

Roger Laporte
The Orphic Text

Ian Maclachlan



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THE ORPHIC TEXT

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IAN MACLACHLAN



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NOTE



Roger Laporte was born in Lyon in 1925 and for many years taught philosophy in Montpellier. Following three short *récits* published in the 1950s, *La Veille* (1963) initiated a series of works exploring the experience of writing. It was followed by *Une Voix de fin silence* (1966), *Une Voix de fin silence II: Pourquoi?* (1967), *Fugue* (1970), *Fugue: Supplément* (1973), *Fugue 3* (1976), *Suite* (1979), and *Moriendo* (1983). This series was collected as *Une Vie* in 1986. Selections from Laporte's extensive critical writings have been published as *Quinze variations sur un thème biographique* (1975) and *Etudes* (1990). Commentators on his work include Michel Foucault, Emmanuel Levinas, Jacques Derrida, Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy. Laporte was awarded the Prix France-Culture in 1978.

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ABBREVIATIONS



The following abbreviations are used for the works by Roger Laporte referred to most frequently.

i. Une Vie (Paris: P.O.L, 1986)

The works collected in this volume are referred to according to the pagination of *Une Vie*, but preceded by the following abbreviations to indicate the individual works collected therein:

<i>V</i>	<i>La Veille</i>
<i>VFS</i>	<i>Une Voix de fin silence</i>
<i>P</i>	<i>Une Voix de fin silence II: Pourquoi?</i>
<i>F</i>	<i>Fugue</i>
<i>FS</i>	<i>Fugue: Supplément</i>
<i>F3</i>	<i>Fugue 3</i>
<i>S</i>	<i>Suite</i>
<i>M</i>	<i>Moriendo</i>

ii. Other abbreviations

<i>B</i>	'Bief' in <i>L'Arc</i> 54 (1973), 'Jacques Derrida', 65–70.
<i>C</i>	<i>Carnets (extraits)</i> (Paris: Hachette, 1979).
<i>DLMB</i>	Laporte and Noël, <i>Deux Lectures de Maurice Blanchot</i> (Montpellier: Fata Morgana, 1973).
<i>E</i>	<i>Etudes</i> (Paris: P.O.L, 1990).
<i>EDM</i>	<i>Entre deux mondes</i> (Montpellier: Gris Banal, 1988).
<i>LP</i>	<i>Lettre à personne</i> (Paris: Plon, 1989).
<i>QV</i>	<i>Quinze variations sur un thème biographique</i> (Paris: Flammarion, 1975).
<i>SR</i>	' <i>Souvenir de Reims</i> ' et autres récits (Paris: Hachette, 1979).

CHAPTER 1



Orphic Writing

On 24 February 1982, Roger Laporte ceased to be a writer.¹ Since that time, to be sure, he has written and published a number of critical and occasional texts, but on completing the final 'Post-scriptum' of *Moriendo*, he ceased to write in his sense of the word, bringing to an end one of the most remarkable and distinctive undertakings in post-war French literature.

The aim of this study is to survey the entirety of Roger Laporte's literary enterprise, from the three short *récits* of the 1950s to *Moriendo*, which marked the end of a series of works subtitled *biographie* initiated by *Fugue* in 1970. The publication in 1986 of a collected volume entitled *Une Vie* effectively extended the designation of *biographie* to the three volumes of the 1960s included therein. The term *biographie* is better seen as a marker of genre than as a subtitle, in fact, for Laporte's ambition is to institute a new type of writing; what exactly is at stake in this ambition will be fully explored later,² but to situate these texts in terms of existing categories, one might say that they are essays which explore the experience of writing. But one would have to add immediately that, in an important sense, this is not writing *on* writing, but rather, in the words of Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, it is a question of '*écrire l'écriture, ce qui n'est pas la réfléchir déjà existante, mais l'inventer encore inconnue, en faire l'expérience nue et primitive*'.³ My exploration of Laporte's invention of writing⁴ will draw on all of his published work, but my overriding concern will be with the paradoxically concluded but interminable project of *biographie*.

