing for a number of days. This episode is now the topic of an upcoming television film, entitled *L'Enlèvement de Michel Houellebecq*, where the author will play his own role.³

Houellebecq and Quignard are extreme but telling examples of a trend that seems to concern today's French literary scene as whole, where, as argued by Dominique Rabaté in a recent essay on the current state of literature in France, 'la disparition frappe [...] par sa récurrence, par son importance quantitative autant que qualitative'.⁴ By dialoguing with and expanding on Rabaté's initial discussion, this paper proposes to explore the possibility of using disappearance as a tool to locate and define the contemporary in French literature. Disappearance and absence will first be examined as chosen postures — constantly oscillating between authenticity and artificiality — through which many French living writers like Houellebecq and Quignard, but also Jean Echenoz and Marie NDiaye for instance, paradoxically acquire and maintain public awareness

¹ 'To speak means putting on a show. To write is to disappear'. Pascal Quignard and Catherine Argand, 'Entretien', *Lire*, 1 October 2002 <http://www.lexpress.fr/culture/livre/pascal-quignard-goncourt-2002_806807.html> [accessed 31 October 2013] (para. 5 of 29).

² Pascal Quignard often explains in interviews and autobiographical statements how, in 1994, he left Paris and withdrew from his various social and professional positions to devote his life to writing and reading.

³ <<http://teleobs.nouvelobs.com/people/20130704.OBS6533/michel-houellebecq-le-film.html>> [accessed 31 October 2013].

⁴ 'we are struck by the recurrence of [the theme of] disappearance and its qualitative as well as quantitative importance'. Rabaté, Dominique, 'Figures de la disparition dans le roman contemporain' in Dambre, Marc and Wolfgang Asholt (eds.), *Un Retour des normes romanesques dans la littératures française contemporaine*, Paris: Presses Sorbonne Nouvelle, 2011, pp. 67-75, p.67.

and recognition. How and why does the establishment of a community of absent writers influence the formation of a contemporary canon? Disappearance also functions as an omnipresent motif in recent French literary works, and I intend to discuss this presence by questioning its historical (absence in a post-WWII literary context), theoretical (disappearance and its psychoanalytical echoes) and thematic (disappearance as absence, flight, and death) implications. Finally, if to write is to disappear, what does this mean for the future of literature? Does the ambition of disappearance apply to both writers and books? The possibility to define contemporary French literature as a linguistic production concerned by its own disappearance will also be explored.