

PROXIMITE *du* MURMURE:  
DUPIN *and* UBAC COLLABORATE

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The emblematic rapport between verbal text and visual image is examined. To the extent that the contemporary French poet and art critic Jacques Dupin and the Belgian born artist Raoul Ubac both present a kind of landscape whose difficult terrain simultaneously implies and retracts human presence, I propose a study of *Proximité du murmure* that employs the notion of landscape as a strategy enabling us to read the artist's images and the poet's words in a collaborative enterprise devoted to the tradition of the book: literary artifact and physical object. In particular, I emphasize what I perceive to be the figurative and material properties of written language as highlighted in a collaborative work of this kind.

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The interplay of poetry and the arts has long been a topic of interest to both artists and poets and, of course, to critics whose variety of approaches to the phenomenon has been provocative, albeit controversial. Comparisons have been undertaken on the basis of the artist's intentions and theories, on the common social and cultural background shared by the works themselves, and on the analysis of the actual objects of art, and thus of their structural relationships. In France, in particular, writers' fascination with the visual arts has a long tradition. Extremely popular during the Cubist period in painting, the *livre d'artiste* — in which original graphics accompany verbal text — establishes a more intimate complementary rapport between painter and poet. Graphics mediate between like discourses, illuminating the figurative and material aspects of written language.<sup>1</sup>

The point of departure for my study is precisely the intimate complementary rapport between poet and painter. Close examination of the *livre d'artiste* collection *Proximité du murmure* (*Proximity of Murmure*) executed by the contemporary French poet and art critic Jacques Dupin and the Belgian born artist Raoul Ubac,<sup>2</sup> reveals the emblematic rapport between verbal text and visual image with emphasis on the unique role and properties of written language as highlighted in a collaborative work of this kind.

Whether Dupin assumes a poetic voice in his own texts or a critical one observant of another artist, he repeats in essence the same images and themes, and takes the same positions. Violence and eroticism are thematic constants. Likewise, land and body imagery prevail and are employed to explore the problem of creative destruction that fascinates him.<sup>3</sup>

Similarly, Ubac's work concerns human desire and resistance as inscribed in a rugged terrain. The tree, the stone, the land, the human body, and the occasional utensil appear in his designs. Intentionally metaphoric, Ubac's forms support multiple interpretations.<sup>4</sup>

To the extent that Dupin and Ubac both present a kind of landscape whose difficult terrain simultaneously implies and retracts human presence, I should like to propose a study of *Proximité du murmure* that employs the notion of landscape as a strategy enabling us to read the artist's images and the poet's words in a collaborative enterprise devoted to the tradition of the book: literary artifact and physical object.

*Proximité du murmure* can be read with respect to two simultaneous movements. In a first and figurative movement, human presence is set in a landscape. Dupin moves the reader from darkness to light, from enclosure to exposure, from land to sea (1. 1-14). Reread in the tradition of the Echo myth — vocal repetition and dispersal of body parts among the landscape — the first movement comprises a loss of voice and generates a context that is both language and text. Corporeal imagery grammatically marks off presence (*c'est un corps de femme* [it is a woman's body]) and models the reader's changing point of view through a series of

object pronouns that announce the subject: speech itself (qu'elle se montre nue dans sa parole même [she bares herself in her very word]):

*Comme il est appelé au soir en un lieu tel  
que les portes battant sans fin  
facilitent ou dénouent le tête-à-tête*

*hors de la crypte forestière il la traîne  
au grand jour, ou plutôt il lui parle  
il la dénude parmi les rafales de vent  
ou plutôt il commence à se taire  
avec une telle fureur dans les rayons  
de la lumière verticale une telle émission de silence comme un jet de sang*

*qu'elle se montre nue dans sa parole même  
et c'est un corps de femme qui se fend*

*As he is called in the evening into such a place  
that doors beating endlessly  
ease or undo the tête-à-tête*

*out of the forest crypt he drags her  
in broad daylight, or rather he speaks to her*

*he strips her among the gusts of wind  
or rather he begins to fall silent  
with such a fury in the rays  
of vertical light  
such an emission of silence like a gush of blood*

*that she bares herself in her very word  
and it is a woman's body that is rent*

In a second movement, the poet refers specifically to the work as physical object, intermittently returning to figurative concerns introduced earlier. Juxtaposing land and body imagery with the technical vocabulary of the poet as craftsman — *signe tracé*, *l'enveloppe*, *l'écriture*, etc. (traced sign, envelope, writing, etc.) — Dupin explores signs traced in books and the steps involved in the production of both.

