

Language as Object: Gift-Giving and Dialogue in Scève and Pernette du Guillet

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In the poem which the editor of her 1545 *Rymes* classified as "Épigramme XXIV," Pernette du Guillet puts forward perhaps the most pertinent question that one might have asked of a male poet of her era, and specifically of her celebrated lover, Maurice Scève: whom does the male poet answer to—the woman who inspires his passion, or the abstraction of Love itself, an idea whose expression becomes in itself an end and a desire?

A qui est plus un Amant obligé
Ou à Amour, ou vrayement à sa Dame?
Car son service est par eulx redigé
Au ranc de ceulx qui ayment los, et fame.
A luy il doibt le cueur, à elle l'Ame:
Qui est autant comme à tous deux la vie:
L'un à l'honneur, l'autre à bien le convie:
Et toutesfois voicy un tresgrand point,
Lequel me rend ma pensée assouvie:
C'est que sans Dame Amour ne seroit point. (Épig. XXIV)

In this dichotomy the poet turns away from his lady to pursue fame and honor; her rival is the poet's image of himself. We might well read her parting shot, the last line—essentially a call to re-personalize the love scenario—as a good-natured reproach aimed at Scève and other poets of her era whose zeal for constructing a textual feminine ideal carries them well beyond the actual women readers who might come across their poems. At the same time, the poem's closing remark carries a note of concession: although she asserts the primacy of the "Dame" as individual in the love story, the woman speaker does not reject the male poet's quest for honor. She notes this division in his desire, and counters with an affirmation that marks her presence as independent voice—she identifies with the "Dame"—but she leaves the issue essentially unresolved.

On a different level, this poem brings up a broader, not unrelated, question, which has been the object of some amount of debate: in exactly

what terms can we discuss the relation between two *texts*—Pernette du Guillet's *Rymes* and Scève's poem cycle, the *Délie*? The *Rymes* in general indicate Scève as a primary reader, most overtly through plays on his name (Épig. XXXIV) and through anagrams (Épig. V). Many of du Guillet's *chansons* and epigrams have a specific, circumstantial pretext—they respond to accusations, explain a missed appointment, often ostensibly functioning as glosses to implied, extratextual events.¹ The tone is personal; the woman who speaks here, more often than not, speaks as a particular woman addressing a particular lover. If, on the other hand, the *Délie* can only rarely be construed as addressing Pernette du Guillet, her presence is nonetheless detectable: several of the *Délie*'s poems (e.g., D161, D162: "Seul avec moy, elle avec sa partie"—scenarios of the jealous bachelor envying his lover's husband) fit rather well into the known historical context of Scève's and du Guillet's affair. Scève's rewritten version of one of du Guillet's epigrams (Épig. XIII, D136) provides moreover specific evidence that their personal attachment overflowed into their work, through borrowing and emulation.

In her study of Scève, *L'Anagramme du désir*, Jacqueline Risset understands the Scève-Pernette du Guillet connection within the same theoretical perspective which she applies to Scève's text in general: i.e., even as the open grid of the *Délie*'s dream-work construction exemplifies the Lyon poets' non-authoritarian attitude towards imitation and situates this poem cycle in the context of an open circulation of texts among writers in Lyons (Risset 21), so too Pernette du Guillet's *Rymes* are to be understood as participating in a dialogue with the *Délie*, each text internally at the same time assigning priority (at the level of content) to the notions of reciprocity and fusion with the beloved other (36). Such a reading may well prove operable at the level on which the poet interacts with other poets and with the reading public, given the relatively free exchange of textual material among readers and writers, notably women, in Renaissance Lyons, and given the era's broad conception of authorship.

