

Birdsong Birdsong Waterfall: Jean-Luc Camperret's The Lascaux Notebooks & the Recovery of Ice-Age Verse

Derek Beaulieu and Gregory Betts

A Review of Jean-Luc Camperret's *The Lascaux Notebooks*. Edited and translated by Philip Terry. Manchester: Carcanet Classics, 2022. £19.99

According to Hugo Vernier, the poetic urge to translate and recuperate texts situates poetry in an ongoing flux of influence, conversation, and the immediate present. Philip Terry's translation of Jean-Luc Camperret's lost Lascaux notebooks does exactly that. Terry's editing and translation of *The Lascaux Notebooks* recuperates Camperret's WWII transcriptions and translation of the Magdalenian-age visuals of the caves of Lascaux, offering decisive insight into how these cave markings—key images in the history of European artwork and mark-making—are, in fact, literary texts; unlocking the narrative between visuality, poetry, and a rich, elusive, history of minimalism. Terry has translated Camperret's notebooks from scratchy and quickly-executed French into graceful and poetic English, creating a nested conversation of poetic swerves; each translation moves from reproduced cave drawing through Camperret's studied (though often-illegible) French, and into a graceful, poetic English, 'pataphysically creating a series of ateliers and chambers as one metaphorically wanders deeper into the dark Ice age caves, lit only by flickering torchlight. Fast-forward millennia to a moment when we, Derek Beaulieu and Gregory Betts, gather in the pale light of Google Docs

to scratch our impressions together on the shared wall between us, thinking about these new origins of poetry, publication, and the public figure of the poet. Our thoughts are sometimes cloudy, befitting the medium in which we work, wondering how far we can reach through these screens, these filters, back to the moment of poetry's first manifestation.

GB: Have you been to the caves of Lascaux? I read Henri Breuil's account of these Magdalenian images; 17,000 years old and everything about the caves seems astonishing and fantastical. The discovery by a teenager, and more precisely by his dog named Robot, shatters the story of human cultural history. The organic meets the mechanical in the wonders of the grotto, as the illuminous drawings appear to move by the flicker of firelight, re-creating scenes of hunting, harvest, and more. The world's first animated images! It is equally fantastical but yet it only stands to reason that these ancient animators were also proto-poets. And here, now, is finally a transcription and translation of these works in my hand right now. Jean-Luc Camperret managed to gain access not only to the caves but to the heart of the ancient poetry inscribed on the walls.

DB: It seems appropriate that 'Robot' re-discovered the caves. In the 21st Century, the caves are sealed to visitors due to the humidity and bacteria expelled from their exhalations; the paintings have bloomed with *Ochroconis lascauxensis*, a species of fungus which was first observed in

the very caves after which it is named. Today only robots and scientific equipment can explore those antechambers. I was lucky enough to have been guided through *Lascaux II*, a modern recreation of the caves only 600m from the original, by Alejandro Buenavista, the author of *Sine Cera* (casa del entrenador, 1997), an fantastical novel about authenticity and reproductions in contemporary art, and was enthralled. That visit prompted me to write *with wax* (Coach House, 2003), which uses the Lascaux cave markings as inspiration for a discussion of contemporary printing practice. I wish I had had access to Camperret's reconstructions and transcriptions—they are incredibly evocative of the originals (or, at least, the 'originals' that I encountered at *Lascaux II*) and capture the shapes and images which suggest the echoes of a flickering, fading, cultural dream-memory; yes, that was a setting sun, a field, a spear. Yes, that all seems like it *must* be true.

GB: Camperret invites us to consider why,—why in the perils of survival did they turn to poetry? It seems that the conversation begins in the gesture to leave these works on the walls for others to find and read. You write something down, as Andrew Sokal has noted, in the presumption of the absence of your voice: presence is a linguistic construct. These proto-poets worked from a similar presumption, that their lives would falter but that their voice (or voices) would carry on. There are lots of traditions encoded into the poems, as one might expect, but also a surprising amount of good

yarn, just riveting stories of personal experiences, dangers, tragedies. I'm reminded of the adventures of Adam More, who, after being blown off course near Tasmania, found himself suddenly in the presence of an ancient civilization. As when I first read More's strange manuscript (found in a copper cylinder), in reading Camperret's work, I spend as much time trying to imagine the civilization surrounding the text as I do attending to the poetry unto itself. Is there not something almost ineffable in the sheer distance between us and these poets? Is it even fair to call them poets, without knowing what they called themselves?

