INTRODUCTION

The Restless Openwork
of André du Bouchet

I know a wind in purpose strong—
It spins *against* the way it drives.
—Melville

An unjustly neglected giant of French literature—and obliquely, of several other literatures as well—André du Bouchet was one of the greatest innovators of twentieth-century letters. Trailblazing poet, maverick philosopher, multifarious critic, trenchant stylist, fearless anthologist, daring editor, prolific diarist, intrepid translator from three languages, tireless explorer of nature and the visual arts, he was an authentic iconoclast who has yet to receive his due, especially in the English-speaking world. This anomaly seems all the more inexplicable, given his dazzling renditions of Shakespeare, Joyce, and Faulkner into French, as well as his lifelong attachment to the classic authors of nineteenth-century America. A moving example of this is the epigraph from Melville quoted above, which du Bouchet placed at the head of one of his late works; and in most of his writings, the elliptical syntax and halting dashes of Dickinson inform every page.

Admittedly, du Bouchet's achievement far transcends all boundaries or allegiances, and the diversity of his ethnic background alone would make him a cosmopolitan figure, representative of our age of "translingualism" and immigration. In addition to his French versions of Anglophone writers, including authors as diverse as John

Donne, Gerard Manley Hopkins, and Laura Riding, he also enriched French literature with important translations from the German and Russian. All the same, affording du Bouchet the recognition he merits should be of particular concern to American readers, since his paternal family had ancestral ties to the United States, and he himself spent nearly eight years in New England at a formative stage of his development, befriending such key exponents of our poetry as James Merrill and Richard Wilbur.

By drawing the attention of the English-language public to du Bouchet's work, we hope this anthology will help to rectify a glaring omission. With remarkable far-sightedness, Paul Auster made the first step in that direction with his translations from the late 1960s and early 1970s (published in book form in 1976 under the title *The Uninhabited*). In my view, these translations of du Bouchet's poems from the sixties are still unequalled; somewhat emended by Auster, they are reprinted in the present collection. While later translators and omnibus anthologists of French verse have also tended to focus on his poetry from that decade, we have expanded the scope of *Openwork* to include pieces from the author's entire trajectory, both "poetry" and "prose." For du Bouchet, as for many French writers of the past two centuries, these modes of expression are intertwined and often indistinguishable.

While English-speakers have special reasons to become acquainted with this author's groundbreaking work, we are by no means alone in needing to catch up. Even in France—though du Bouchet was duly awarded the Critics' Prize of 1961, the Grand Prize of the French Academy in 1975, and the National Poetry Prize of 1983—the full import of his oeuvre is only beginning to make itself felt. With little regard for the self-promoting mainstream of belles-lettres, he frequently favored small presses and artists' editions, and many of his articles and essays in periodicals have yet to be collected. In verse, prose, and intermediate forms, he published more than seventy heterogeneous books in his lifetime, including twenty major translations from the

English, German, and Russian. Though highly respected among celebrated writers and artists, the friend of Paul Celan, Yves Bonnefoy, Louis-René des Forêts, Philippe Jaccottet, Jacques Dupin, Pierre Tal Coat, Alberto Giacometti, and many others, he maintained a cautious reserve toward the intellectual trends of Paris. As the epigraph from Melville implies, he was an inveterate contrarian. When Yves Bonnefoy introduced us in the autumn of 1970, du Bouchet wryly remarked: “With me you will learn to say no, no, no. Isn’t that why you’ve come to France?”

A poet’s poet in the tradition of Mallarmé, with a strong dose of the master’s aloofness, du Bouchet never sought to attract a circle of younger disciples; nor did he try to advance his international reputation. According to his longtime American companion, Sarah Plimpton, though he returned to the United States briefly in 1970, he declined an interview with the *Paris Review*, which she had arranged through her brother, George Plimpton. With his son Gilles, du Bouchet made a trip to Crete (see the eponymous poem in this volume), and in his last years he attended several short conferences in Turkey, Eastern Europe, and Mexico, but he never took advantage of his early links to the English-speaking world. Throughout his life, he spent the greater part of his time in the French countryside, devoting himself to the long walks—first in Normandy and then in the Drôme—which nourished the creation of his notebooks. The entries were often jotted down during his rambles, especially during the decade of the fifties, and they have emerged as signal works in their own right. Once the entire corpus of these journals appears in print, the challenging texts he published in his middle and later periods will come into focus as trees fully integral to the understory below. In retrospect, more than a decade after his death, du Bouchet towers among his contemporaries with gathering insistence.

André du Bouchet was born in Paris in March 1924, the son of a physician, Nadia Wilter, and an engineer by training, Victor du

Bouchet. Though of Russian Jewish extraction, his mother had been raised in Paris; his father, of American and Russian parentage, had grown up in Odessa and then in Paris. In both these cities André du Bouchet's grandfather, Charles Winchester du Bouchet, conducted a distinguished medical practice. Born in Philadelphia, he was described by other family members as "very American"; his paternal ancestors had immigrated to the United States from France at the end of the eighteenth century and had intermarried with the local population of English descent. This American connection would prove decisive for André du Bouchet and his family during the crisis of World War II. Until then he and his younger sister, Hélène, enjoyed the comforts of bourgeois life in the Sixteenth Arrondissement, a well-to-do quarter of Paris. Given their multicultural relations, and the steady stream of maids, governesses, and au pairs who shared their apartment, they constantly heard many different tongues and dialects spoken around them. As du Bouchet later remarked: "I remember an entire childhood with foreign languages being murmured in the background." The children had plentiful access to books through their cultivated mother; her close friend, the novelist Nathalie Sarraute, lived in the same building.

This otherwise idyllic picture was overshadowed by the gloomy irascibility of the children's father, Victor du Bouchet, whose nervous fits were clinically diagnosed as schizophrenia in 1939. Throughout most of his life he remained unemployable. By 1940 André's mother, Nadia Wilter du Bouchet, was fully supporting the family, pursuing her medical career in a Norman village. Still an adolescent, the future writer bicycled to secondary school each day in the nearby town of Dreux, ten miles away. The worst blow of all came in May of that year, with the German invasion and the rapid collapse of France. About this cataclysm du Bouchet would later reminisce:

I have a very exact memory of the moment when I realized people were fleeing on the roads . . . I felt that the world I'd

just discovered was caught up in a kind of rockslide. In June 1940, under the bombardments, we departed helter-skelter at first light . . . I recall quite well that I picked up a Greek dictionary, the Bailly, which was my only reading during the months that followed. It was a very violent experience: the world was destroyed. This was when I wrote for the first time, with the will to reestablish something, to attest to a connection I had barely glimpsed . . . before it was swept away.