However, on the level of specific poems, Risset's study focuses rather on the (relatively few) *dizains* of the *Délie* which address a specific feminine other and/or lead to a first-person plural "nous," while in large part leaving aside the just as many poems which clearly partake more fully in the Petrarchan tradition, with its characteristic figuring of the mythic woman as an unapproachable, deified Other. In its heterogeneity, Scève's text is in fact even more slippery than Risset is willing to admit. More recent critics, among them Ann Rosalind Jones, have raised the objection that women poets such as Pernette du Guillet necessarily "write from a position outside convention altogether" (Jones 138), given that by adopt-

ing a male-centered discourse (e.g., Petrarchism or Neoplatonism) they implicitly contradict the passive role these discourses assign to woman.

Scève's and Pernette du Guillet's case is a particularly apt one for discussing this question. Each set of poems—although in varying degrees—is addressed to a specific implied reader (a lover), a specific empirical reader (i.e., Scève and du Guillet), and to a wider public. The challenge lies in pinning down the nature of this exchange, in articulating the logic which governs the various shifts between personal and public discourse.

In his *Essai sur le don* anthropologist Marcel Mauss describes the three obligations—giving, receiving and repaying—which bind together primitive societies and which in fact play a central role in the life of individuals in these societies, since, as Mauss found, the gift is itself considered an extension of the giver: "The pattern of symmetrical and reciprocal rights is not difficult to understand if we realize that it is first and foremost a pattern of spiritual bonds between things which are to some extent parts of persons, and persons and groups that behave in some measure as if they were things" (Mauss 11). In many such societies gift-objects are animate—they speak, have personalities and "are confounded with the spirits who made them" (43). This economy of giving is not limited however to objects of value but extends to immaterial gifts—services, courtesies, entertainment and rituals. Moreover, the system is rarely found to be a zero-sum game but perpetuates itself in an expanding spiral of obligation and repayment, as what is owed to the donor always surpasses the value of the gift received (63).

A much-commented manifestation of this social imperative to create debt is the *potlatch*—the public donation (or simply outright destruction) of personal wealth, in a ritualistic ceremony of self-assertion before one's peers and/or enemies, whose goal is the intimidation of a rival in order to gain an advantage, most often a greater stature in society. Each such challenge demands a response greater in magnitude; a lack of response indicates defeat. As in other forms of gift-giving, the very persona of individuals is at stake in the *potlatch*, and geographically separated tribes use a similar term for a member who proves unequal to the challenge—"he has lost face"—i.e., he has lost his public identity; we no longer recognize him (Mauss 38).

The gift carries the donor; it speaks for him; it represents him in the public circulation of similar objects. In Scève's *dizains* D347 and D349 it is the absent woman who is rendered present through the agency of a gift-object—a ring— which she has bestowed on the poet:

Heureux ioyau, tu as aultresfoys ceint
Le doigt sacré par si gente maniere,

Que celle main, de qui le pouoir saint
Ma liberté me detient prisonniere,
Se faignant ore estre large aulmosniere,
Te donne a moy, mais pour plus sien me rendre.
Car, comme puis en tournant comprendre,
Ta rondeur n'à aulcun commencement,
Ny fin aussi, qui me donne a entendre,
Que captif suis sans eslargissement. (D347) ↗

This object, addressed in the familiar "tu," leads him back metonymically to that female body whose absence is thereby to some extent covered over or filled in. The woman's physical presence is conjured up in D347 by a progression from the ring itself ("Heureux ioyau") to "le doigt sacré" to "celle main," and by a similar movement in D349 from "Anneau" to "main" to "sa chair."

Tu as, Anneau, tenu la main captiue,
Qui par le coeur me tient encor captif,
Touchant sa chair precieusement viue
Pour estre puis au mal medicatif,
Au mal, qui est par fois alternatif,
En froit, & chault meslez cruellement.
Dont te portant au doigt iournellement,
Pour medecine enclose en ton oblique,
Tu me seras perpetuellement
De sa foy chaste eternelle relique. (D349)

In this latter poem the lover's description of his passion as "alternatif, / En froit, & chault meslez cruellement" creates a structure of opposition which also evokes the contrast between the ring's cold metal and the warmth of the lady's finger. The resolution of the poet's crisis in both poems lies in somehow bridging this gap through the agency of the inanimate object itself.

