

Bouvier on Claude-Phalippou (2015)

Claude-Phalippou, Laurence. *L'Imaginaire de la parole dans l'œuvre romanesque de Barbey d'Aurevilly*. Droz, 2015, pp. 356, ISBN 978-2-600-01800-5

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In her comprehensive monograph, Laurence Claude-Phalippou takes up one of the defining obsessions of Jules Barbey d'Aurevilly's prose works: the problem of speech, or *la parole*, understood as both *énoncé* and *énonciation*, and in particular as concerns the act of interlocution. Claude-Phalippou organizes her study around what she identifies as the three primary functions of speech in Barbey's work: "La Parole structure," "La Parole révèle," "La Parole assujettit." Though the study does not address the problem of speech acts or performativity per se, these three titles suggest the extent to which the author views speech as the principal agent in Barbey's narratives. Indeed, "de quelque côté qu'on appréhende ses récits," she remarks, "on constate en effet que cet univers littéraire tient tout entier dans la parole parce qu'elle le façonne, le commente, le dévoile, le subjugue et engage ainsi sa profondeur" (327).

The first section begins by examining the constitutive role of speech in the emergence, progression, and symbolic functions of Barbey's narratives, focusing in particular on the crucial status of storytellers and listeners in his work, as well as the complex relationship between the two. Beyond its narratological functions, though, speech also functions as a principal determinant of identity. According to Barbey's ontology, each character is structured by his or her relation to speech and the related domains of voice and language, and as the author asserts, it is precisely this constitutive role of speech that defines the singularity of Barbey's characters. In Barbey's fictional universe, speech is the privileged means of unveiling the real in all its depth and complexity. In this regard, Claude-Phalippou's second section examines the revelatory functions of what she calls "la tragédie du mensonge" and "la comédie de la rumeur," and then demonstrates how even the apparent failures of speech in Barbey's narratives (as in the case of deafness, madness, muteness, silence, and death) subversively reveal their underlying economies of desire. In the final section of her study titled "La Parole assujettit," Claude-Phalippou analyzes the extent to which Barbey invests the act of speaking with essential powers of subjection and domination, especially in situations of interlocution, and concerning both those who are speaking and those who are spoken to or about. An apt summary of her argument here would no doubt be her affirmation that "Là où on a parlé, nul n'est plus libre" (293). In her exploration of a diverse array of speaking situations, such as dialogues in the guise of monologues, naming, confessional/confidential speech, verbal violence, and aggression, group conversation, criminal speech, and prophetic speech (along with its relation to the fantastic in Barbey's work), the author demonstrates that the verbal force of subjection can ultimately be traced to the speaker's drive to impose his or her own, generally unconscious desires on others.

Ultimately, Claude-Phalippou views the problem of speech in Barbey's work as an affair of desire and its sinuous and tricky means of expression. As the author makes clear, "nul désir ne saurait en effet être définitivement tu dans l'œuvre aurevillienne" (258). In this regard, her analyses show persistent ingenuity in tracing the intertwined workings of speech and desire in Barbey's texts, and she extensively documents her readings with a considerable array of psychoanalytic and linguistic thinking on the problem of speech, as well as with much of the pertinent recent scholarship on Barbey. Still, her understanding of desire remains within a fairly conventional Freudian framework, and though she makes some gestures beyond Sigmund Freud, her readings of Barbey remain mostly on a thematic level and generally avoid the disruptive implications of the later rethinking of Freud's work. So one should not take her use of the word "imaginaire" in the Lacanian sense, nor expect to find any significant engagement with such potentially pertinent concepts as the play of the signifier, the materiality of speech, the "phonotext," the role of the body in relation to speech, or the broader problem of orality. Likewise, her discussion of the critical relation between speech and writing is mostly consigned to a footnote and represents an important missed opportunity. These reservations notwithstanding, Claude-Phalippou's study is an impressive piece of scholarship that formulates many perceptive and valuable critical insights despite its conceptual limitations. It should be of interest not only to Barbey specialists, but also to all those working on problems of speech, voice, and orality in literature.

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