Under the anti-Semitic laws of Vichy France, Nadia was no longer able to exercise her profession, and graver dangers loomed on the horizon. In December 1940, along with his parents and his sister, André crossed the Atlantic in the *Excalibur*, the last passenger ship to leave Lisbon.

After arriving in New York on December 6, 1940, the refugees made their way to Boston. There André's American grandfather temporarily took them in; but he could not afford to sustain them for long. He had led a prosperous life in Paris until 1939, but when the upheavals started in Europe he returned to the United States, his income reduced to a small pension. From this time forward the du Bouchet family was forced to split up. Far advanced in his illness, Victor was confined to a psychiatric institution. Since her diplomas were deemed unacceptable in the United States, at the age of forty-three Nadia was obliged to recommence her medical courses and lived in a student's room at a hospital. The two children were sent to boarding schools and later to college, always on a shoestring budget. For the spring semester of 1941 André obtained a place at the Loomis School in Windsor, Connecticut, expressly founded to provide aid to pupils in need. Thanks to his superior training in ancient Greek—and perhaps to the solace he had sought in the Bailly dictionary—he swiftly graduated from the classical course with honors.

In the autumn he entered Amherst College on the Harry de Forest Smith Scholarship for Greek, still in existence today. He received

his BA summa cum laude in three years. Combining his two favorite disciplines, he wrote his senior thesis on “the influence of Cartesian philosophy on seventeenth-century literature.” At Amherst he made friends with a fellow undergraduate, the poet James Merrill. Merrill would later recount to Paul Auster that he acknowledged du Bouchet as a genius even then, a prodigy whose gifts overawed him. Unfortunately, their college acquaintance was short-lived, since Merrill took leave in 1944 to serve as an infantryman in the US Army. That fall, at the age of twenty, du Bouchet began his master’s degree at Harvard University on an Amherst stipend for graduate studies in English literature. In addition he received the Chapman Scholarship from Harvard, commemorating an alumnus who had died in France during World War I. Thanks to the funds from those two sources du Bouchet could forgo any major support from his hard-pressed mother.

Throughout his eight years in the United States André maintained a copious correspondence with Nadia, whom he rarely saw in person. It provides detailed information about his reading, his courses, his friends, and his extracurricular activities. He earned his MA at Harvard in English and by 1947 was a teaching fellow there in history and literature. In Cambridge, besides such French compatriots as the art historian Georges Duthuit, his younger colleague Pierre Schneider, and the artist André Masson, he frequented the poet and translator Richard Wilbur, who from 1945 was attending graduate school at Harvard on the GI Bill. Not surprisingly, given his troubled family background, du Bouchet underwent four years of psychoanalysis from 1944 to 1948. In November 1949, after his return to France, he would write in one of his notebooks: “Psychoanalysis has taught me my own limits: beyond them, it forces me to be free, and to weather the terrible squalls of reality.”

The safety in which du Bouchet had spent the war years and their immediate aftermath could not make up for his sense of time lost in an involuntary exile, far from his native culture. As he wrote his

mother in 1947: "This prolonged sojourn in America escapes the usual valuations: it's neither lovely nor dreadful. It has simply been a necessity for me to remain . . . a condition of my life. One more year to go. A sad year that means we know how to focus our efforts on true riches . . . Often I think of the celebration my return will be. I want to be equal to that." On the other hand he dreaded the "colères" (angers) of French society, still torn by the conflict between former "collaborateurs" and "résistants"; many of them harbored grudges about a wartime ordeal he had not directly shared with his compatriots. In August 1948, at the age of twenty-four, André du Bouchet regained the land of his birth. His mother had preceded him the previous year, continuing her medical career in Paris and placing his father once again in a psychiatric hospital. In 1949 du Bouchet married the future translator and anthropologist Tina Jolas, daughter of the American writer and critic Eugene Jolas, whose family he had met in New York. She had grown up in France and was also eager to resume her life there after the war. With her the poet would have two children: Paule, whose presence imbues her father's early notebooks; and Gilles, whose painting would later have an impact on his work.

On balance du Bouchet's experience in the United States had been neither wholly positive nor wholly negative; but for many facets of his oeuvre it would prove to be determinant. Despite the shattering of his family and the turmoil in Europe, he had continued his education, both formally and informally. His mastery of English was now complete: as he would later assert, it had become for him the academic language par excellence, the vehicle of argumentation and ideas. His separation from French had created in him a dual consciousness, a distance that encouraged him to approach his own language freshly, testing and stretching its possibilities as only an "outsider" can do. At a deeper level, he had entered the interstices where silence cohabits with speech. In a conversation less than a year before his death, he recalled that in this period English was the language in

which he “didn’t sputter,” whereas French was the language of intimacy, “of everything that belonged to the order of muteness.” After his long exile in America, he noted, French seemed “like a foreign language, inaccessible because too close.”

Despite his youth, du Bouchet’s work had already begun to appear in such leading US periodicals as *The New Republic*, *The Yale Quarterly*, and the *Partisan Review*. Now he gradually won access to journals of equivalent caliber in France. The most emblematic of these was the aptly named *transition*, a major cross-Atlantic forum in the postwar years, with a distinguished roster of American and European contributors. His older friend Georges Duthuit had just revived the publication, which had been founded before the war by Eugene Jolas; and on his arrival in Paris, du Bouchet served as an assistant editor for the review. He soon encountered Pierre Reverdy, whose poetry he had long admired; they became close friends and exchanged an avid correspondence. Du Bouchet published an incisive essay on Reverdy’s work as well as studies of René Char and Francis Ponge, two more masters from the previous generation whom he befriended. Notably, he maintained his distances from the Surrealist movement, in accord with his preference for taut, understated imagery.

Despite his respect for his literary elders, he did not neglect his contemporaries. He forged close friendships with the artist Pierre Tal Coat and the poet Jacques Dupin; he soon met Yves Bonnefoy and Philippe Jaccottet as well, poets and translators who would follow his work with enthusiasm. Thanks to the intervention of Ponge, in 1951 du Bouchet published *Air*, a book of poems; in the same year he published his translation of *Knight’s Gambit*, a set of short stories by William Faulkner. A second collection of verse, *Sans couvercle (Lidless)*, followed in 1953, and he advanced his supranational concept of literature with self-assured essays on James Joyce and Boris Pasternak. In an anthology of Victor Hugo he edited in 1956, he displayed the kaleidoscopic method he would adopt toward his own literary

production. By excerpting paragraphs and even short phrases from Hugo's poems and novels, he defied the conventional view of the author's oeuvre, stripping it of Romantic sentimentalism and inflated rhetoric. Admiringly, in his notebooks he cites Hugo's line "the earth is under words like a field under flies" as a pithy example of "words visualized."

