

**BAYART: SPRING**

**PASCALLE MONNIER**

**TRANSLATED FROM THE FRENCH  
BY COLE SWENSEN**

**DP**

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## FOREWORD

The following pages are the first section of a four-section book-length poem based on both the conventions of the *chansons de geste* (particularly the *Chanson de Roland*, the oldest poem of France) and the life of the sixteenth-century knight, Bayard. Bayard, though an historical figure, has become a legendary one – and one of the things Monnier examines in this book is poetry’s transformative edge, the way it deftly curves history into myth – sliding one kind of truth into another.

And this is equally true with personal history – but what does that term really mean? Can history ever be impersonal? She pursues this question simultaneously with the question of storytelling itself—how much play is there in the ways in which a story can be told? – especially a story that has been told so many times. How can it live (active) rather than be told (passive)?

One way Monnier injects life into her version is by fracturing the time limits, by slipping in details from contemporary life, from allusions to the occupation of Vietnam to references to road signs she remembers from her childhood. This invitation to recognize parallels between the late medieval and the late twentieth century worlds implies that the reader is outside of both. And this “outsider” position subtly reinforces the fact that it’s a woman’s point of view on an historically male world.

For it is a man’s tale—an old-fashioned tale of gallantry and heroism, told through a postmodern eye, which views the violence much differently, casting the hero as a questionable category. The female characters oc-

cupying their traditional places—back home receiving letters from or the corpses of their men. The woman and woman's world is revealed through perspective, and is sometimes embodied in peripheral characters, elements normally perceived as mere background, such as the trees that play a central role all through the book. She also uses the now-famous series of unicorn tapestries in the Musée de Cluny as a principal character in the work, their vividness and their delicacy contrasting with their immobility, and suggesting the sense of entrapment that may have pervaded the woman's world.

However, the real twist that Monnier gives her story is in the language she uses to tell it. The story's structure, detail, perspective, pacing and phrasing alter it tremendously. Monnier's use of sound, in particular, threatens the narrative line. She is fascinated by sound, and in turn uses it in a fascinating—as in hypnotic—way. The reader is lulled away from the events of the story and pulled into a space in which sound creates an imminent field.

She uses repetition to a similar end, repeating words and phrases until they lose much of their referential power, stepping out from their service to the story per se and emerging as objects in their own right. Overall, Monnier uses language as much to dissolve the tale as to construct it, and these two operations, because they head in opposite directions, create a tension and a continual movement, so that the text has an undulating surface and follows a cyclical path. What remains is a state of active equilibrium.

--Cole Swensen

**BAYART: SPRING**

# 1

the different season as season follows season, the climate different as well,  
spring comes (not as brutal as it once was, back there, back then;  
back there, back then: a thing fled, another house, another land, less tender  
now only remembered by the few papers and photographs left)  
the sky another color, and other sounds, other heat,  
more rain, and a different color to the trees (greener but a lighter green)  
and different because the transition from winter to spring comes  
imperceptibly (the leaves not falling):  
and birds, more birds, more life (for instance, fireflies, but in another season)  
hunting dogs, horses, etc., more flowers and the sea nearby,  
the sea calm and grey and also pink after it snows or after certain kinds of clouds,  
the islands dark and low, almost black against the pink sea and the cotton clouds  
and the snow-filled air (all captured in watercolors  
in an herbal guide that has since fallen apart — the few remaining pages dog-eared or torn —  
like other watercolors in this book bound in blue)  
which is to say neither dull nor bright, a different blue, a darker one;  
of the house and garden every single thing: plant, tree, flower, lamp, scent, scene  
and the arrangement of the rooms and their furnishings  
(moving some, shifting others, sounds as familiar as those in an oddly accurate dream,  
unexpected and a bit off-kilter, though you couldn't quite say why

other: the suspension bridge on the left, down below the rocks, a small beach,  
along a river colored yellow or blue, the ships of the merchant marine  
(the other marines being simply marines, without benefit of adjective,  
and thus clearly superior)— oil tankers, ferries, cargo ships, carriers —,

signs posting the schedule of the shuttle between this bank and the other—  
the lines of pale blue sky and pale blue sea fusing where they meet,  
light grey buildings, the statue, white, and a street growing dimmer in the falling sun  
— so the stone goes black — in full sun, stone is white  
but under the arches, black — as black as stone stained with smoke  
from enormous fires and stained, too, with smoke escaping from the kitchen stoves

## 2

The first day:

the important thing: the pond                      the garden, flowers

as for the house, the important thing:

the size of the rooms and the number of rooms

and a house. The important thing: the park, yes but also: the factory, the workshops

the workers.

