

## Wagstaff, Emma. André du Bouchet: Poetic Forms of Attention

Sanda K. Simmons

Numéro 122, 2022

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1101638ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1101638ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

Department of French, Dalhousie University

ISSN

0711-8813 (imprimé)

2562-8704 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce compte rendu

Simmons, S. (2022). Compte rendu de [Wagstaff, Emma. André du Bouchet: Poetic Forms of Attention]. *Dalhousie French Studies*, (122), 143–144.  
<https://doi.org/10.7202/1101638ar>

Wagstaff, Emma. *André du Bouchet: Poetic Forms of Attention*. Boston : Brill Rodopi, 2020. 229 p.

André du Bouchet is a major 20th century poet who is just beginning to find a place among anglophone readers, owing to a couple of recent translations by Hoyt Rogers (*Openwork : Poetry and Prose* translated in collaboration with Paul Auster, and *Outside : Poetry and Prose, André du Bouchet*, with Eric Fishman), along with an earlier volume by David Mus, as well as to this first English language, book-length critical presentation and overview on the poet by Emma Wagstaff. While her project is vast, introducing major features along the entire breadth of du Bouchet's life work, her argument remains focused on an experience of time and attentiveness, rather than space, that du Bouchet's writing brings into play for the reader. Her interpretation defines his poetic singularity as the process inherent in being attentive to words, the material world, such as nature and works of art, others, and time. Within those processes, the poems and prose of du Bouchet inform the reader of how to become attentive, what attentiveness might look like in a concrete way, and where that attentiveness happens, at the breach between meaning and form. Her close analyses of specific extracts resonate with contemporary critical, literary, and philosophical approaches, including her own appreciation of du Bouchet's expressed poetics, to highlight a renewed interest in the temporal dynamic of reading.

The book is organized to present various facets of du Bouchet's writing and includes many references to other works on the poet, mostly by French scholars, and as she supports her own interpretations, she carefully distinguishes her viewpoint from that of other critics. Her focus on attentiveness helps to center the analyses on a certain kind of reading, one tied to the notion of time as experienced by the reader, using a reader-reception lens, yet she insists that du Bouchet mostly kept personal subjectivity to a larger, more inclusive view of human experience as a whole, which she places within a humanist value of egalitarianism and otherness. The six chapters focus on the context of his life within literary tradition, his vital role in the journal *l'Éphémère*, the thrust of his poetics, his writings as translator of both contemporary works and classics, his relationship with artists, their practices, and the art produced by them, and his life writing practices and body of work. From a philosophical angle, Wagstaff examines how the formal structures of du Bouchet's poetry more closely resemble Wittgenstein than Heidegger, where the former places importance on attentiveness to change over time and the latter stresses the concept of presence and absence. By contextualizing du Bouchet in relation to other poets and intellectuals of his era, she demonstrates how he resists falling into clear divisions while retaining certain affinities, for example refusing the Surrealist notion of the image as nothingness, embracing the natural world, and using language that is often pared down to its literal meaning and devoid of anecdote. His translations of texts by Paul Celan, criticized for some of the language he chose, reveal the poet's interest in what is strange in all language, and this very point of difficulty characterizes du Bouchet's work within the precise moment of the struggle to put meaning to form, which, according to Wagstaff, results in a deeper understanding of our own mortality as humans within a larger framework of the natural world. Friendships with his contemporaries (Pierre Tal-Coat, Philippe Jaccottet, Jacques Dupin, and Yves Bonnefoy, to name only a few) show how du Bouchet engaged with the world around him, even if his work did not ever align with another's perspective. Wagstaff makes the distinction clear on a number of theoretical practices, including how du Bouchet's focus on the object differs from Francis Ponge, for example, or how the elemental emphasis on nature tends to separate du Bouchet from German Romantics. Within each chapter, the contextualization leads to a close analysis in which each argument finds its source and exemplification. Notably, in the chapter on

“Poetry and Pauses” (Chapter 3), the discussion on repetition, contradiction, spacing as an element of temporal distancing, and asymmetry convincingly supports her argument on how fluidity in du Bouchet’s poems is produced. In building her argument, Wagstaff takes into account the textural and semantic forms, that is how du Bouchet organizes his words and phrases on the page, and their effects on the reader, which all add up to a kind of calling for both heightened awareness of the present and distraction resulting from the unfinished nature of each poetic encounter.

According to Wagstaff’s interpretation, these encounters with written material include contact with the real world but also with the textual object where a kind of grappling with temporal forms situated in space leads to a deeper understanding of our own mortality and of the existence of foreignness, or otherness, in language itself.

The conclusion that “it is the job of poetry to show us how we live and think” may be a bit too broad, yet the overall assertion that du Bouchet “advocates a way of perceiving, thinking and moving that lives time rather than taking it: slowly, with pauses, seeing through surface meanings, adjusting based on experience, and imagining possible futures” (95-96) sums up the underlying message that Wagstaff has gleaned from her readings. The accrued benefit of her presentation is that she carefully distinguishes the focus of du Bouchet in relation to his peers and to movements such as Surrealism, giving arguments to show how du Bouchet transverses clear lines. Wagstaff presents an overview of the poet’s entire life’s work, placing him in a historical context relating his work to other poets, critics, writers, and even languages within the framework of du Bouchet’s translations, from a variety of languages and from a wide swath of time periods, and as an art critic between forms of art. She also constructs a theoretical framework concerning attentiveness as a lesson readers can glean from du Bouchet’s writings.

With an extensive bibliography, index, list of abbreviations, and several images that evoke du bouchettian esthetics, this significant book contributes to a deeper understanding of André du Bouchet’s body of work as well as to ways of approaching contemporary poetry.

Sandra K. Simmons

The University of Texas at Arlington

\*\*\*

Migdal, Anna. *Déserts noirs*. Paris : L’Harmattan, Poésie(s), 2021, 94 p.

Professeur émérite de l’université de l’Alberta et éminente spécialiste de Zola et du naturalisme, Anna Migdal nous fait découvrir une autre facette de son écriture à travers ce premier recueil de poèmes, *Déserts noirs*. Beaux et tourmentés, les Hoodoos de la vallée de Drumheller qui illustrent la couverture donnent le ton du contenu de l’ouvrage. L’auteure interpelle la vie sur le mode de la conversation et transporte le lecteur vers un monde à fleur de peau, tout en sensations hantées d’émotions. On remarque dans les poèmes une récurrence de mots apparentés à la douleur et à l’anxiété : « solitudes » « meurtrissures », « isolements », « désolations », « décombres », comme autant d’instantanés qui frôlent la mort. Migdal rend toutefois l’indicible possible, saisissable, palpable et vivant, lui donnant le maximum d’ampleur et de retentissement comme dans le poème « Géologie » : « Tu déploies tes entours/te façannes sur le jour/toujours plus loin/ vers d’autres rives/où s’emportent les confins ».

Par la dédicace qui ouvre son livre – « À toi qui as eu le covid comme moi » – l’auteure s’adresse à chaque lecteur en recueillement. Le covid s’est mué en un mal universel que tous expérimentent, dans leur chair ou par personne interposée. Cette pandémie devient ainsi une métaphore de la souffrance, de l’isolement illustré par le masque qui cache et réduit les fonctions vitales de la bouche et du nez : l’être humain se retrouve en partie privé de ses sens et de sa respiration. Le coronavirus distille la peur et