As previously in the United States, du Bouchet availed himself of fellowships—research grants from the Centre National de Recherche Scientifique (National Center for Scientific Research)—to help finance his literary pursuits. The eminent philosophers Jean Wahl and Gaston Bachelard endorsed these disbursements, all the easier to obtain since du Bouchet was also working as a librarian for the center. The special fields of phenomenology and aesthetics, particularly as conceived by Martin Heidegger, would always form an essential undercurrent of his writing. Already in the early text « Les épines déchirantes » ("The piercing thorns . . .") of 1951, he had evoked the verse-form of Maurice Scève's *Délie* as "ten lines tight as a fist." In the three years from 1955 to 1957, he presented various studies of "poetic creation" to the oversight committee, honing in not only on Scève but on Hölderlin and Baudelaire. All the same, it eventually became apparent to all concerned that he had opted for poetry over poetics. Du Bouchet's fascination with what occurs in the gaps between the "dizains" of Scève would soon be reflected in the teeming blanks between his own verses. The late style of Hölderlin would also reemerge in his fragmentary syntax, uneven layout, and multivalent meanings. His fervent reading of Baudelaire culminated in the magisterial essay of 1956, "Baudelaire l'irrémissible," comparable in heft to Bonnefoy's tribute to *Les fleurs du mal* a few years later. Baudelaire would always haunt both poets, seconded by Rimbaud and Mallarmé.

Tellingly, du Bouchet's final sketches for the CNRS projects already read like first drafts of his poetry. For example, he observes that

Baudelaire tried “to convert the future into a past,” which could only result in “incompatibility.” He ends his comments with the words:

Baudelaire makes his sky of this incompatibility

Incompatibility prime motor

It is the sky of the annihilated image,
the aura of the poem that expands and subsists

from the vaporized image

incompatibility wall in Baudelaire that will have served him as
a road

Clearly, this passage marks a transition to du Bouchet’s mature manner, both in content and in technique—even down to the strikingly un-Baudelairean linkage of “motor,” in all its senses, with “road.” A “white motor” will soon figure strongly in his poems of this period, a metaphor both for the mechanics of movement and for the generative power of the sun.

In 1957 du Bouchet underwent one of the most painful crises of his life, his separation from Tina Jolas. The rupture arose from a double betrayal: her passionate affair with René Char, the younger writer’s poetic mentor. For several years du Bouchet had a hard time regaining his inner balance; his readings, critical essays, and poetry served as helpmates toward stability. With a small notebook always at hand for spontaneous jottings, he continued his habit of extensive walks, especially near his mother’s country house in the Vexin region of Normandy. As for Tina Jolas, she went on from a subsequent breakup with Char to become a noted ethnologist. Soon enough the tide would change in du Bouchet’s favor. He attained a milestone in 1961 with the publication of *Dans la chaleur vacante* (*In the Vacant Heat*). This kinetic sequence of verse abounds in the gaping blanks, toppling

metaphors, and syntactic twists which would characterize his middle and late periods. At the age of thirty-seven he now received widespread acclaim, garnering the Prix de la Critique, a national prize bestowed by literary critics. In his personal life he also arrived at an important turning point: getting over his divorce from Tina Jolas, he began a partnership with the American artist and poet Sarah Plimpton that would flourish for twenty years.

In 1966, along with Yves Bonnefoy, Louis-René des Forêts, Jacques Dupin, and Gaëton Picon, du Bouchet founded *L'Éphémère*, a legendary cultural review of wide-reaching influence, published by the Maeght Foundation. Two other renowned writers, Paul Celan and Michel Leiris, soon joined the editorial committee. The twenty numbers of the journal, the last of which was issued in 1973, provided a showcase for a broad range of topics, from literature to the visual arts, and from philosophy to anthropology. Texts from all periods of history appeared alongside each other: aesthetics prevailed over temporal contingencies. Here du Bouchet published his versions of Gerard Manley Hopkins, John Donne, and Laura Riding, as well as his collaborative translations of Paul Celan, Marina Tsvetaeva, and Ossip Mandelstam. Like Ezra Pound, he found such joint efforts useful in transposing a poem from one language to another. Above all, du Bouchet moved forward with his own poetry. After parts of the sequence had first come out in the review, in 1968 he published his collection *OU LE SOLEIL*; he left the title in capitals, so that the first word hovered between “or” and “where”—though the initial verse began with the phrase “où le soleil” (where the sun).

In 1971 du Bouchet acquired a house in the isolated village of Truinas, surrounded by the mountains of the Drôme. His constant wanderings in this region, one of the best-preserved natural areas in France, colored his notebooks for the rest of his life. But his preoccupation with art also came to the fore: in 1972 he took up his earlier compositions on Giacometti, expanding them into the full-length book *Qui n'est pas tourné vers nous* (*Which Is Not Turned Toward*

Us). The leading authority on his work, Clément Layet, has observed that from this time forward, his creative methods resembled those of the visual arts: “In reshaping his textual materials, sometimes written twenty years earlier, as though he were digging at or adding to their substance, André du Bouchet’s writing approached sculpture more and more closely. His working tools were pages, a typewriter, scissors, glue, and a drawing board, where the thumb-tacked sheets evolved according to his successive looks of appraisal.” The author himself commented that he proceeded “sometimes by cutting, sometimes by development. When it’s a matter of what we might call ‘prose,’ it’s mostly through a development which entails more cutting in turn, by a movement of drift within repetition. For poems, it’s more like pulverizing, condensing.” During one of our earliest discussions in 1971, he also stressed the need for a lengthy period of gestation: “Leave what you write in a drawer for a couple of months or a couple of years, even a couple of decades,” he told me. “Later you’ll find out why these words came to you, and where to take them from there.”

Du Bouchet had always used his notebooks as an ore from which to extract subsequent texts; but increasingly, even his printed writings would undergo later revisions—often thoroughgoing—that would require further publications. In 1979 he reworked many of his contributions to *L’Éphémère*, weaving them into the complex fabric of *L’incohérence* (*Incoherence*). Though the changes were profound, such shifts may seem common enough when revamping pieces from periodicals. But in the case of du Bouchet, the recycling could apply to entire volumes that had already appeared, segments of which would migrate from one opus to another. The technique might be compared to the transfer of a draftsman’s sketch to other media while conserving either the broad outlines or certain details of the preliminary drawing.

The author’s engagement with the visual arts would in fact lead him to present many of his books as inner colloquies with painters and engravers, accompanied by their images. Along these lines, the most catalytic of his silent partners were Pierre Tal Coat, Jean Hélion,

Alberto Giacometti, Bram van Velde, Geneviève Asse, and Miklos Bokor. And in an especially moving gesture, coming from such a private poet, the vast meditation of 1984 entitled *Peinture* (*Painting*) takes the artworks of his son, Gilles du Bouchet, as its point of departure. From the late seventies onward, this personal link with painting was further strengthened by the writer's relationship with Anne de Staël—the daughter of Nicolas de Staël and herself an artist—who gave birth to his third child, Marie, in 1976.