Similarly, the series of eight black and white etchings done by Ubac on Japon Hosho and mounted in the text can be seen as physical and figurative entites with respect to landscape notions. The black angularly curved lines in the first etching conflate both the female torso and the topographic markings on geological area maps (Figure 1). The image, inserted after the first two texts, highlights their last lines indicative of figure (*et c'est un corps de femme qui se fend* [and it is a woman's body that is rent]) — erotic in its pose — and ground (*un pays qui reprend souffle et feu* [a land that recovers breath and fire]) — violent in its upheaval.

The second etching (Figure 2), ambiguous in its rendition of land/body imagery, emphasizes materiality through its own con-

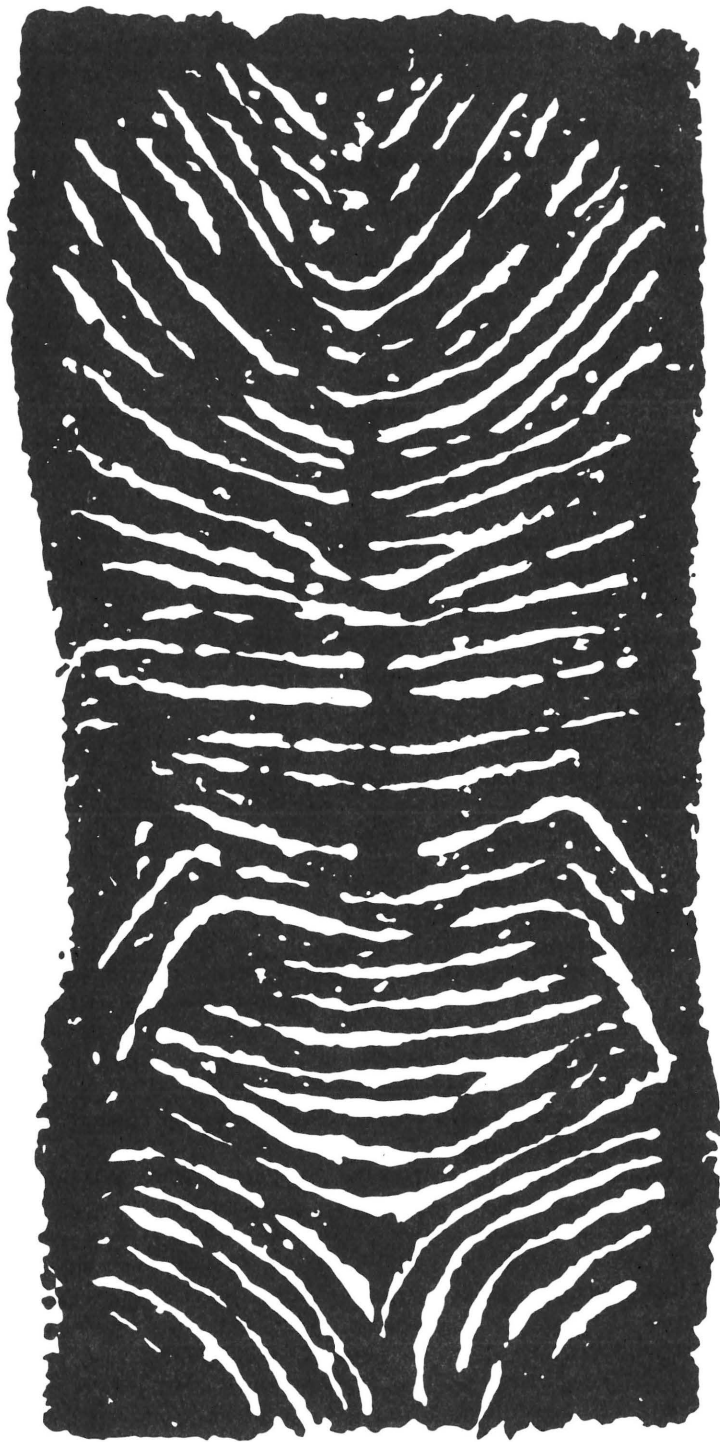


Figure 1.

Note:  
all figures are by  
Raoul Ubac. Etching  
(*Proximité du murmure*,  
Paris: Maeght [1971]).  
Courtesy of Maeght.



Figure 2.



Figure 3.

tent and its placement in the work. Opposite the first text that mentions writing — oscillations of sign and meaning — the lined image on the page recalls the physical aspects of the book. Generally concentric and elongated, the curved lines achieve depth or volume, delimiting both horizontal and vertical space. Images 3, 4, and 5 in the text have a horizontal emphasis and serve as legends for the subject and direction of Dupin's words: stops and starts, silence and voice, stasis and movement (Figures 3 & 4). Images 6, 7, and 8 in the text have a vertical format and parallel the direction that informs the writing (Figure 5). Insofar as Dupin returns to a language that marks human presence, Ubac returns to shapes more suggestive of the human body. Evocation of violent scenes and large expanses is interpreted by the artist in an etching reminiscent of a death mask. The final lines that advance towards a threshold and closure for the entire work, return the reader to the image of a landscape equivocally animal and mineral.

The title *Proximité du murmure* alludes to the posture of both the artist and the poet to the extent that their presence must be encountered at a distance. The deceptively well-defined etchings by Raoul Ubac and the incessant tête-à-tête presented in Jacques Dupin's text, invite the reader to entertain presence limned by a continuum of words and a series of images bound within the dimensions of the book.