And in the garden: trees with cigarettes hanging down.

Later, we'll find the magnolias again and we'll know why.

From the factory (called the hangar) design tables and tall machines.

Later, it will all be destroyed but not only that.

Off to the side: offices, one always smelling of glue.

This office hasn't had time to get old.

And in this office, nothing much.

And in the other one, models (of machines, trucks, trains), plans.

The wall at the back, the walls around; walls surround the spot.





whose leaves are large and ugly and so,  
the sycamores are not elms,                      are different from elms.

And then: a bandstand in faux rock.

The faux rock: the limbs of a tree in cement, twisted  
intertwined, which make                      a bandstand.

The cement fakes the limbs of a tree,              the form, the feel, but not the color.

And all around: cement faking tree limbs  
(like cloth made to feign                      flowers)

By the sea: tamarisk, acacia, pine  
and mimosa (but in another season) if the sea is warm.

Two lindens loved like brothers.

As much, I think, as this apple, this chestnut,  
this magnolia, this oak, as much, it's true, as much.

Pines are tall trees





One smell is sort of like another smell. Sort of.  
Decaying leaves give off a smell a little like the smell of  
decaying leaves give off a smell like,  
leaves, a smell, a warmth, a soft, warm smell,  
and the leaves behind the rocks  
(behind the pond, behind the tree)  
and the other leaves, the ones that fall on the river,  
give off the same odor.

But they aren't the same leaves  
and it's not the same time,  
it's not the same garden, same house, though you thought:  
perhaps the house is the same, and the park, and it's the same place.

And if at times you thought that, or think  
you may, from time to time, have thought it, yet  
it's not the same place, not the same time  
though so close at first glance  
(the park, the trees, their names, their fruit and all the people about)  
and above all, the flowers so well placed.

The hardest part was leaving the house  
–hard too to leave behind the trees,  
which have since grown differently  
while you were away, have grown  
though you weren't there to watch;  
the hardest part was to not go back  
–though there were trees at the other house too,  
as well as paths, statues, ponds.

When you see the flowers, you see the trees  
and then you think of this house and then of the other house,  
and nothing happens. But you know all the trees  
(all the trees you see) look a little alike  
although all trees are not the same—in specific detail—  
and just as flowers (flower: zinnia, dahlia or rose)  
all look a little alike, and each one is close  
(close to the one you saw first),  
all trees look a little like the first one you saw.

Who cares if it's a cigarette tree  
(the one whose name you don't know, that you call a cigarette tree),



it all floats:

air, clouds, sound

trees

and then is simply clear

even the silence, utterly still

other than this, slow and precise,

and lighter still

that changes, less white,

the other branch—the touch of the flower—the color—more odor,

sounds, and changing light—

like this branch—

branch—shifts

scent, stone,

not the least obscure,

of this leaf

of this branch, of this light

lighter still,

the sounds that shift

the sounds shift like this

they slip.



### 3

*and my Sire my father just how much did that paternal love  
so required and I, forced to forget*  
I try to garner the favor, the pardon, the ardor of the father—  
having both here departed, this mansion,  
beyond description—bear no ill intention—nostalgic touch  
and so much so that here among the giant poplars I'm brought to tears  
and the mild breeze stifles me and so I sob (sobs or tears or cries)  
I remember, too, the tree he hid behind;  
*all here being taller, certain things seem clearly fragile, shameful)*  
*the fine deeds you frequently recount of the great men of an earlier age*  
*even some from this very house and I will be, if you please,*  
*of that estate that you and your forebears shared, which is to say to follow arms,*  
*it is in this world what I most desire*  
*and will in that do you no dishonor*  
BAYART

## 4

to my older brother (the one who wants nothing more than to fight bears)  
fell the job of keeping up the great house among its fields,  
the tower held in the Dauphin's name, the surrounding park and land,  
the orange hills and green and blue further on  
to protect the voiceless men, to hold the donjon

## 5

I find that I  
put him in the  
of a  
or  
so he'll learn to  
himself well and  
older will take up  
and thus of you I  
as far as I can  
each in his  
way to let me  
on his  
the best  
to best place

must  
house  
prince  
lord  
hold  
when  
arms  
ask  
ask  
own  
know  
behalf  
place  
him