In a reflex similar to his dialogue with the visual arts, du Bouchet adapted translation to his desire to stretch the envelope of literature. His French versions of works written in other languages, chiefly the ones from the German and Russian, have been criticized—wrong-headedly—for a few minor semantic shifts. No doubt English was his most accomplished language after French; with the other two, as I have already noted, he had to rely on assistance. His incisive renditions of Shakespeare alone—of *Pericles* and *The Tempest*, for example—would have earned him a lasting place in the annals of literary translation. But even in the case of English, slavish exactitude was not the essential point. Whereas conventional translation starts with a source language and aims at a target language, for du Bouchet both source and target lay elsewhere: in the unspoken, at the threshold where poetry begins to form. His quest for the fundamental language underlying translation runs parallel to the theories of Walter Benjamin. Just as du Bouchet perforated the walls of literature and art to reveal the unexplored spaces they share, in his recastings of German, Russian, and English he subtly pierced the divisions between languages. After all, in his childhood, many linguistic voices had overlapped, including those of Latin and Greek; and when he returned from America, French itself had become like a foreign tongue to him. Astutely, he recognized this not as a hindrance but as an opportunity. His seminal meditation of 1986, “Notes sur la traduction” (“Notes on Translation”), leaves off with the words: “French. I still have to translate from French. We do not realize: that has not been translated.”

In the final decade of his life, from 1991 to 2001, du Bouchet crafted new poems in a never-ending stream. But coevally, he summed up his own achievement as a writer, with a lucidity rarely rivaled in literary history. He carried out this reprise on two seemingly opposite fronts. On the more obvious level, he orchestrated his past texts—from the earliest to the latest—into comprehensive ensembles, which alter and expand his existing books. For example, in the volume *Alberto Giacometti, « Dessin »* (Alberto Giacometti, “Drawing”) of 1991, he crystallized his decades of thought about the single artist who had most influenced his writing. Along the same lines, he issued three successive “anthologies” of his work—in the supple definition we must apply in his case, which is highly *sui generis*. The series began in 1995 with the deceptively neutral title *Poèmes et proses*: a set of revised older pieces and new additions. But after he was diagnosed with leukemia in 1996, du Bouchet seems to have hastened the recapitulation of his oeuvre. The second selection, *L’ajour* (*Openwork*), of 1998, was followed in 2000, only a year before the author’s death, by a third: *L’emportement du muet* (*The Mute’s Outrage*). In contrasting ways, both titles illuminate the central axes of his lifework: the open-ended dynamism of change and the seething silence that underlies speech. Through ceaseless experiments, he had learned to use his early exile to the advantage of his quest. His disjunction from his language and culture had allowed him to arrive at a form of expression beyond the accidents of time and place. He had mastered a prose style that hybridized the visual and literary arts, an approach to translation that heightened its textual flexibility, and a free-floating poetry that overstepped the conventional bounds of language.

The other channel taken by this final burst of creation was equally momentous, though it appeared unobtrusive on the surface. In 1989, du Bouchet permitted the literary critic Michel Collot to publish a selection of passages from the journals he had maintained over the decades, under the anodyne rubric *Carnets, 1952–1956* (*Notebooks, 1952–1956*). In his afterword, Collot explained that he had drawn on

sixty of the pocket-size sheaves the poet habitually took with him on his excursions. As I have already mentioned, these often furnished the nucleus for published writings. But until his encounter with Collot, it had never occurred to du Bouchet to print verbatim the raw materials of his work, his spontaneous jottings in the field. Collot rightly thought they would shed a clarifying light on his oeuvre; and thanks to the impetus given by his friend, du Bouchet began to unlock his workshop for his readers, inviting them to look over his shoulder. In a long entry published only recently, he greeted Collot's intervention as follows:

... the choice given by Michel Collot — without whom these
pages
would not have existed — a choice where I counted
for nothing — I return them
today to an existence : to what may have a power of appeal.

But then the poet began to reassume his authorial control, positioning these snippets from the past on his drawing board. With himself as sole editor, he issued *Carnet* in 1994, widening the earlier collection to span the years 1950–1961. In that volume he continued to head the selected entries with month and year, as Collot had done; but already in *Carnet 2*, published in 1998, which covers 1962–1983, he suppressed the months and divided the sections only by the year of their composition. By the time he reached *Carnet 3*, which appeared in 2000, he had reduced the word “notebook” to a subtitle, pointedly calling the work *Annotations sur l'espace non datées* (*Undated Annotations on Space*). There could be no clearer demonstration of du Bouchet's resistance to the concept of chronological order, as well as his impulse to invent new genres out of preexisting literary modes. As Antoine Emaz has observed, the author's switch from Collot's plural “notebooks” to the singular “notebook” affirms the primacy of the form itself over “the concrete supports of writing.” In the *Annotations*, it is as though “the notebook had passed from the

status of a rough draft, the genesis of a parallel poetic work, to that of an autonomous poetic work, with no relation to any historically adjacent publication.”

In what may have been his last poem, du Bouchet paid tribute to a renowned fellow poet, Louis-René des Forêts. Returning to the more emotive style of his early verse, he virtually wrote his own epitaph:

A man walks on the shoreline of language, a child at first; and
then, moving from page to page, he arrives at a great age
from which it would seem that only an instant, or several
instants, had divided him.

man child nothing

a child goes to the man in the air . . .

We should recall that du Bouchet’s first book was entitled *Air*; and in an early undated poem that came to light only recently, he addresses poetry as the “diamond of breath.” The link with the “air” of words could not be clearer, just at the point when they fall silent. In all these instances, as in the notebooks, du Bouchet reveals an intimate side often hidden in the published works of his middle and late periods. As it happens, the homage to his friend adverts to a crucial moment that decided the fate of the “cahiers” themselves.

Anne de Staël, whom du Bouchet married in 1999, has recounted the incident. In December 2000, at their house in Truinas, he amassed all his notebooks with the firm intent of burning them; he wanted to destroy every page without leaving a trace. Having already extracted three volumes of passages from these “cahiers,” in addition to the one prepared by Collot, he feared that after his death more excerpts would be needlessly divulged. But just as he was about to carry out his resolve the telephone rang, stopping him in his tracks. The wife of Louis-René des Forêts had called to tell du Bouchet that her husband had died. “Then we are all dead!” du Bouchet exclaimed.

Forthwith he abandoned his plan once and for all. The poet's gesture suggests an acceptance that he, like all authors, must ultimately yield to those who will go on living. Readers, critics, and editors will make their own choices about which texts seem most salient to them, and their judgments will shift over time with the historical evolution of taste.