The singular voice of the poet Jacques Dupin can be heard in the initial word of the text: *Comme* (As, like). As a causal conjunction that implies a logical relationship between propositions and events, *comme* is, however, the very poetic gesture that refers us to other voices in different works. *Comme* is an earlier collection of poems by Marcelin Pleynet (Editions du Seuil, 1965). Denotative of a likeness or representation, we locate *comme* elsewhere in time and space. Throughout *Proximité du murmure* Dupin's immediate

words elude us as he inscribes antecedence into the text, drawing upon previous writing by the likes of La Fontaine, Baudelaire, Char, Ponge, and even by himself at earlier and later moments. Thus surrounded by other voices, the poet immerses the reader in them and makes him understand fluency, i.e., the ebb and flow of syntax via alternate patterns of speech. Silence becomes audible in the material gesture of turning the white pages of the book, as well as in the figurative one of hearing the natural sounds emitted from the images on these pages: *parmi les rafales de vent . . . il commence à se taire . . . une telle émission de silence comme un jet de sang* (among the gusts of wind . . . he begins to fall silent . . . such an emission of silence like a gush of blood).

Inherent in the inarticulate murmurings that accompany the presentation of the word inscribed in this text is the inevitable break between voice and body. Corporeal imagery measures the distance between the speaker and his idiom: *le cercle de tes bras ne s'entrouvre que pour mieux ne rien dire* (the circle of your arms gapes open only better to say nothing); between the interlocutor and the exchange: *N'être plus avec toi dès que tu balbuties la sécheresse nous déborde* (No longer to be with you as soon as you stammer drought overwhelms us). At the climax of the poetic act, however, persona do embrace in a union of opposites: body and voice. Hence the value of the resulting image that overcomes distance might be measured as André Breton first suggested in *Manifestes du surréalisme* (1924), by its luminosity or the ardor of its composition:

*notre buisson quotidien  
les balafres de la lumière*

*our daily thicket  
slashes of light*



Figure 4.