DB: When faced with the peril of survival, what makes more sense than to write—in poetry— your history; to testify to your days, your points of view, your dangers and tragedies, and to imagine a future? *Lascaux III*, a travelling exhibition consisting of five recreated chambers, has travelled the world since 2012; it has, in a sense, become a book—a portable, readable, translatable, way to access the tales and stories of these lost poets. Canadian poet Ellen Field once opined, in response to a quip by OW Toad, that 'the best response to a poem is another poem' and if that is the case, and Robot's discovery of Lascaux inspired Camperret and Terry to create and translate these source texts, then what else are they but poems? These poems explore that 'sheer distance' between image and word, thought and action, truth and fiction—and do so in a way that transcends the temporal limitations of an author's lifespan.

At no point has Terry blown us off course from

Camperret's transcriptions, nor from what would seem to be the intent of the original poems; but he has harnessed the breath of the poet to both inspire and to spread a sinister, spreading, infestation.

And as for the distance, I think that the flickering potential that Terry's translation brings to Camperret's transcription—that ineffable distance that language creates, is echoed, once again, in contemporary terms. *Lascaux IV*, yet another, contemporary, re-creation of Robot's caves, has been created at the Centre International de l'Art Pariéta, incorporating both accurate replicas and digital technology; the cavelight transcriptions are now backlit LED screens. We are as far away from the readers of the future as the poets of the caves are from us.

The code involved in *Lascaux IV* and *Lascaux M*, the VR-immersive experience recently theorised by Meta and Facebook and digitally rendered by Denis Borrade, posits language in a similar way as the Lascaux artists—these codes, markings, neo-languages create a world, create imaginative projections of a written reality—for code is always ultimately written by poets. How do you see *The Lascaux Notebooks* connecting to contemporary practice?

GB: They open up worlds for us to inhabit, where fantasy and reality intertwine. When I first started reading the poems, I had paintings by Pavel Jerdanowitch dancing before my eyes, more present than the cave drawings. Three authors into this project (the original author(s),

plus Champerret, plus Terry), and we are confronted with a constant series of substitutions, switching of codes and voices, mysteries invoked and revealed only to be permuted and dissolved. Each becomes a surprise beckoning for us to rethink our foundations and assumptions. There was an exhibition at the Art Gallery of Ontario in 2008 in which patrons were invited to tour the recently uncovered chambers of the nineteenth century Irish maid Mary Amber O'Shea, who every day at work stole droplets of wax until she had amassed enough to fashion the hidden plunder into objects that she stowed secretly in the walls of her chambers. There's a similar kind of aesthetic subterfuge at work in *The Lascaux Notebooks*. O'Shea's hidden vestibules of secret artmaking echo the finding of ice age poetry. Like the archeological bent of the AGO exhibition in 2008, Terry presents the process by which Jean-Luc Champerret found the images, transmuted them into semiotic objects, and elaborated their poetic relation. Reading becomes both an act of extrapolation, secretion, and discovery. The word 'discovery' has gone out of fashion these days, but I use it in reference to its Old French root *descouvrir* which means to uncover, unroof, and unveil. These texts are now out in the world, unroofed from the caves, and their meaning begins to accumulate implications and potentials like so many barnacles on a whale. A sign of vitality!

One of the more intriguing sections of this work is the selection from '*Boîte Jaune: Carnet Gris*' in which Champerret acknowledges that we don't know how the authors of this ice

age poetry read their own work. Did they read left to right, right to left, or in the boustrophedon style? In this section of the book, he considers the ‘vertiginous’ variants of each grid of the logograms produced by variant reading techniques, producing an astonishing volume of readings of the grids, all poems unto themselves. Does this acknowledgement bring us closer to the original authors or serve more as an acknowledgement of our inevitable and irrevocable distance from them?