If du Bouchet composed his own epitaph in the poem I have quoted, I should also cite one more: it reflects the other side of the coin, the austere self-abnegation of his late work. Heedless of his delicate state of health, in 2001 the poet insisted on going to Truinas in the dead of winter to witness the snowfalls there, so often evoked in his writings. The doctors had given him several more years, but by March he underwent a massive relapse of leukemia. He received his final publication, a set of new poems called *Tumulte*, in his hospital room. As always, the title of the book said everything: the turbulence of his restless energy, the letters and blanks whirling like a blizzard on the page, the never-ending tumble of universal forces. One of the poems in that last collection, "A l'arrêt" ("At a Standstill"), reminds us that du Bouchet was not a poet who led a purely verbal existence, only through the medium of words: he lived in them, but he also lived "outside" them. As the poem repeatedly declares: what is important is "dehors"—what is "outside" our grasp. A supreme example of his openwork, the term implies thousands of meanings at once: being "outdoors" in the shifting phenomena of nature but also being "outside" the limits of language, "outside" the constraints of human consciousness, and "outside" existence itself:

but

outside
without having

stopped it

I cannot

André du Bouchet died on April 19, 2001, and was buried in Truinas.

If I have stressed du Bouchet's American years in this brief biography, it is for two reasons. In the first place, that little-known part of his history may bring him closer to the English-speaking readership. But far more significantly, I believe the period of his escape from France and exile in the United States exercised a lasting influence on his work. In those eight years, starting when he was barely sixteen, he went through a tidal wave of shocks: the collapse of France, the invasion by the Germans, the anti-Semitic persecution of the Vichy regime, the hasty flight to Lisbon, the crossing to New York, the inability of his grandfather to provide a haven in Boston, the permanent unraveling of his family, the forced adjustment to boarding school, the separation from his mother, the rejection of her professional degrees, the irredeemable madness of his father, the uneasy disjunction from European suffering—and above all, for such a literary youth, the abrupt plunge into another language for both intellectual and everyday use. The self-effacement of du Bouchet's poems does not mask the difficult experiences behind them, which continued into his adulthood. For example, his betrayal by both Tina Jolas and René Char was a heavy blow; in one of his journal entries around this time, he fears his family will “blow apart”—but he could have written, “blow apart again.” And then at the end of his life there was the lingering leukemia, which he faced with stoic resignation.

At a crucial stage of du Bouchet's development as a writer, French began to seem like a foreign idiom to him. On top of the multiple

ethnic and linguistic strains (in both senses of the word) he had already inherited, he now became to some degree a migrant within his own country of origin. His transpositions from one language to another, or from one art to another—such as his fusion of painting with literature—were never acts performed within the comfort of an aesthetic “homeland.” Instead, they represent a perpetual motion: cultural and verbal fragments rise and converge only to shatter all over again, in a tireless motion forward. This internalization of exile might explain why he was never tempted to live abroad again and why he rarely traveled for extended periods outside of France. It was as if his lengthy stay in the United States had exhausted his tolerance for daily life in other cultures. On the other hand, since he subsumed various nationalities within himself, he had no need to cultivate their outer trappings. His childhood and adolescence had unfolded against a backdrop of linguistic pluralism, and he embodied it no matter where he lived; he maintained that polyvalence through his translations and foreign friends. His twenty years with Sarah Plimpton, who spoke little French when he first met her in Paris, were somewhat like sharing an outpost of America in France—in a contrary movement to that of his youth.

Given the intricacy of du Bouchet’s origins and influences, it is hardly surprising that his literary output is dauntingly complex. In putting together our reader of his work, Paul Auster and I have tried to give a balanced glimpse of the author’s vast creation, and we have felt justified in proceeding with a free hand. Du Bouchet himself allowed Collot to select entries from his journals as he saw fit, lending an even greater elasticity to his oeuvre. By so doing he acknowledged the right of a conscientious reader to exercise his or her own control over his writings, and even to countermand authorial dictates. In other words, he might be said to have endowed future editors with an ongoing permission to devise an André du Bouchet of their own, just as he had done with Victor Hugo. The ultimate stage of his “openwork” would be to devolve it to the imaginations of others.

At the time of his death du Bouchet had already given his intellectual heir, the philosopher Clément Layet, license to carry out such a project. The result, the Seghers volume of 2002, combines Layet's lengthy exegesis of four du Bouchet texts with a selection that abandons all chronology, excerpting passages from various works in "verse" and "prose," just as the author himself had done when regrouping his previous compositions. I should add that the leeway with his words du Bouchet granted to others had always impressed me. As I transposed his poems at various points from 1970 to 2000, I noticed that while he kindly answered questions, he preferred to leave his translators a wide margin of freedom. His only explicit suggestion—for the ending of "Célérité" ("Swiftiness")—was actually a distinct departure from the original (see Part Three of our anthology). His liberality seemed all the more striking, given his multilayered fluency in casual as well as formal English, dating back to his long American sojourn.

In our collection, as in many reeditions sanctioned by the author in his lifetime, the blank spaces have been slightly compressed to accommodate a new book size and format. In works left as manuscripts, such as the notebooks, we often have no exact indication of his wishes, and so we must improvise in any case. Thanks to du Bouchet's final act of selflessness in preserving them, we still possess such invaluable passages as the early entry about a voyage from Venice to Greece, included here. Clément Layet published that sequence only recently, along with many other notations by du Bouchet, in the spring of 2011. We hope that all of them will appear one day, perhaps in facsimile, and that du Bouchet's letters will be printed as well. The letters to his mother in the American years, like his exchanges with artists and writers in his maturity, are fascinating not only as autobiography but as documents of an era.

Up till now, in the omnibus translations of modern French verse, du Bouchet's poems may have seemed baffling to many readers, through no fault of the editors: lacking space, these compendia must showcase each author's most characteristic traits. Thanks to a wider

compass we can begin to trace how du Bouchet's mature style evolves from its origins. The early poems and notebook entries disclose that his innovations flow naturally from the tradition of Baudelaire and Rimbaud—even Hugo, whom he boldly spliced in his anthology—after passing through the prism of his immediate mentors such as Reverdy and Char. All these ancestors loom large in du Bouchet's writings from the forties and early fifties, which echo the sonorous music, emphatic metaphors, and synesthesia of his predecessors. From these beginnings he gradually modulates to the more reserved tone and Mallarméan spacing of the poems Paul Auster first transposed. But in his final phase, by far the longest of the three, instead of repeating his “trademark” manner, as a lesser poet or artist might have done, du Bouchet leaps beyond his own maturity, fracturing its hard-won molds into ever more daring and disintegrated forms. Unlike his midlife achievement, his early and late production remains virtually untranslated, to the impoverishment of world literature in English.