The writing derives its erotic tone from the notion of nudity that Dupin has ascribed to corporeal imagery. Resistant figures, alternately opaque and transparent, are attractive in their vacillation between appearance and disappearance. Silence in the face of such reserve proves seductive: woman yields; words part. Similarly erotic is the apparent choice of the verb *extraire* (to extract): the poet prepares a text — part of a longer book (*extrait* [excerpt]) — that is a passionate exploration of its sources (*j'extrait* [I extract]).

In a text whose existence depends on a writing that stems from an absent source where spelling and etymon undergo continual change, the poet must repeatedly gauge distance and adjust perspective. Reiteration of the initial word and causal conjunction of the text: *comme* provides a series of likenesses that swerve away from exact resemblance. Surveyor who articulates the approximate, the poet takes a position reminiscent of Michel Deguy (*Fragment du cadastre* [Surveyor's Fragment]), Gallimard: 1960). In order to balance the contradictions in his text and the contrasts in its images, Dupin assumes a self-conscious point of view that highlights the constant plane of language: the horizon of a landscape. Lines that shift vantage points, undermine figures that allude to depth. Both poet and reader cannot transcend the surface of the text and continually return to the material constants of the book: the superficialities, the borders, the limits assigned by characters and edges.

To read the text, is, in a sense, to violate the book. Although we need not cut the pages of this particular edition in order to turn and read them, we must remove the volume from its pale yellow folding case, careful not to break the binding, and look long and hard at the words in our attempt to uncover meaning. In these gestures we as readers are reminded of the violence in Dupin's images: *ce livre je le casse en vous regardant choses nues* (this book I break while looking at you, naked things); and of the wound in French texts since Mallarmé as described by Mary Ann Caws.<sup>5</sup>

Representative of the modern *livre d'artiste* in France, the rapport between word and image in *Proximité du murmure* goes beyond illustration. The eroticism and violence implicit in Dupin's point of view are reflected in the line and contour of Ubac's perspective. Divided by white space and punctuated with ellipses, the disposition of the words on the page suggests the emblematic rapport between verbal text and visual image. Likewise, allusions to figure and ground in the artist's etchings coexist in the arrangement of land and body imagery in the poet's text. Lines cut along the vertical and horizontal axes in the graphics materialize like movements conveyed by poetry that attempts transcendence and intentionally fails. Literally, object that contains its own tradition of poetry sensitive to the notions of origin and loss, the *livre d'artiste* collection *Proximité du murmure* truly merits the label *oeuvre d'art*.





Figure 5.

## REFERENCES

1. See Breon Mitchell, *Beyond Illustration: The Livre d'Artiste in the Twentieth Century* (Bloomington: The Lilly Library, 1976) for an illuminating exposition of the *livre d'artiste* phenomenon.
2. *Proximité du murmure* / Jacques Dupin; (etchings by) Raoul Ubac. — (Paris) (30, Av. de Messine, 75008); Maeght, 1971, c 1969. (4), 9-38, (5) p. : ill.; 44 cm. Etchings struck on les presses d'Arte, Adrien Maeght, in Paris. Text, hand-set in Elzévin Caslon corps 28, printed by Fequet and Baudier. Number 66 of a limited edition of 175 copies on vélin de Rives. All copies are signed by the author and illustrator. Etchings on Japon Hosho and mounted in text. Folded sheets laid in cream printed wrappers, in a pale yellow folding case. The edition used for this study is in the collection of Indiana University's Lilly Library. I wish to thank the staff of the Lilly Library for its kind assistance with reference and production aspects of my work.
3. For further reading on the poetry of Jacques Dupin, see Jean-Pierre Richard, *Onze études sur la poésie moderne* (Paris: Seuil, 1964), pp. 277-95, and Robert W. Greene, *Six French Poets of Our Time* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979), pp. 140-58.
4. See also *Derrière le Miroir*, nos. 105-106 (Paris: Maeght, 1958): nine original lithographs by Raoul Ubac to illustrate poems by Yves Bonnefoy.
5. Mary Ann Caws. *The Eye in the Text* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981).