## 6

I know they've gotten rare, long silence, long silence  
but from then on slept silently, my father, and the flowers on his body,  
and the house smelled of flowers and dampened earth,  
the dark room of flowers and dust  
(while others smelled of stone and cold and once the open door  
as in the old story of the stone that rolls  
—of the stone that closes, seals and finally rolls—  
in the shadows his face unmoved and the mouth shut, stitched, lips glued)  
and among the line of dark faces, leaning and smiling that followed in odd cortege;  
he gave me back the blue books, and then — can you believe it — almost said  
*from now on must and look upon you  
as a father would and forget all petty causes of shame  
against him, hope that you, too, would forget  
begged gestures of friendship made to endear him  
to give of the heart again as had his again been given  
get it?  
what nerve, the dog*  
BAYART

## 7

To the magnificent Lord Such-and-such, I the So-and-So-Present-Case as it is utterly known that I have naught to nourish nor clothe myself, and thus appeal to your piety—and to your grace which has been accorded me—the privilege to place myself in your power, as I have done: to know that in this way you must aid me and sustain me in the needs of living as well as in those of clothing to the degree that I can serve you and merit your care and as long as I live, I shall serve you and respect you as befits a free man and as long as I live, I shall not have the privilege of leaving your honor but, on the contrary, shall remain for the remainder of my life under your protection and your will, your power, etc.

BAYART

## 8

And they set out, he staying close behind his uncle to serve him  
who presented him and gave him to the duke as a servant

in April, Bayart became a page among seventeen pages  
the others, Savoyards, Piemontais, Swiss

he the only French, and given a nickname, Bayart  
in April, became page,

in April, Bayart left the house surrounded by the river and trees

born, on Sunday, among the high grasses and the scent of the river and that of berries warming in the sun among the lanes of catalpas and chestnuts and elms lining the paths, remembers the days he climbed the stairs bringing one foot up to meet the other, of his days as a child when the house was dark and now farther, Bayart still remembers, his younger sister and the smell of blood setting and mixing in the hair that fell down to her waist and of the lukewarm scent of the hounds returning from a fight (different from that other scent, entirely sad, the dusty smell of the tapestries that covered the walls and the favorite one, hanging on the first landing of the grand stair, depicting a forest sometimes blue, sometimes red, or white at times and people seated with, between them, floating in the flowered air, words written in letters of gold, like those in the painting where the virgin dips and makes reverence, head bent down, hands crossed on her breast, to an angel armed with wings in layers of yellow and red)

preceded by an escort and by the other pages—Bayart rides last, slowest, and youngest; Bayart recalls the least delicate smells, those that make him want to vomit, those that make him vomit, and, also, that make him a little sad, the doctor's breath (smells mixed, distilled, altered, of oil, peppers and garlic) called to his bed and who cured him one day of raging fever and ravaging pain in his right ear (the words forming, all around his mouth in the room's cold air, a light white fog infused with pearl green and pearl grey, different from the tapestry so living with the words formed in gold letters and the air charged with birds and flowers, different, too, from the tales that cast bad words as snakes and toads that leapt from the black gums and lavender lips of evil (step)mothers, while tender words were breathed by the pink lips, pursed and perfumed, of small orphans)



## 11

the fort loomed over the sea and above it all, a small crenellated tower mirrored in the verdigris water  
and seeing the fort he was reminded of a violent storm—all of it almost swept away,  
all without doubt lost forever in the wind and waves—  
a ship overturned, its mast plunging down and keel aimed up at the sky  
the drowned bodies, in their feigned and backward sleep, each balanced on the edge of its wave

## 12

lean on me to cry and we'll cry and pour out our tears  
and cry over these drowned bodies drifting past their own hair slicked back by the waves that make  
no lighter sound beneath the wind—a trick of wind—a ruffling caress that rocks and cradles the hair, the lids  
let's go to the end of the pier, stand in front of the fort one last time try to see  
and maybe we'll see them slowly passing these solemn bodies distended by water,  
their hair slicked back by waves,  
their clothing heavy and holding to the curves of their marble bodies  
our father our brothers drifting past like statues unleashed  
floating solemn and slow on the waves in the open sea before the fort  
and we'll watch it all from the end of the pier crying a little as you cry, lean on me