

Nioque of the Early-Spring

**Francis Ponge**

Translated by Jonathan Larson

The Song Cave

## TRANSLATOR'S INTRODUCTION

*"... for want of language and the novelty of things"*

*"thus, our age is unable to look back on the lifetime  
before, but where reason shows a trace."*

Lucretius, *On the Nature of Things*,  
from *Book I* and *Book V*

*"I was speaking of spring. This forest decided to  
speak of you, but why did it decide to speak of you?  
Because it is spring. A forest begins to express itself  
in spring."*

Francis Ponge, *Oral Tentative*

The work of Francis Ponge is formed by the firm, lucid, and sound. His most widely lauded collection of poems, *Le Parti Pris des Choses* (translated into English as *The Nature of Things*, *The Voice of Things*, *On the Side of Things*, *Siding with Things*, and, most recently, *Partisan of Things*), appeared initially in 1942 and established Ponge as a leading voice in French poetry. With its celebratory and

playful paeans to everyday objects like mollusks, moss, and fruit crates, the poet elaborated a reinvention of the prose-poem in which the subjects are held in common with the fibrous ligature of their textural make-up.

This collection of notes, *Nioque de l'Avant-Printemps*, gathered over the course of a several weeks stay in the countryside during the first part of April 1950, builds out the earlier rhetorical platforms, but with an expansive glance toward seasonal (or serial) time itself as the subject, and more so its eternal return, a mode hinted at in *The Nature of Things* with the two poems *The cycle of the seasons* and *The end of autumn*. As explained in the opening note to the reader, 'nioque' comes into play as a neologism that draws on various Latin and Greek root forms of gnossos (knowledge), while the early-spring connotes the liminal phase in anticipation of the time to come, "when after the several months of silence it vomits green" (*Oral Tentative*, Francis Ponge). The echoing of 'note' in 'nioque' sounds out the new approach to Ponge's poetic, as committed documentation with the concern not only of transmitting knowledge, but also of knowing again, which is to say that in knowing a thing one

already looks forward to knowing the thing again, if one (as Ponge did) takes the words of Lucretius seriously “that any thing thus cannot return to nothing.” The matter that is, is the matter: adapting, altering, and renewing itself, in the orchard as within the circulations of speech, art, and letters, to carry on flowering, threading, and spreading (while “smiling at another”) by their diverse mutual delight.

Ponge will thus ascribe this text’s politic to the ‘events of 1968,’ the spring of its earliest publication, as “something to return to.” Though historical time is made, and marked, by political actors, the artist is reintroduced as the capacity to remake and remark upon the past in advance of its future. All the more fitting that this text would delve into the failings of the French Communist Party as if to say *there the speech rang hollow – here the hollow rings with speech*. It is in this context that *Nioque de l’Avant-Printemps* was written, three years before the poet, who suffered from mild aphasia, accepted an invitation to give a rare talk, entitled *La Tentative Orale*, and contemporaneously with what will appear as the chapter *Murmur: (Condition and Destiny of the Artist)* in another work *Méthodes*,

dated in the manuscripts from April 2 to July 18 of 1950. Speech as such (and alternatively, keeping mute) is the concern here, both of the season and of the poet-artist, whose murmured speech comes out as the green emission to make an inward thing outwardly known, the pushing out of stems and leaves that show what's held at their core, when, in fact (or in the act), it's never been better concealed by all the foliating overgrowth. The early-spring ushers in the twofold season when the heart of matter prepares for coming *into* and *out of* its own, simultaneously, to dwell within a shared plane as music. Here the poet consorts with the abundant and abounding elemental particularities that take on their shape, as one speaks:

“You...

You are there, all around me – today, you trees, pebbles of the orchard, clouds in the sky, wondrous dead nature, uncontested nature.”

The voice inhabits the middle distance, as it were, between the addressed object and the speaker tasked with vocalizing these to an audience, therein committing to an alliance that is partial, in every sense:

“We will speak to them, to humans.

So, to take on their voice, their speech. Let us speak! You speak! I am your interpreter. Say what you have to say. Say only what you are.” It is imperative that things are spoken, that the world of things express itself (its mute nature), but without hyperbole. The poet and artist is called upon to do but this.