Respecting the schema outlined above, we have organized our reader in three parts; but given du Bouchet's penchant for constant recycling, our selections cannot—and should not—obey any strict chronology. Instead, they coexist in an interchange with one another across the decades: the poem “*Je ne vois presque rien*” (“*I See Almost Nothing*”), for example, from du Bouchet's earliest period, is printed here in his revised version of 1995. Even so, our initial sequence consists of little-known pieces from the 1950s; the middle section offers the major poems of the following decade; and the closing segment is composed of works written or rewritten in the poet's later phase. Both the first and third portions are made up mainly of writings that have never appeared in English before. As I have observed, the lifeblood of du Bouchet's oeuvre courses through his notebooks, of which he left more than a hundred. His approval of Collot's edition, his own volumes of published excerpts, and his final decision to preserve the originals intact, all serve to legitimize them as integral to his writing. They have not been neglected in this anthology, especially the

entries of his formative years; and the last poem in our selection was entitled by du Bouchet “From a Notebook.” As his own reuse of these extemporaneous texts affirms, they illuminate and complete his life-work, revealing its coherence as a lucid sierra *as well as* a far horizon of mist-shrouded peaks.

Some book titles are fairly neutral or refer only to one of many aspects of a book; but du Bouchet’s headings always wield an intentional heft—even more so when they seem noncommittal. By lending a special weight to the title of our anthology, we mean to imitate his practice. The heading *Openwork* was inspired by *L’ajour*, the title he gave to a set of excerpts from his oeuvre in 1998, several years before his death; otherwise, our selection bears no resemblance to that compilation at all. The French and English words often turn up as dictionary stopgaps for each other; but as always, no neat equivalence pertains. Every translation implies an option, a slant—and ultimately, a stance. “Ajour” resonates with many echoes in French: phrases we could render as “to light,” “day by day,” or “up to date.” At every level du Bouchet’s writings are flooded with light, graphically portrayed by the blanks that dominate his pages. Like the spatial demarcations in a painting, they bring out the full force of each word, each “object of thought.” From a related perspective, his work feeds on the cycles of the sun from dawn to dusk, the “white motor” of the eponymous sequence included here; and *L’ajour* begins with a piece called “un jour de plus augmenté d’un jour” (“One More Day Increased by a Day”). Then, too, du Bouchet’s whole collection under that heading not only revisits but also revamps earlier texts that stretch back as far as 1972, “bringing them up to date.” Here revision must be understood in a more literal sense: not as an improvement but as a recasting “in the light of” the present moment. To hear another reverberation: “ajournement”—like the English “adjournment”—tells us that this day’s session has ended, but also implies that it will be followed by another, at some point in the future. Du

Bouchet had used this very word as the title of a previous book, with all the accompanying overtones.

By settling for the helpmeet “openwork,” English must jettison some of the French allusions to light, day, revision, and adjournment. But as often happens in the process of translation, something is gained as well as lost, the goal being to keep the black column balanced with the red. Like “ajour” the English word refers to artifacts that consist of holes as much as solids, whether embroideries, paper cutouts, filigrees, or retraced drawings and etchings like Giacometti’s—not coincidentally, the artist about whom du Bouchet wrote most often and whose techniques he adapted to writing. In a sense such works are absent as well as present, a way of positing nothing and everything at once. The analogy with du Bouchet’s own blank-pierced lines is self-evident, but here is where the English “openwork” compensates for the missing connotations of the French “ajour.” As the term seems to suggest, the interstices in such an opus turn it into a “non finito,” a refusal to reach any conclusion. It hovers in a perpetual state of flux, of receptiveness to the word and to the world. Like the air in an openwork sculpture, both are temporarily captured by the verbal net but freely pass through it. And yet the wholeness of those wider spheres—of language, of reality—can be surmised in each of the poem’s interlocking voids.

As I have pointed out, du Bouchet often excavated fragments from his notebooks to reuse them in his published poems and prose. In earlier collections such as *Air* and *Dans la chaleur vacante*—titles that both suggest a kind of “openwork”—he seems to have striven for finished versions, in accord with common praxis. But in his later phase he reshapes his already printed works, often changing them radically. The parsing of these metamorphoses could easily spawn a shelf-load of dissertations. But the basic principle is clear: for du Bouchet, transformation is writing itself. Not only does *L’ajour* present multiple shifts in preexisting texts, it even alters selections from the

preceding anthology, *Poèmes et proses*, published just three years before. This renders the notion of an “état définitif” (definitive state), even when applied by the author himself on occasion, more than a little suspect. Probably he would have approved the ironic turn: “definitive—for now.” As in lithography, “état” (state) might denote a stage equally valid with the others in a series. For that reason the seeming volatility of du Bouchet’s writing should not deceive us; his oeuvre evinces a thoroughgoing unity. In fact, it can only be understood by taking it as a whole; but by the same token, each of its parts reveals its totality, like every coded cell of an organism.

All the same, is a du Bouchet “anthology” even possible? By setting the word in quotation marks, I am admitting the intrinsic danger of sticking samples of his massive geology into a small box, especially since the strata continue to upend as his notebooks rise to the surface. But I would maintain that any sample of his words furnishes a valid illustration of his fundamental method. Reflections of his readings, of artworks he has examined, and above all of his rambles in the countryside, his journals ripple with a keen sensibility. Even in his more standard publications, instead of devising set pieces to place on display, as a goldsmith might, he provides us with cross-sections of the ore itself. The poetry and prose emerge from the notebooks, to be melted down in turn and recast later on. All are only proposed as a brief view of the mountain, most of which remains invisible: like every lifework, every poem or essay, every metaphor—even every word. When du Bouchet was embarking on the mature phase of his oeuvre, he observed: “Poetry without any padding would be poetry with big gaps—it would be riddled with gaps.” As he moved into his later period these gaps became wider and wider, and readers were obliged to make some strenuous leaps.

Strenuous, but not prohibitive: especially in the final reaches of his work, du Bouchet was pursuing the techniques of visual artists. If we compare the notebook entries (pp. 72–77 in this anthology) that gave rise to “Le voyage” of 1956 with the poem itself, we can observe

how the original metaphors were progressively fractured, overlaid, and recombined. By the time they reach their later avatar as “Sur le pas,” the bare, aerated version of *Dans la chaleur vacante* (1961), they have become both more streamlined and more multivalent. Like Giacometti in his sculptures, du Bouchet has refined his initial images to a level where they almost seem effaced; but paradoxically, they have also attained an intense “thereness,” a concentrated presence. An even more radical distillation occurs in the late poems: as an example, take the multiple shifts from the early “state” of the poem “Je ne vois presque rien” to its last known revision in 1995 (included in our selection). As in the final paintings of Willem de Kooning, the late works of du Bouchet contain large stretches of white canvas that force the remaining forms to stand out with breathtaking purity.