Laporte's work has attracted a number of commentaries, but predominantly in the form of review-articles on the occasion of a new publication. Only a few of these endeavour to consider the broad itinerary of Laporte's writing, and even then they do so at a length which precludes consideration of that itinerary in any detail. My

objective in writing the first full-length study of Laporte's work is therefore to analyse individual works in detail, but at the same time to attend to the progression in Laporte's work, focusing particularly on the transitions between stages of Laporte's writing, which we shall come to regard as ambivalent *brisures*, at once connective and disjunctive.

These commentators have included, from quite an early stage, Michel Foucault, Emmanuel Levinas and Maurice Blanchot and, more recently, Jacques Derrida, Roland Barthes, Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy. But the celebrity of such commentators has not been enough to ensure a large readership for Laporte's work; in his 'Avant-Propos' to *Lettre à personne*, Lacoue-Labarthe describes him as 'un écrivain pratiquement sans lecteurs (ils sont tout au plus un petit millier)' (LP 14). This is the case, despite the fact that the publication of *Une Vie* had stimulated a small upsurge in interest, leading even to the first British appreciation of Laporte's work to appear in print, in the form of John Sturrock's full-page review of *Une Vie* in the *Times Literary Supplement*.⁵

The objective of the present study will largely have been fulfilled if, in some form, it is able to play a part in fostering a wider readership for Laporte's work, the importance of which is an implicit, and at times explicit, claim of the pages which follow. This claim is not simply predicated on the eminence of some of Laporte's commentators, although the names associated with Laporte are indicative of a limited—one might say, documentary—interest of Laporte's work. In surveying the itinerary of Laporte's writing, it is possible to trace certain key developments in post-war French thought and writing, beginning with the early *récits* of the 1950s, which reveal the influence of Blanchot and, partly through the mediation of the latter, of German philosophy, particularly that of Heidegger; there follows the transitional phase of the texts of the 1960s, in which these influences are still discernible, along with that of Levinas, for example, but which at the same time mark the development of a more distinctive idiom; the *Fugue* series is most obviously distinguished from its predecessors through a focus on writing which owes much to the work of Derrida; finally, *Suite* and *Moriendo* mark something of a return to the idiom of earlier texts, particularly *La Veille*, but in a manner still informed by a Derridean conception of writing, as well as by a psychoanalytic perspective which had begun to manifest itself in the *Fugue* series. In fact, the stages which I have briefly sketched out here largely account for the structure of my argument.

But if Laporte's writing were simply reducible to a set of influences, its interest would indeed be merely that of a marginal document in French intellectual and literary history. In any case, the question of influence is not quite so simple as my brief outline suggests; it will be my contention in the early part of Chapter 3, for example, that Laporte's texts of the 1960s may be said already to anticipate the influence of Derrida. More importantly, I will also contend that Laporte's enterprise of *biographie*, his attempt to 'écrire l'écriture', gives rise to a writing which promises to outstrip the limits of philosophical or theoretical thought, an impossible transgression which is the only possibility of a certain conception of literature; in making this case, which is particularly to the fore in the latter part of Chapter 3 and in my Conclusion, I am myself, of course, indebted in particular to the work of Blanchot and of Derrida.

I am also indebted to Blanchot for the title of this study, which alludes to Blanchot's use of the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice in *L'Espace littéraire*,⁶ which I discuss in the course of Chapter 2, and to which I return intermittently thereafter. I use the term 'Orphic text' to distinguish the reflexivity of works like Laporte's from a more conventional conception of literary reflexivity, applied to works which are seen, in some way, as successfully mirroring themselves or containing their own image, a conception whose mythological counterpart is generally given as Narcissus; it is one of the effects of the Orphic text to reveal such successful self-reflection to be illusory. The Orphic text turns towards its own origin to discover that origin to be ever-receding and yet still to be accomplished, and returns on itself to find itself already other; the reflexivity of the Orphic text turns out to be the impossibility of perfect reflexivity. In this failure of self-coincidence, the reflexive moment of the Orphic text no longer consolidates its integrity as a work, but becomes instead a movement towards the other, sealing its own ruin or *désœuvrement* as a work, but at the same time founding an ethical communication, in the sense of ethics elaborated by Levinas.⁷

