

Françoise Joukovsky. *Le Bel objet: les paradis artificiels de la Pléiade*.

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Abstract:

This article is a book review of *Le Bel objet: les paradis artificiels de la Pléiade* by Françoise Joukovsky.

Keywords: Book Review | French Literature | Visual Arts | French Renaissance Poetry | Pléiade

Article:

Françoise Joukovsky. *Le Bel objet: les paradis artificiels de la Pléiade*. Paris: Champion, 1991. 225 pp.

Considerable progress has been made in scholarly approaches to the relations between the verbal and plastic arts since René Wellek and others first questioned the practical value of impressionistic comparative studies like Helmut Hatzfeld's *Literature through Art*. Regrettably, however, the facile intermedia analog continues to attract and misdirect even the most astute of literary critics. With the present book, Françoise Joukovsky now joins their number. The celebrated French *seiziémiste* repeatedly draws impressionistic parallels, for example, between the pure colors that vitalize Pierre de Ronsard's poetic description of natural spectacles and those employed by the Fauves painters in the early 1900s (93).

Although tantalizing, such comparisons in fact have no basis in art historical reality. Moreover, they add nothing to Joukovsky's central thesis, set forth in the first of her book's five chapters, according to which Ronsard and his fellow Pléiade poets would be obsessed with a discourse on beauty that simultaneously inscribes their concepts of the expressive power and the aesthetic status of poetry. The remaining chapters expose the most notable instances of this discourse: among the numerous poetic evocations of artificial (versus natural) beauty (ch. 2)—especially in the "ekphrastic" poems that verbally simulate the visual microcosms figured upon one or another "bel objet" (ch. 3) as well as among descriptions of gracefulness and the voluptuous quality of

venustas (ch. 4), or, conversely, among accounts of transgressions against beauty, representations of the grotesque and the ugly (ch. 5).

Other flaws also abound. On the conceptual level, there is the irresolute portrayal of the Pléiade authors' attitudes toward the plastic arts. While conceding that many poetic references to painting and sculpture contain "une ébauche de critique d'art" (99), Joukovsky fails to identify the objects of that criticism or to make any conclusive pronouncements about the Pléiade poets' stand in the contemporary *paragone* debate over the relative superiority of the arts. Also troubling are the textual inconsistencies. One wonders how, for example, Joukovsky can insist that Ronsard and his followers derived their "esthétique de la représentation" from Petrarch (177) while elsewhere affirming their obligation to the verbal pictorialism of the Ancients.

Joukovsky's lexical imprecision is similarly disturbing. Key terms are allowed to drift between their narrowest and broadest possible senses, and thereby to lose the best of their semantic potency. Just as "tableau" is used to denote either a pictorial work of art or any verbal description, so the meaning of "ekphrasis" is stretched to designate both "la description d'une oeuvre d'art réelle ou imaginaire" (129) and any "description d'un objet nature!" (130). Factual errors are another problem. The most prominent and surprising mistake is the confusion of the "Janet" in Ronsard's *Élégie* to this artist with Jean Clouet (61, 63, and 99). As Joukovsky herself pointed out in a 1987 essay on the same poem, Janet is in truth a sobriquet for François Clouet, Jean Clouet's son and the official royal portrait painter from 1541-72.

Its shortcomings notwithstanding, this book is a must for all students and scholars of Pléiade poetics and French Renaissance aesthetics. Furthermore, true to form, Joukovsky successfully draws many significant yet heretofore unidentified intertextual connections. Her remarks on the debt of Pléiade authors to the epistemological theories of Charles de Bovelles and to the optics of Agrippa de Nettesheim, L. Le Roy, and others are particularly noteworthy. Likewise, Joukovsky's thoughtful comments on the aesthetics of laughter in Pléiade poetry promise to spark many interesting new discussions of this topic.

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