In a (ring-like) circular construction not uncommon in the *Délie*, the poem, D349, after tracing the ring's contact with the woman's body, returns definitively to the ring itself ("De sa foy chaste eternelle relique"): by virtue of its previous juxtaposition with the absent other, the ring becomes a relic endowed with the power to replace the woman—a part whose curative power presupposes the absence or the death of the whole. This reductive strategy, present throughout the *Délie*, might be emblemized by the first line of D119—"Petit obiect esmeult grande puissance"; in this category we find other examples in the *Délie*: gloves (D169, D198), a

lute (D345), the lady's reflection in water or in a mirror (D235, D257), or her representation in a portrait (D297). In each case, much in accordance with Petrarchan convention, the intermediate object, most often an index of the absent woman, receives the affective charge that to all appearances has been displaced from her, its primary object.

Yet the poem—Scève's poem—is itself also an object, one which we trace back, as would the putative feminine reader of the *Délie*, to its point of origin, the poet himself. Critics such as Marcel Tetel have pointed out that the *Délie*'s emblems are intricately bound up in the poem cycle's specular economy of self-reflection.² Fifteen years before the *Délie*'s publication, Geoffroy Tory's *Champ fleury* glorifies the shapes of capital letters, finding in their geometry correspondences to the proportions of the human face and body. Scève's text of choice, the *dizain*, a ten by ten syllable block of language, functions as mirror and depository of the poet's own self-image, the face which he attempts to create on the page and which must be given away, presented to a reader, for objectification. The project of reconstituting through objects the absent woman thus becomes a trope for the poet's own efforts to formulate a written self: the poem, as language separated from its origin, from any anchoring signified, must serve as a substitute.

In this sense then it is not only Scève's ring poems but all of the cycle's *dizains* which, like Mallamé's "Don du poème," can be taken as objects, as gifts which in this case can be said to carry the giver along with them.³ In Scève's ring poems (D347 and D349) themselves, one primary characteristic which is particularly relevant to the question of the dialogue or (rather) exchange with Pernette du Guillet is Scève's use of paradox, in the best Petrarchan tradition. Both poems are built on circularities: in D347, giving reveals itself as taking, since by receiving the ring the poet loses his liberty; in D349 the woman is seen both as the cause and as the only cure for love-sickness. The circular form of the ring (D347, lines 8-9) of course provides the metaphor for the closed-economy nature of this exchange and the obligations it sets up, but within the *Délie* as a whole, the notion of circularity—the repetitive return to/of the same—also functions as a primary organizing principle. The *Délie* appears at first to follow a unifying narrative structure, on the model of Petrarch's *Rime*: the opening *dizain* recounts a fateful meeting with *Délie*, the moment of original visual union, and the rest of the volume's poems seem to spring from this seed. Yet, also not entirely unlike Petrarch, Scève continues to re-play the *innamoramento* scene throughout the *Délie*, but in numerous variations, in ways that make no clear reference to the initial poem, although each variation is still qualified as, and recognizable as, the formative shock—that precious first contact which provides a pretext for the entire rest of the

poem cycle. The effect of this repeated, imaginative mythification is to displace the first poem, to draw seriously into question its status as a primary, founding event, and to upset any governing narrative structure, as the lyrical aspects of the poem cycle tend to undo any direct story line.⁴

The text thus becomes more completely self-referential, drawing its authority from its own set of signifiers, while the otherness—the fictionalized woman's intervention—which ostensibly provided the impetus to the poet's self-objectification slips gradually into the realm of pretext. In other words, in order to compose an independent self-image, an object which must have currency while divorced from an original meaning, the poet writes over the (textual) history of a "past" exchange, effacing it, such that the poem cycle becomes oriented towards a specifically textual self-containment. Such a gesture reduces the potentially endless chain of giving and obligation towards another—the Other of the poet's story, the elusive *Délie*—to a circle, which is itself encompassed within the sameness of the poet's created universe, his text. In the two *dizains* mentioned—D347 and D349—it is the male speaker who puts on the woman's ring, not as a sign of a debt owed and to be paid to another, but as an appropriating gesture marking off the self's limits.