For reasons such as these, Laporte's work seems to me to have an importance not presently reflected by the extent of his readership. In particular, it is a body of work which would repay greater attention at a time when discussion in literary theory and contemporary philosophy has increasingly focused on the question of ethics.⁸ This tendency, which was already in evidence and received an unexpected impetus from the Paul de Man affair, has cast a welcome light on the

ethics of deconstruction and on the ethical dimension of literature in general, and has brought nearer to the foreground figures such as Levinas and Blanchot. Laporte's work has a great deal to offer in such a climate.

To write of Laporte's work under the rubric of the Orphic text is implicitly to place that work in a particular tradition, a tradition which Laporte has clearly indicated in his published *Carnets* and in a number of critical studies; in the case of a number of figures in this tradition, Laporte has also signalled the extent to which these were mediated for him by Blanchot's critical writings. In the 'Post-face, ou un chemin de halage' written for his first collection of critical essays, *Quinze variations sur un thème biographique* (QV 229–46), Laporte offers a simple justification for his critical writing: 'il est juste de payer ses dettes' (QV 235), a sentiment echoed in Laporte's cover-note to his second such collection, *Etudes*, which ends with the last line from René Char's poem 'Qu'il vive!': 'Dans mon pays, on remercie'.

Char himself is of course one of the later figures in this tradition, and was also instrumental in encouraging Laporte's earliest literary efforts, ensuring the first publication of *Souvenir de Reims* in the journal *Botteghe Oscure* in 1954.⁹ Laporte's essay, 'Clarté de René Char' (QV 7–15), focuses on two complementary movements in Char's poetry, which find an echo in Laporte's work: towards an originary moment, a movement indicated by the title of Char's collection *Retour amont*, and towards the unknown *as unknown*, which is the very domain of poetry, as Char's famous aphorism, 'Le poème est l'amour réalisé du désir demeuré désir'¹⁰ reminds us, a movement whose counterpart in Laporte's work will be explored, in a Blanchotian context, in Chapter 2. That the two movements are one, the movement towards an unattainable origin at the same time an opening to a perpetual future, as in Laporte's own work, is suggested by the opening lines of the section 'Odin le Roc' of Char's 'Les Transparents', with which Laporte concludes his study: 'Ce qui vous fascine par endroit dans mon vers, c'est l'avenir, glissante obscurité d'avant l'aurore, tandis que la nuit est au passé déjà.'¹¹

To restrict oneself to the domain of French literature, the obvious place to which one would look for the beginnings of this tradition is the work of Mallarmé. Laporte has not, in fact, devoted a study to Mallarmé, an omission which he notes in the 'Post-face' of *Quinze variations* (QV 235), but the importance of Mallarmé for him is clear enough from his *Carnets*, and indeed from his study of Blanchot, 'Une

Passion',¹² some of which concerns his reading of Blanchot's essays on Mallarmé. In fact, he ascribes the foundation of his work to a misreading of Blanchot's 'Le silence de Mallarmé',¹³ his ambition being, he says, to write 'le Livre' which Mallarmé never achieved, taking Blanchot's article to be 'un appel en ce sens' (DLMB 55). However, despite this *contresens* in his reading of Blanchot's article, he adds: 'En fait, ma position et celle de Blanchot ne sont pas très éloignées puisque Blanchot a dû écrire toute sa vie afin tout au plus d'indiquer l'absence de livre, alors que je passe ma vie à écrire un Livre qui sans cesse se dérobe; il n'empêche qu'en droit nos positions sont radicalement différentes' (DLMB 56). The position of Mallarmé at the origin of a particular tradition of reflexivity, and the importance of his writing for a view of poetic language, impersonality, and the necessary failure of the work which is central to much contemporary writing and theory, and to Blanchot's work in particular, has already been too well-documented to require further comment here.¹⁴