DB: Champerret acknowledging his lack of concrete knowledge—even to the level of reading direction—does assert distance, yes, but it also allows for poetic licence and exploration. The poems themselves are caves, brief moments of light in a darkened cavern. Ern Malley argues that when meaning and intent is ‘reversed in the quiet reflecting waters’ it becomes a space for readerly collaboration and interpretation; which then makes the text more immediate and contemporary—it speaks directly to the reader and requests a response. Champerret, through Terry, does exactly that; he presents with potentialities and possibilities; it’s one of the things I really appreciate about *The Lascaux Notebooks*—at no point do Champerret or Terry present themselves as authorities, they are simply fellow travellers.

GB: It is funny though, because there is a remarkable clarity to the poems, despite that conscientious ambiguity in the transcription and translation. One of my favourite pieces presents a simple repetition of the reindeer sigil

nine times (*Boîte Noire: Carnet Noir* '98). You can feel the ancient abundance and infatuation with the creatures, such that Champerret's elaboration of the cave drawings into 'reindeer / how I fucking / love you' captures something of the emphatic spirit of the original. It reminds of that famous sequence of bridges that Nat Tate drew. When asked about them, he responded delightfully, 'I like bridges, so strong, so simple.' That's the kind of clarity most of these poems have, even if there remain all these questions about word order, sequencing, and creative license. It really comes down to the repetition of 70 logograms across all of the poems. That constraint gives us a very clear sense about what things and relations were important to them: consider 'birds plain shoot / hunters plain birds / birds flight shoot.' Blistering clarity! Champerret's elaborations of these grids thread a narrative between them, but regardless of exactitude, we can intuit a story with a setting and competing characters, in short a hunt.

I once saw Sarah Binks give a lecture in the small French village of Palais Idéal, not about her own poetry, but about Rimbaud's masterpiece "The Spiritual Hunt." His poem is filled with strategic ambiguity, as Hugo Vernier wrote about frequently, but also breathtaking precision about the drive to access the everyday orphic. I would describe Binks as a distracted speaker, moving laterally and haphazardly, such that the threads of her talk often seemed hopelessly entangled, except when she addressed the poem itself. In those moments, she had a kind of magical clarity that opened

the text up to the shared hunger and fascination of ancient human civilizations. I actually forgot about that talk until I was going over Terry's verdant introduction, which details the story of his acquisition of the Champerret notebooks and his translation methodology. He says, 'that they are poems is indisputable,' and I suppose it is that kind of clarity I'm talking about. A kind of magical transformation of the possibilities of culture emerges in the clarity of the poems in this book. Set aside your hesitation and scepticism about any specific moment in the book, and dive into the indisputable aspect of it all. The dawn of poetry has been set back over 13,000 years prior to Gilgamesh!

DEREK BEAULIEU is the author/editor of over twenty-five collections of poetry, prose, and criticism. His most recent volume of fiction, *a, A Novel*, was published by Paris's Jean Boîte Editions, his most recent volume of poetry, *Surface Tension*, was published by Toronto's Coach House Books. Beaulieu holds a PhD in Creative Writing from Roehampton University, is Banff's Poet Laureate, and the Director of Literary Arts at Banff Centre for Arts and Creativity.

GREGORY BETTS is an experimental poet with collections published in Canada, the United States, and Ireland. His books explore conceptual, collaborative, and concrete poetics. He has produced two of the most exhaustive

academic studies of avant-garde writing in Canada, *Avant-Garde Canadian Literature: The Early Manifestations* (2013) and *Finding Nothing: The VanGardes, 1959-1975* (2020), both with University of Toronto Press. *Finding Nothing* received the Basil Stuart-Stubbs Prize for Outstanding Scholarly Book on British Columbia and the Gabrielle Roy Prize, which honours the best work of scholarship on literature produced in Canada. He has served as the Craig Dobbin Chair of Canadian Studies at University College Dublin.

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