Pernette du Guillet's ring-poem (Épig. X), written in much the same tradition as Scève's, would perhaps resemble it more but for its woman speaker. By convention the Petrarchan woman accepts nothing from her lover except (perhaps) poems, certainly not a ring; such symbolic artifacts in this male-created myth travel only in the other direction. Thus in this poem the speaker addresses not an object but her lover, directly; the text ostensibly accompanies and partakes in the gift, both standing beside it as a gloss and forming an essential part of it.

Si tu ne veulx l'anneau tant estimer
Que d'un baiser il te soit racheptable,
Tu ne dois pas, au moins si peu l'aymer,
Qu'il ne te soit, non pour l'or acceptable,
Mais pour la main qui, pour plus rendre estable
Sa foy vers toy, te l'a voulu lyer
D'un Dyamant, où tu peulx desplier
Un cueur taillé en face pardurable,
Pour te monstrier, que ne doibs oublier,
Comme tu fais, la sienne amour durable. (Épig. X)

As a result, when Pernette follows in a somewhat similar way the same metonymic links as Scève—from ring to her own hand (line 5), back to the ring and then on to the male lover, the end result is a reversal of Scève's

self-reflexive withdrawal: the poem opens outward, in a direct appeal to the other, significantly passing beyond the ring-object itself as intermediary symbol.

In what we might interpret as a modified rendering of the *plainte* or conventional complaint of the spurned (male) lover, the epigram begins and ends with a reproach. Again, this structure creates a markedly different effect than that produced by Scève's poems, whose first and last lines provide images of stasis, closure and control, as if to mark off the poem's borders. In Pernette du Guillet's poem the question of control is more present, and perhaps more problematic. To a point the poem's structure inverts Scève's: here it is primarily the central lines which contain images of stability (the woman's certainty in her own faithfulness, her gesture of endowing the ring and diamond with this meaning), whereas at the margins of her text, at the beginning and end, at the points where she makes the transition from her internal state of assurance to the uncertain action of contact with her lover, this contact holds no guarantee of success. She offers the ring as sign, but acknowledges the sign's dependence on a shared system of meaning: it is the addressed lover who must "desplier"—unfold, interpret—the significance she assigns to the heart-shaped diamond. The "Si" which opens the poem marks all that follows as response to conflict, a conflict brought on by the lover's misreading the ring's exchange value. This doubt in the lover's constancy resurfaces in the final line: "Comme tu fais." In comparison, in terms of the progression of images which the speaker presents in each poem, Scève's describes a circle, starting with and returning to the object, the ring itself, which he retains. Pernette du Guillet's, on the other hand, is open-ended; she gives the ring away, and calls for a response.

Although the reasons for the development of this particular opposition between these two poems are in part circumstantial, a reading through the works of the two authors bears out consistencies (within each author's *œuvre*) in content, in style, and particularly in the implied attitude towards the reader. At the same time it is important to draw attention again to the particular context in which Pernette du Guillet's poems were composed and made public: Ann Rosalind Jones has rightfully noted that the strongly Neoplatonic character of Pernette's work represents perhaps less the poet's choice of idiom than her society's hesitation to accept any other representation of desire from a married woman (Jones, *The Currency of Eros* 89). Jones argues that Pernette's emulation of Scève can be considered in a similar light:

By naming a master, [a woman poet during the 1540s] could construct a literary self through her affiliation with his circle and citation of his

work. Presenting her poems as a series of responses to a famous man reflected favorably on the woman whose lyrics demonstrated her familiarity with his texts and testified to the social bond implied by her choice of him as addressee. In such a case, the woman writer not only recognizes the otherness of the man; she appropriates his difference—that is, his public reputation—for herself (Jones, *The Currency of Eros* 81).

In other words, to proclaim publicly her debt to Scève, to offer her work in some measure as an exchange in gratitude for his influence, is as central to Pernette du Guillet's gambit for authority as Scève's relative insularity is important to his own.