Laporte's *Carnets* and critical writings readily suggest other figures in this tradition: Valéry, in particular, for Laporte, *Monsieur Teste* and the *Cahiers* (cf. E 305–17), the latter presenting clear parallels with aspects of Laporte's work in terms, for example, of its evocation of the work as mental discipline, such that the construction of the work is inseparable from a reconstruction of the self,¹⁵ and the law of 'self-variance' which describes the mobility essential to the exercise of thought in the work,¹⁶ and which, as we shall see, has its counterparts in the *contre-écriture* and the *écart* of Laporte's later works; Ponge, of whom Laporte notes in his *Carnets* as early as 1954 that what he admires in his works is: '1) (malgré lui) leur aspect *genèse* d'un poème; 2) son amour de la clarté; 3) son refus de la fiction, je veux dire sa mise à nu de l'imagination comme telle' (C 35), and to whose work we shall briefly refer in Chapter 3; Artaud, in his exploration of failure, loss and dislocation of the self, which leads Laporte, in his 'Antonin Artaud ou la pensée au supplice' (QV 101–12), to ask how one could not dream of a work which would be a transcription of the impersonal drama of the soul, 'qui dénuderait radicalement l'esprit et ainsi le mettrait en jeu, aventure cruelle qui formerait le "thème" unique de la littérature se trouvant enfin avant peut-être de se perdre! Avec Antonin Artaud ce rêve s'est accompli' (QV 103). The texts to which Laporte seems to have been particularly drawn are the correspondence with Jacques Rivière, *L'Ombilic des Limbes*, *Le Pèse-*

nerfs and *L'Art et la Mort*; one may readily observe, for example, the affinity with Laporte's literary enterprise of the programme announced at the beginning of *L'Ombilic des Limbes*: 'Là où d'autres proposent des œuvres je ne prétends pas autre chose que de montrer mon esprit. [...] Je ne conçois pas d'œuvre comme détachée de la vie',¹⁷ sentiments which, as we shall see, are closely echoed in the *Fugue* series.

When one adds to these names those of Joubert, Proust, Bataille, and, outside France, Hölderlin and Kafka, for example, one sees to what extent Laporte's pantheon coincides with the recurring figures of Blanchot's critical writing, in which, as Leslie Hill observes, one encounters 'not so much a repertoire of critical concepts as a configuration of proper names'.¹⁸ In the next chapter I shall therefore consider Laporte's earliest works¹⁹ in the light of Blanchot's fictional and critical writings, and in the light of the inheritance shared by Laporte and Blanchot, focusing, for example, on aspects of the work of Heidegger and on other key intertexts, notably in the works of Heraclitus and Hölderlin, to which Laporte's *Carnets* and features of his early work, such as epigraphs, direct us.

Notes to Chapter 1

1. See e.g. *LP* 21, and Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe's 'Avant-Propos' to those notebooks, *LP* 11–18.
2. See Ch. 3, below, in particular.
3. Cover-note to Roger Laporte, *Suite (biographie)* (Paris: Hachette, 1979).
4. I return specifically to the notion of invention in the third part of Ch. 3.
5. John Sturrock, 'The writer as Writer', *Times Literary Supplement* 4357 (1986), 1111. The only substantial studies to have appeared in English are the section 'Fugue: The Adventures of Metaphors' in Dina Sherzer, *Representation in Contemporary French Fiction* (Lincoln, Nebraska and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1986), 104–17, Andrew Benjamin's much more sophisticated 'The Redemption of Value: Laporte, Writing as *Abkürzung*', in *Art, Mimesis and the Avant-Garde* (London and New York: Routledge, 1991), 197–211, and my own 'Musique-rythme: Derrida and Roger Laporte', in *The French Connections of Jacques Derrida*, ed. Julian Wolfreys, John Brannigan and Ruth Robbins (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999), 71–84.
6. Cf. 'Le regard d'Orphée' in Maurice Blanchot, *L'Espace littéraire* (Paris: Gallimard, 1955), 227–34.
7. I explore aspects of Levinas's thought in Ch. 2, and return to this notion of communication in Ch. 5. Clearly, it follows from these remarks that I deplore Fredric Jameson's recent dismissal of Laporte as 'of all contemporary writers the most intransigently formalist in the bad sense of writing about nothing but your own process of writing' ('Marx's Purloined Letter', in *Ghostly Demarcations: a*