We start into the text by positioning ourselves to the south, facing the Mediterranean (“even the Aegean”), in a farmhouse while taking note of the wind driving in storm clouds from the west (i.e. the right, both directionally and politically). This concern with situating oneself runs through the four sections, and closes with the reclamation of the same opening viewpoint: “We look to midday readily; / Our dramatics come to us westerly.” The midday would signal the end of the humanist age when humans would retake their place within, and not atop, the natural world. Oblique reference is made to cooled friendships with P and S (written out as Paulhan and Sartre in the manuscript, which Jean-Marie Gleize and Bernard Veck make note of in the *Pléiade* edition) who were at that time delegating back and forth the responsibilities of publishing a collection of tributary

pieces to Ponge, a proposal to collect funds for him that was Sartre's initially. Concerns of taking side are further embedded in this text upon its republication, having already been split up between the opposing attitudes of the two journals *L'Éphémère* and *Tel quel* in which excerpts of *Nioque* had appeared. To the former magazine, whose aim it was to delimit a purer poetry and reclaim it as the privileged genre, Ponge sent the selection *capital proem* to put forward the notion of the poet as a researcher, a worker who cedes the floor to the armoire, while to the latter, under the editorship of Philippe Sollers and representing a post-structural inquiry suspicious of the claims made under the flag of art and poetry, he submitted the pieces demonstrating the kinship of the artist and writer who fills their canvas with the material landscape present so as to interveniently portray the poet to both journals as the consummate revolutionary for carrying onward the efforts of preserving the harmonious simultaneity of all things.

The *canevas* is foregrounded as the conceptacle of time in this booklet, figuring as the leaves to turn and pass back over, their surfaces absorbing the dimen-

sions of color and the winds of inspiration, making music. In the section titled *Proem* we come across the declaration that “to woven cloth, god sends the thread,” a modification of the saying “to woven web, God sends the thread,” a proverb that Ponge undoubtedly came across in the Littré dictionary (an urtext to Ponge’s poetic) under the entry for ‘ourdi’ (the past participle of to weave). Concomitant with trading out the web for paintable cloth, the lower-case god is chosen to replace the upper, perhaps as a thing among things, a Spinozan god. We also find this subtle exchange with an uncharacteristic capitalization of *Music* to conclude section III and at the end of COLD WINTER RAIN OR EARLY-SPRING where “all of mute nature or (interested or disinterested) says April over and again,” though the names of months take the lowercase in French and elsewhere in the text. These majuscule and minuscule letterings return around the order of things, as if to say that one achieves the proper noun but by delight in oneself. Ponge expresses his disdain for the “nefarious Jerusalem-Athens-Rome axis” in a conversation with Serge Gavronsky due to its implementation of the

Platonic project that was responsible for propping up *humanity* as the unit to govern the state of things by, and would rather swap the one Christian God for the Epicurean (pagan) spirit and “the living nature of its *diverse* divinities.” The manifold presences of regeneration return again, but with difference, announced every revolving calendar year with “the frigid worries” and “the bluish overshadowing” blowing in from the west. This “bad weather” is but a “passing meanness” however, and necessary for the restart, to obliterate “bars, gates, cages, damp prisons of which nothing will remain!” when rejoining the chorus to “resay April” (or March, or October, or November, for that matter) “so that all of nature says it over and again.” As Ponge stressed in an early poem that takes up Paul Claudel’s polysemous trope *Co-naissance*: “it is not so much about *connaître* (knowing) as it is about *naître* (coming to be, or being born)” (La Loi et les Prophètes). One returns to the renewed page of the book by saying April again, acknowledging the liberational force coming together at its source (we might think of the double-forged adjective *reimentsprungenes* (purelysprung) that Hölderlin coined to describe

the Rhine river), restoring the hydrological cycle so that “through all the pores (faucets) liberty springs forth.” I have retained the French word *doux* mentioned in the section COLD WINTER RAIN OR EARLY-SPRING because of its regional association for a rocky crevice whose etymology derives from the Celtic term for fountain or spring, and with origins associated with the Gaulish deity Divona, a sacred spring. Because the poet artist lends their voice to the eternally recurrent streams of time and weather (the double-sense of *le temps* conveys both *weather* and *time*), they hold with their emancipatory charge, their “elemental meanness” that is always still coming into formation, both as “cold winter rain” and the burgeoning “early-spring,” alongside the natural order of the material world, whose borders and confinements of human imposition are thus broken down and apart, to take on the textum as it is given.

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