When we consider du Bouchet’s recurring keywords and tropes, we are tempted to cite the evolving leitmotifs of a musical score; and as his notebooks reveal, he was a devotee of classical music. Paul Auster has reminisced about how he often listened to records with the author in the early seventies, at his apartment in the Rue des Grands-Augustins. In the same period du Bouchet and I would frequently set out from there, cross the Pont Saint-André des Arts, and visit the Louvre: his aperçus on Sumerian sculpture, Delacroix, and Patinir are still vivid in my memory. He was always at pains to point out the importance of the single contour, the single brushstroke, the single color transition—with that same focus on the primacy of the fragment that informs his poetry. But again, the techniques of modern art afford the closest parallel to his work. De Kooning devised many of the black-and-white paintings of his first major exhibition in 1948 by tracing definite figures, then painting over them repeatedly until they appeared almost unrecognizable. Yet even in later abstractions like the hugely colorful oils of the 1970s, an occasional object such as a woman’s red shoe leaps into view. The constant overlap of foreground and background, the intricate slippage of half-glimpsed outlines into each other, the dizzying modulations of thickness and texture—all

correspond to similar traits in du Bouchet's writings. However abstract they may seem, they are always bonded to the immediate and the concrete. The underlying sensory impressions still resonate, if only as "force fields" that fuel the text's coexistent meanings. As de Kooning said: "Even abstract shapes must have a likeness."

In his Séghers essay on four of du Bouchet's poems, Clément Layet has demonstrated the endless web of ideas each of them contains. His analysis is philosophical, and it undoubtedly holds true; yet I would also suggest a more basic approach, anchored in the senses. Du Bouchet, an avid walker and motorcyclist, never lost his passion for the countryside, particularly as it shuffles through the ceaseless nuances of the weather. In a poem like "Cession" ("Giving Over"), included here, he starts simply with the wind, the summer dryness, and the sundown narrowing the sky. In that clarity, the folds of the terrain stand out. Over time, our successive breaths strip us of being as surely as the wind scours the fields; but that rhythm is also the source of our life. An equipoise is reached in the middle lines, where the sky is both wall and light—like our forehead, a surface that harbors depth. From that stasis, the blue air of infinity impels us forward. The word "foot" is used as a stable marker, but it implies the act of walking. The "gathering anew" (in French, "se recomposer") of the poet is also the composition of his "verse" (derived from the Latin for "turning the plow"), alluded to here by the furrowed field. On manifold levels, "nothing quenches his step."

Du Bouchet always grounds his work in primal sensation; but the interplay between reality and trope is never simplistic. As he scoffed in one of his interviews: "People think I spent my life in front of a mountain—but in fact, it isn't so! I never spoke about mountains more than when I wrote *Dans la chaleur vacante*, but there weren't any around. If I settled down later across from a mountain in Truinas, it's because I felt an attraction . . ." But was that symbolic mountain of the poems any more intangible than the later mountain of stone

and ice? Even if we touch a mountain, we are only laying our hand on a small patch of rock. From afar, we think we survey the mountain in its totality. But what of the mountain at night, or hidden by fog? We cannot see it, but we know it is there. Or do we? The fact is that we never encompass a whole mountain from any vantage point. Even from high above, we cannot observe the core of the rock below its many surfaces. In a horizontal view, we register only one of the mountain's many faces. All of these vary as well, according to the vagaries of lighting and weather or the play of shadows made by clouds. Such effects are beautifully limned in a sentence from "*Le voyage*," which I would translate as follows: "But the white rock-face—gilded and glazed by the light that picks it out and sweeps it with dim mountains." Du Bouchet was a translator of Gerard Manley Hopkins, and he twists the familiar phrase "the mind has mountains" inside out. Not only does he internalize the landscape, he externalizes the mind-scape. Even in nature, the mountain we can see is always a metonym. That is why it is so much like a word: never the thing or the concept itself, words only point in their direction, before relapsing into their own inscrutability.

This semantic seesaw becomes even more manifest when du Bouchet sets us before a painting, as in "*Peinture*," the first poem by that title in our reader. Art, like poetry, swings subtly between the palpable and the ineffable. In the canvas held up to our view, the objects depicted wait for us to notice them. We might assume that they are only a simulacrum. But since reality is filtered by the mind, it is always a resemblance, and so resemblance "is itself reality." But with this nuance: in art, we cannot possess what it offers us. That is why its surfaces can bloom, in pure, unattainable desire—as a halo, an effulgence that pierces mere appearance. Branches, a doorway, or a tile grant us an emotion that is "almost unmoved." "Almost," because we are stirred by a deeper awareness: this gift we have received from art (or poetry), this paradox of repetition and freshness, is in fact our

only access to the world. What we longed for was but a seed of infinite expansion; thanks to art (or poetry), it opens and flowers. The end of the poem circles back to its beginning. The objects of external reality also wait for us to notice them. On both sides of the looking glass, they unveil their endless ambiguity. The unseen blue of the sky, reflected by the window, is inseparable from the window itself. As we pause expectantly, what seemed so recognizable at first takes on another name—or none at all—and in our watchfulness . . . it has already flowered.

The poems of du Bouchet's last phase require an even more attentive reading, but the rewards are equal to the demands. More than any other poet, he persuades us to slow down, to give each syllable a chance. At first we may not realize what a passage like this, from "J'entrelettre ..." ("I Interletter . . .") might be evoking:

one, all of sudden, and several. whether swift or slow
they strive to reach the blinding hearth. the last isn't
far, though blocked from my view and as hard to pick out as
the fastest, which is ahead and has almost disappeared.

But a few lines later, the poet adverts to "running on the sun," and in retrospect we infer that these are clouds, racing toward that "blinding hearth." "Infer," because du Bouchet, especially in his final works, does not encourage us to fix on any single meaning. Many actions—and inactions—go on at once. In a landscape, through his words and his silent blanks, we are merely walking, seeing, and scribbling; but we are also approaching, assessing, and imagining. Then we flip back like acrobats to the primal level, where we walk, see, and scribble again. In his meditations on art we draw close to the work along with him, we look at every detail through his eyes, we hear him express what might be there. In his translations we accompany him again, we read, we absorb, we transmute. In every instance he helps us jettison our preconceptions, and reexperience the "mayhem of the torrents, purified at last."