- symposium on Jacques Derrida's 'Specters of Marx'*, ed. Michael Sprinker (London and New York: Verso, 1999), 33).
8. Studies such as Timothy Clark's *Derrida, Heidegger, Blanchot: sources of Derrida's notion and practice of literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992) and Simon Critchley's *The Ethics of Deconstruction: Derrida and Levinas* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992) are notable examples of this tendency. A stimulating account of the conception of ethics at stake here, which repudiates certain attacks on the supposed ethical and political indifference of deconstruction, is Seán Hand's article 'Reading, "Post-modern", Ethics', *Paragraph* 13:3 (1990), 267–84. More recently, amongst some of Derrida's admirers, there has emerged a converse and equally hasty assumption about the essentially ethical nature of deconstruction, irrespective of the specific sites of deconstructive engagement; for an indication of Derrida's unease about any such assumption, see *Passions* (Paris: Galilée, 1993), 40–1.
 9. Laporte indicates Char's role in his 'Correspondance avec Sylviane Agacinski', *Digraphe* 57 (1991), 77–94 (87).
 10. René Char, 'Partage formel' XXX, in *Seuls demeurent*, in *Œuvres complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 'Pléiade', 1983), 162. Laporte slightly misquotes this in his study (QV 13).
 11. Char, *Œuvres complètes*, 298.
 12. In his later study of Blanchot, 'L'ancien, l'effroyablement ancien' (Montpellier: Fata Morgana, 1987; E 9–50), Laporte disavowed this earlier study, having indeed withdrawn it from publication, so that a subsequent new edition comprised only Bernard Noël's 'D'une main obscure'. A new version of 'Une Passion', preceded by a note explaining his extreme disquiet about the earlier version, was published by Laporte in *A l'extrême pointe: Bataille et Blanchot* (Montpellier: Fata Morgana, 1994), 33–53. However, the later version omits the very references to Laporte's own work which are of particular interest to us here.
 13. In Maurice Blanchot, *Faux pas* (Paris: Gallimard, 1943), 117–25 in the 1987 printing; these page numbers do not correspond to the ones given by Laporte (DLMB 55), as the pagination of *Faux pas* has changed since the early printings.
 14. On Blanchot's reading of Mallarmé in particular, see Leslie Hill, 'Blanchot and Mallarmé', *MLN* 105 (1990), 889–913. For an account of Mallarmé's relevance to contemporary thinking on literature, which aims to show that Mallarmé's work is not in the end reducible to the categories of such thinking, see Peter Dayan, *Mallarmé's 'divine transposition': real and apparent sources of literary value* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986), particularly 'Part 2: The Vanishing Trick', 109–219.
 15. Cf. Paul Valéry, *Cahiers I*, ed. Judith Robinson (Paris: Gallimard, 'Pléiade', 1973), 368: 'Le but ne soit pas de faire telle œuvre, mais de faire en soi-même celui qui fasse, puisse faire—cette œuvre. Il faut donc construire de soi en soi, ce soi qui sera l'instrument à faire telle œuvre.'
 16. Cf. Valéry, *Cahiers I*, 960: 'Mon premier point est toujours la self-variance. Tout ce qui semble stable dans la conscience ou capable de retours aussi fréquents et aussi aisés que l'on voudra, est pourtant soumis à une instabilité essentielle. L'esprit est ce qui change et qui ne réside que dans le changement.'
 17. Antonin Artaud, 'L'Ombilic des Limbes', *suivi de 'Le Pèse-nerfs' et autres textes* (Paris: Gallimard, coll. 'Poésie', 1968), 51.

18. Hill, 'Blanchot and Mallarmé', 889.

19. In the first part of Ch. 2, I shall be concentrating on the three texts of the 1950s which were published at the time: *Souvenir de Reims*, first published in *Botteghe Oscure* 13 (1954), *Une Migration*, first published in *Botteghe Oscure* 23 (1959), and *Le Partenaire*, first published in *Lettres Nouvelles* 7 (1960), 'Jeunes écrivains français'.

