

Review of *Le Vif du sens: Corps et poésie selon Maurice Scève*, by Thomas Hunkeler

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Abstract:

This article is a review of the book *Le Vif du sens": Corps et poésie selon Maurice Scève* by Thomas Hunkeler.

Keywords: Book Review | Sixteenth century French poetry | Maurice Scève

Article:

Thomas Hunkeler. "Le Vif du sens": Corps et poésie selon Maurice Scève. *Cahiers d'Humanisme et Renaissance* 66. Geneva: Librairie Droz S. A., 2003. 321 pp. index. illus. bibl. CHF 50. ISBN: 2-600-00861-6.

The last twenty-five years have been rich in scholarship devoted to the works of the Lyonnais poet, Maurice Scève. The goal to contribute something new to this corpus is therefore both laudable and daunting. Thomas Hunkeler attempts to meet the challenge in this book by complementing the perception that a Ficinian-based Neoplatonic spiritualism comes to dominate Scève's love poetry with a thesis that locates the start of all early modern notions of *spiritus* within prevailing medical notions of the "corps" — the body and its physiology — and that thereby requires us to recognize the centrality of the body within all his expressions of spiritualism. The critic outlines his theory in an introduction that acknowledges his debt to the New Historicism and lays out his position that "le corps sert de matrice" (23) throughout Scève's verses, but principally in his blazons of the 1530s and the 449 dizains of his 1544 *Délie*.

Consistent with Hunkeler's dedication to historical-based criticism, chapter 1 analyzes Scève's role in revitalizing Petrarch in Renaissance France. The central concern is the story about Scève's 1533 discovery of Laura's tomb. For this critic, the poet's ability to decipher the markings on that grave evidence his wish to become "un *autre* Pétrarque" (39) and to establish his reputation as an erudite humanist.

Chapters 2 and 3 consider Scève's contributions to Marot's blazon competition of the mid-1530s and their links to contemporary treatises on human anatomy. Four theses emerge from the discussion. First, in chapter 2 Hunkeler argues that the spiritual emphasis of the Lyonnais's five blazons (on the forehead, eyebrow, tear, throat, and breath) is designed to defy the physicality that distinguishes the other contest epigrams. He further establishes that Scève's poems underscore the sublime effects of the lady's attributes upon the mind, heart, and soul of the poet and thus stage the poet himself at their center. Third, in chapter 3 the critic shows that the spiritualized affection represented in the blazons nevertheless reflects contemporary medical knowledge like that published in Jean Fernel's 1554 *Physiologia*. These theories inscribed the ancient Galenic concept according to which the *spiritus* of love is equally corporeal and incorporeal. Hunkeler then proceeds to his concluding fourth point: "le corps ne peut pas être exclu" (135) from the love in Scève's blazons.

Chapters 4–7 focus on *Délie* in ways that expand the preceding findings. Chapter 4 reexamines the Ficinian brand of Neoplatonic spiritualism that dominates the collection. Whereas previous scholars have regarded that spiritualism as wholly metaphysical, Hunkeler reminds us that Ficino both understood and accepted the dual character of *spiritus*. He also traces the Florentine's debt to poets of the *dolce stil nuovo* (e.g., Dante and Cavalcanti), for whom the experience of love begins with the corporeal sense of sight before proceeding to the physiological synthesis of spirit and blood in the heart. After elaborating the preceding revelations, chapter 5 ends with an introduction to Scève's innovations to the Petrarchan tradition in *Délie*. Hunkeler centers on the psycho-physiological "éléments hétérodoxes" (182) injected into Ficinian Neoplatonism by contemporary French and Italian humanists. Questioning the dichotomy between spiritual and carnal love, these authors inspired Scève to modify Petrarch's division between "spirito" and "corpo" in the *Rima Sparse*.

Chapter 6 exposes still other *Délie* intertexts and subversions of Petrarch. The discussion moves from an examination of Scève's "scientific" depiction of falling in love to a review of the Aristotelian and Galenic character of the Lyonnais's concept of sight as the sensory gateway for the incursion of love into the body. These distinctions are apparent from the initial dizain, the touchstone for most of Hunkeler's subsequent poetic explications. The curious evocation of the "Idole" that *constitutes* the object of the poet's adoration affords additional evidence of Scève's rebellion against Petrarch. Whereas a "real-life" Laura remains the inspirational start starting point throughout the Tuscan's *canzoniere*, the stimulus for Scève's collection is the idolized image imprinted on the poet's soul that emerges *re-constituted* in the printed verses. Hunkeler concludes that the Lyonnais's poems thereby become the ultimate objects of adoration, attaining all the *vertu* (force) of the internalized lady.

Chapter 7 returns to *Délie* as an instance of *translatio virtutis* (267). Hunkeler thereafter considers the ways in which Scève also strives to imbue his idol with "dureté" (240), *hardness* as callous cruelty and physicality. The latter aspect is realized by the dizain form itself, whose structural symmetry and lexical density achieves a solidity absent from the fluidity of Petrarch's

sonnets. The place of pitilessness in the work opens another direction of thought. In Hunkeler's view Scève's *Délie* is scarcely more merciful than Petrarch's Laura, though the response of the Lyonnais's poet to that behavior is significantly different from the *dolcezza* of the Tuscan's bard. It is closer to the *âpreté* (harshness) advocated by Dante in the *Rime* and *Convivio*, where the ill-treated lover reacts to the lady's cruelty with his own disdainful harshness. For Hunkeler, however, the poet of *Délie* turns his negative *âpreté* into a positive commitment to "fermeté" (246), firmness in his loyalty toward his beloved. The critic then rightfully concedes that *Délie* is ultimately more about movement than hardness insofar as love is ever-changing. This admission leads to a commentary on the magical power of the *vertu* in Scève's poems that posits a tenuous connection to the ray-emitting-words theory of the ninth-century Arab scholar, Al-Kindi.

Completing the study is a perfunctory epilogue that aspires to explain why Scève never received a poetic *tombeau*. The disappointing answer: to his contemporaries, as to us, the Lyonnais never really died, but rather survives in the magical force of his verses. Back material supplements include a select bibliography and an *index nominum*.

This book affords a useful review of early modern anatomical theory and notions of *spiritus* (in all its senses). The Al-Kindi reflection aside, it likewise argues convincingly for the impact of those theories and concepts upon Scève's innovations to the Petrarchan tradition. As a close critical reading of the Lyonnais's poetry, however, the work disappoints. Among the 449 dizains of *Délie*, very few are ever scrutinized. Disappointing, too, is the neglect of the fifty *Délie* emblems in a study that supposes to underscore the place of "corps" in Scève's verses. A discussion about these sensually graphic enhancements would have strengthened the critic's arguments.