

Why a poem in space?

Hugues Marchal

The European Space Agency obeys deep motives by including in its program a poetic device. It reminds us that exploring and experimenting are not the prerogative of science and technology, and that culture and artistic creation form a crucial component of human life, even and perhaps especially in the moments when it seems most fragile, the most counted, the most disconcerted by an environment that forces her to reinvent herself. "Changing life", after all, is a slogan of Rimbaud, and a very old tradition has made poets the inventors of the myths and challenges that humanity has tried to achieve through science: Victor Hugo did not he not see, before Jules Verne, the man "now walker of the

Eduardo Kac is certainly one of the contemporary artists most constantly attached to linking poetry – that is to say, etymologically, *creation* – to the constantly renewed possibilities brought by technological and scientific evolution. His poetry of space (*space poetry*) prolongs, in another form, his experiences of writing by holograms or his recent *biopoems*, who use genetic engineering to blur the boundaries between text and life. The device he is proposing today poses to specialists in space as to the rest of the public a question that he has already submitted to researchers in optics or biology: what type of writing and what experience of writing can we conceive, not *about* these different fields, but within them, with their tools and their constraints?

One of the best proofs of the depth of this dialogue is the extreme economy of *Inner Telescope*. As early as 2007, Kac sketched out a program where the “authentic poetry of space” was defined by its ability to test syntax and material behaviors unachievable in terrestrial conditions. Here, two shapes are cut out of paper (not inscribed on it). Once launched in weightlessness and in a way that only the absence of gravity allows, they must be enough to compose three letters and a single word, *me*, whose conciseness is compensated by the changing aspects that its movement will give to the assembly. Accessing time, the text will also become a mobile sculpture, such that, depending on the angle and the moment, everyone will be able to read different characters in it or not, see in it an abstract volume or the representation of an observation instrument, a satellite, of a human figure.

This richness of interpretation is reinforced by the many echoes that this device, so simple in appearance, awakens within an extended culture. Another contemporary poet, the Frenchman Michel Deguy, noted it in 1969 in a text evoking the first lunar missions, humanity goes everywhere carrying its heritages of thought and "recidivating [se]s fictions" - the past of our thought helping us to apprehend the unprecedented. Here, forcing the attention towards the very matter of the characters

that make up the writing, in a framework freed from gravity, will thus be able to recall that two millennia ago, in his *De natura rerum*, a masterpiece of Latin poetry already linking physics and literature, Lucretius compared atoms to letters, elements sometimes pure and floating freely in space, sometimes combined to create textures with different properties.

As for the choice of the word *me*, there is nothing narcissistic about it. The term, which will refer as much to Kac as to Thomas Pesquet, the astronaut to whom this composition is delegated, is in fact a synthesis. That, first, of this quintessence of poetry that is the lyrical word. Because, if lyricism has been centered since romanticism on the very person of the poet, in Kac as in this tradition the subject who speaks is “porous”. His speech resonates with the surrounding nature and it is this intimacy of an almost ecological order that *Telescope interior* reproduced, making weightlessness an actor in the poem. However, the lyrical voice is also a word to be shared, voice of all or of no one, where everyone is invited to meet and observe themselves – a reflexive dimension that the title chosen by Kac underlines: to read another is to depart out of oneself to return to oneself, to see oneself as another to better observe oneself closely.

Finally, placing the *self* as far away as possible constitutes the most fundamental driving force of human material creation, if we accept that any object, whether technical or artistic, has the function of disseminating the traces and the sphere of action of its author beyond the site and the narrow moment when his presence is effective. The anthropologist Alfred Gell, to whom we owe this definition, developed it by observing that certain Polynesian peoples gauged the influence of boat sculptors according to the area where their boats spread. The poem by Eduardo Kac, who dreamed as early as 1986 of sending a poem-probe towards the Andromeda galaxy, in turn activates this imagination, by adapting it to stellar navigation. Also *theme* that he states also becomes through this means that of humanity, even of the whole Earth, in the sense that space exploration is precisely trying to extend far from our bases the signs of our existence and the tools of our activity. Seen in this way, *Inner Telescope* is therefore in no way foreign to the orbital station: it perhaps sums up its very motivation.

Hugues Marchal is professor of modern and contemporary literature at the University of Basel. His work focuses in particular on poetry and its relationship to science. He has notably published *La Poésie* (Flammarion, 2007) and edited the anthology *Muses and pterodactyls: the poetry of science from Chénier to Rimbaud* (Seuil, 2013).