CHAPTER 2



Writing the Unknown

i. The early *récits*

Souvenir de Reims relates a visit to Rheims undertaken by a narrator unable to complete work on the final chapter of a novel. It describes his initial disappointment on finally seeing the famous cathedral, and then his discovery of its glory on returning there shortly afterwards. The latter revelation poses further problems for the narrator, as he seeks to account for the effect on him of the cathedral's rose window and to describe the nature of the cathedral's beauty. These endeavours are suddenly curtailed by the narrator's apparent renunciation of the artificiality of his narrative, in favour of an admission of the 'real' situation of writing (Algiers, not Rheims), and a discussion of the possibility of a description of description and, ultimately, of a sort of textual self-coincidence, this discussion returning the focus to the final chapter of the incomplete novel. The narrator ponders the possibility of an open-ended conclusion to the novel, and the significance such a concluding silence would have for the reader. The remainder of this short text pursues this discussion of the novel's ending in terms of the 'Devoir d'écrire' imposed by the inspiration of the cathedral, the notion of a speaking silence and the impersonality of the writer whose experience of writing is a failure of self-coincidence and a loss of identity.

The hiatus between description and its object discovered by the narrator of *Souvenir de Reims* may be ascribed to language's generalizing properties which realize the world in abstract terms, inasmuch as the linguistic sign renders its referential object in its ideality rather than its materiality. The notion that the linguistic presentation of an object also signals its 'real' absence can be traced back to Hegel and beyond, and is most notably observed in French literature in Mallarmé's famous 'Je dis: une fleur!'. It is also of central importance to Blanchot's discussion of the language of literature in 'La

littérature et le droit à la mort': 'Le mot me donne l'être, mais il me le donne privé d'être. Il est l'absence de cet être, son néant, ce qui demeure de lui lorsqu'il a perdu l'être, c'est-à-dire le seul fait qu'il n'est pas.'¹ Having noted that language generalizes the specific by transforming the actual, physical existence of its referent into the ideal essence of the sign, Blanchot argues that the goal of literature is precisely this ideal, abstract realm, but that the negation of reality operated by language is vitiated by the material reality of the sign. In a further twist to his argument, Blanchot asserts literature's concern with a reality prior to the negation of language, and with language's inability to realize this elusive realm, which will by definition escape any effort to name it: 'La négation ne peut se réaliser qu'à partir de la réalité de ce qu'elle nie; le langage tire sa valeur et son orgueil d'être l'accomplissement de cette négation; mais, au départ, que s'est-il perdu? Le tourment du langage est ce qu'il manque par la nécessité où il est d'en être le manque. Il ne peut même pas le nommer' (316). In its endeavours to locate what precedes it, language is condemned to propel this element ever forwards beyond the reach of a naming which perforce denies the reality of such an element. But this impossible pursuit is, for Blanchot, precisely literature's quest—'Le langage de la littérature est la recherche de ce moment qui la précède' (316)—and its privileged resource in this quest is that very materiality of the linguistic sign which had previously appeared as an obstacle to the literary ideal, for in addition to being the negating abstraction of reality, language is also part of that which it negates: 'Où réside donc mon espoir d'atteindre ce que je repousse? Dans la matérialité du langage, dans ce fait que les mots aussi sont des choses, une nature, ce qui m'est donné et me donne plus que je n'en comprends. Tout à l'heure, la réalité des mots était un obstacle. Maintenant, elle est ma seule chance' (316). This leads Blanchot to suggest that literary language characteristically foregrounds the physical properties of language at the expense of the transparent signifying function that language appears to have in its everyday usage.

The attempt to discover a realm prior to manifestation is the source of the exigency to write experienced by the narrator of *Souvenir de Reims* as he seeks to convey the joy experienced when the light of the rose window reveals the true glory of Rheims cathedral: 'Joie digne par excellence d'être décrite [...], elle désespère le poète dès qu'il se change en philosophe et veut l'atteindre dans sa source de lumière comme en dehors et avant sa manifestation' (SR 31). The attempt to