All words are compacted metaphors, each with a past, present, and future: that is their enigma, and that is their strength. Every line of du Bouchet is so densely packed that he readily abandons the pretense of transparency. This brashness has given him the reputation of being “too difficult,” even “unreadable,” a charge he always confronted head on. In this regard another reminiscence comes to mind. Paul Auster and I first met du Bouchet in Paris at the beginning of the seventies, when we were both in our early twenties. At that time he was championing a translation by the equally young Pascal Quignard. He told us that some of his fellow editors at *L'Éphémère* considered it “too obscure” for the review—even though arcane ravings could only be expected from the poem’s main narrator, Cassandra. It is indicative that in his 1970 lecture on Hölderlin in Stuttgart, du Bouchet compared the German poet’s late work to “Cassandra’s word, a word from which no lesson is to be drawn, a word, each time, and every time, spoken to say nothing . . .” Fittingly, Auster used this pronouncement as an epigraph for his essay on du Bouchet of 1973 (see the Appendix at the end of our reader). It need hardly be emphasized that “nothing” in this context takes on a special meaning: a void that underlines itself as such, a word that radiates a negative pull, like a black hole that swallows the “somethings” of ordinary discourse.

While the original Greek of the *Cassandra* has been attributed to Lycophron of Chalcis, a Hellenistic poet, the author’s true identity can only be described as moot. On his return to the United States Auster discovered that the work had been splendidly translated into English long ago by yet another young man about our age: Philip Lord Viscount Royston, who drowned in 1808 while voyaging in the Baltic Sea. Besides his version of Lycophron, the ill-fated traveler left behind letters addressed mainly to his father, the Earl of Hardwicke, as well as a lengthy poem on the subject of “Nothing”—not coincidentally, a central theme in du Bouchet’s oeuvre, as we have noted. In the introduction to his Miltonic rendering of the *Cassandra*, Lord Royston squarely countered the usual disparagement of Lycophron’s

“obscurity.” “Darkness is placed by Burke among the Sources of the Sublime . . .,” he asserted. “The sensations which are produced upon our minds by the absence of light are perhaps analogous to those which we feel when that mode of writing, metaphorically termed obscure, prevents the formation of distinct ideas, and sets no limits to our conceptions of *power*.”

In du Bouchet, this notion of power applies to the opaqueness of phenomena, physical or mental. If atoms, quarks, strings, and dark matter escape our notice, in the end they are no more unfathomable than morning light falling on a stone or the ricochets of a daydream. If he is truthful the poet can do no more, and no less, than mirror the conundrum of being itself. In one of his notebooks, du Bouchet jotted down the following lines:

Readable
poet . . .
I no more ask to be read
than reality.

And in the preface to his translation of excerpts from *Finnegans Wake*, he is even more adamant:

Finnegans Wake immediately assumes its real dimension—expands—as soon as we set it aside. The unreadable is in fact the only infinity of which a work presenting itself as the written world can avail itself. This written world, which takes its measure from the living world in order to supplant it in the end, is stricken by the same muteness. Everything is transposed into words, and words will lapse back into silence. But Joyce dreams of seizing this ultimate silence in turn, and placing it at the heart of his narrative. This is the driving force of his persistence, of his brooding, of his inexplicable joy. And we feel it again and again in *Finnegans Wake* under the coinages of the unreadable, as under those of words plain to the point of truism, that well up from breakdown and collapse.

Du Bouchet's insistence on opacity, which impelled him to translate the late poems of Hölderlin's "madness" as well as the final works of Joyce, can best be explained by his own self-defining apothegm: "what holds us is what we cannot grasp."

But that is only half the story, as we have seen: otherwise, du Bouchet would have burned his notebooks as he had resolved, just as Wallace Stevens disposed of most of his drafts. Considering the alleged cryptic bent of his late period, we might whimsically compare du Bouchet's notebooks to Tzetzes' marginalia of Lycophron. But the French poet's annotations do not explicate, they are poems in their own right—though they may run parallel to other poems. From that standpoint, they resemble the commentary by San Juan de la Cruz on his own *Cántico spiritual*: poetry in prose that tangentially intersects with the ordered verses, allowing us to sense the hidden springs from which they flow. For example, in his lengthy gloss San Juan extols the Sierra Nevada landscape in sensuous detail, then abruptly avows: "These mountains are my Beloved for me." He is speaking of the divine, but its incarnation in nature is no less enigmatic than the ever-retreating threshold "outside" ourselves toward which all of du Bouchet's writing tends. His attachment to the late Hölderlin leads us in the same direction, toward the apprehension of a presence far beyond our ken, invoked in "Der Einzige" ("The Only One"—translated by du Bouchet as "L'unique") under the triune names of Heracles, Dionysus, and Christ. To echo Heidegger, all these intimations are "Holzwege," paths that lose themselves in forest depths.

Needless to say, there is no such thing as "mysticism" in du Bouchet's work, much less a personification of the sacred. Yet there is undeniably a profound strain of self-abnegation—without the overt links to Eastern teachings we find in Pierre-Albert Jourdan, another great diarist, whom John Taylor has translated with lucid care. Like Jourdan's harrowing account of his fatal cancer in "L'approche" ("The Approach"), du Bouchet's ardent passage toward the "outside" moves

us all the more because he strips it of the masks that have so often consoled humankind. All he professes is that beyond our limits there is otherness, though that otherness rebounds into the mind itself, rapidly shuffling consciousness from absence to presence, from presence to absence, over and over again. In his remarks about the art of minting maxims, Jourdan stresses the import of the pause between each of them as a mindful act of restraint. By contrast, du Bouchet's ever-widening spaces denote the poetic process itself, its restless, serial attachment and detachment—to and from the external sphere, as well as to and from its own inner movements. To borrow a phrase from William Bronk, he invites us to experience each and every moment, within and without, as “the world, the worldless.” As we advance through physical reality, we perambulate through thought: his poetry fuses the two indissolubly, yet also enacts the way each step erases the one that has gone before. Even so, these disappearing footfalls accumulate into a road, surging toward a goal which—as he acknowledges—will always elude us.

Like the poets of the late Renaissance, du Bouchet identifies mutability as the sole earthly truth—though he firmly rejects their ultimate appeal to a changeless beyond. Such unswerving fortitude in the face of life's essential futility cannot fail to impress us. But there is more here than courage: there is joy. As Paul Auster has noted in his essay, “What du Bouchet manages to maintain, almost uncannily, is a nostalgia for a possible future, even as he knows it will never come to pass. And from this dreadful knowledge, there is nevertheless a kind of joy, a joy . . . that is born of nothing.” To this last phrase, drawn from du Bouchet's book of 1972, *Qui n'est pas tourné vers nous*—a title that says it all—I would add that the poet fully embraces his “dreadful knowledge” of the human dilemma as soon as he ascertains the silence “outside” all words, “outside” all existence. What du Bouchet concluded about Joyce applies to himself, once we grasp his entire corpus of writing as a unity: a “supreme fiction,” but one that he shatters with ruthless honesty, creating an openwork

as porous as life itself. In composing it he “dreams of seizing this ultimate silence in turn, and placing it at the heart of his narrative. This is the driving force of his persistence, of his brooding, of his inexplicable joy.”

—Hoyt Rogers
Venice, 2014

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