It becomes clearer that the use of the term "dialogue" to discuss the relationship between these two texts is problematic at best. The relative insularity of Scève's style (though in large part specific to him) finds its characteristic expression by drawing from Petrarchan and Neoplatonic traditions which situate the beloved Other beyond the poet's grasp; unable to attain this union, separated from the lasting ideal which Délie represents, he seeks permanence and identity through the text itself, establishing a self-image in the eyes of the public. The integrity of the poet's public self, his fame, is contingent upon his bypassing—writing over—his address to a specific other, as Petrarch's Laura is transformed into the laurel wreath with which the poet crowns the achievement of the poem itself. In Scève's time, the (1536) *Blasons anatomiques du corps féminin*—the *concours* organized by Marot to which Scève contributed five poems—add to this principle a new element: a group of male poets match their talents against each other in glorifying specific parts of female anatomy, various fetishized accoutrements (including the woman's ring) and abstract "feminine" qualities or virtues ("La Voix," "La Grâce"). Each part-object, thus abstracted—like the ring in Scève's *dizains*—from the woman herself, becomes a means and a pretext for the male poet's project of self-definition vis-à-vis his society.

This contingency between public recognition for the poet, and the effective removal from the scene of a personal woman addressee, suspends the notion of dialogue and redefines the exchange function of the poet's gesture to fit the context of one-upmanship, such that it forms the equivalent of a linguistic potlatch. In his discussion of Mauss, Georges Bataille picks up on Mauss's observation that the potlatch excludes all bargaining, and that the ideal potlatch, to be successful, allows no possible response. The ideal affirmation of a public persona—as it appears in Scève—relies on picturing the Other as silent interlocutor, and preventing this gift of the self/text from being caught up in an economy of exchange. The concept of

self as it appears in Scève's poems—insular, auto-referential—is formed on the characterization of *Délie*, the idealized woman reader, as the addressee who supplies the speaker with the means for suspending dialogue.

● NOTES

¹ Cf. for example the opening lines of *Épig.* XXXIII: "Or bien, puis qu'ainsi le voulez, / Soit fait, sans y contrevenir"; *Épig.* XIX: "Je te promis au soir, que pour ce jour / Je m'en irois à ton instance grande / Faire chés toy quelque peu de sejour: / Mais je ne puis"; or the enigmatic *Épig.* VII, "R, au dizain toute seule soubmise. . . ."

² "Les renvois à deux sens entre les emblèmes visuels et les neuvaines soulignent un corpus thématique relevant des notions de doute-angoisse, renouvellement, soumission-volonté, solitude, travail. Toute cette thématique se place sous le signe de la spécularité, c'est-à-dire que tôt ou tard le poète se regarde et se regarde surtout écrire" (Marcel Tetel, *Lectures Scéviennes: l'emblème et les mots* (Paris: Klincksieck, 1983) 9).

³ As in Scève's D205, an *étrennes* poem: "Si ne te puis pour estrenes donner / Chose, qui soit selon toy belle, & bonne, / Et que par fait on ne peult guerdonner / Vn bon vouloir, comme raison l'ordonne, / Au moins ce don ie le presente, & donne"

⁴ For a study of narrative structure in the *Délie*, see Doranne Fenoaltea, "*Si haulte Architecture*": *The Design of Scève's Délie* (Lexington: French Forum, 1982).

⁵ "Le sens du *potlatch* est l'effet glorieux des pertes—dont découlent la noblesse, l'honneur et le rang dans la hiérarchie. La gloire se donne à celui qui donne le plus. Le gain qui suit peut être à la longue calculé par l'avarice: [sa préoccupation était absente—ou du moins suspendue— quand l'attrait décida de la coutume. Même aujourd'hui l'idéal serait, le *potlatch* donné, qu'il soit impossible à rendre. A certaines destructions rituelles, on ne connaît pas de réponse]" (Georges Bataille, "La limite de l'utile" 203, brackets in original text).

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