

On the Line: Notes from a Factory

À la ligne: Feuilles d'usine

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Strictly speaking, it is not a novel, despite being presented and sold as such by the publishing house. Rather, it is a collection of “notes from the factory”, as suggested by the subtitle of this 2019 publication, in which the author recounts his experience of temporary work in agri-food factories in Brittany (France). Nor is it a direct political denunciation of the harsh working conditions. Ponthus chooses not to write in a journalistic style, but instead presents his experience in the form of fragments of blank verse, blending literary work with factory work. Its political significance probably lies in this duality: it reveals a violent social and collective reality while also turning it into a literary work, thus avoiding the twin pitfalls of populism and miserabilism (see Grignon and Passeron).

Although frequently referenced, factory work is rarely represented in literature. Its monotonous and repetitive nature makes it unsuitable for novels and challenging to narrate. Nevertheless, Ponthus manages to convey the violence of this experience, particularly through the rhythm of his writing. He makes us feel the suffocating smells that permeate the clothes and bodies of factory and slaughterhouse workers, the physical pain, endless days and intense fatigue they endure. He conveys the physical violence imposed on the body by the demands of productivity and the pace at which workers must perform their tasks, as well as their immobility and confinement in a closed space. The repetitive nature of the work is reflected in the rhythm of the writing and the assonances and repetitions that dominate the text. This work on language is what keeps readers hooked into a book devoid of any real plot and what gives the text a unique tension and urgency, forming the basis for the numerous theatrical adaptations that highlight its rhythmic and expressive qualities. Similarly, the numbers lend a monstrous quality to the work accomplished:

I watch the prawns roll out onto a conveyor belt after cooking at a rate of three tonnes per hour.

I calculate at the same time.

That's one and a half tonnes every half hour.

That's seven hundred and fifty kilos every quarter of an hour.

That's two hundred and fifty kilos every five minutes.

Fifty kilos of prawns pass before my eyes every minute.

This gigantic scale raises questions about consumption – and its absurdity.

In *À la ligne*, Ponthus does not set out to reveal or denounce anything. There are very few references to the factory's hierarchy or the temporary employment agency. There are no reflections on the organisation of work in general or the prevalence of temporary work encouraged by neoliberalism. Although he mentions solidarity with other workers, it is sporadic and brief: temporary work does not allow for a sense of belonging to a class or even a community with a shared destiny. By bringing factory work to life, Ponthus's book also highlights the disappearance of the working

class and the organisations that empowered them to demand better working conditions and foster a sense of collective identity.

Although the book is centred on the author's experience of working in a factory, this is immediately reframed as a literary writing experience, as suggested by the title: "À la ligne" refers both to the reality of factory work and to the poet's return to the line in his short stanzas, punctuated by 66 chapters. Cultural, literary and musical references also run throughout the book, providing the worker with the means to endure the night shifts – and enabling readers to experience the book alongside the songs hummed by the worker. This shared culture connects the worker to a community outside the factory. Apollinaire, Dumas, Aragon, Rabelais and Thierry Metz are all companions who accompany the narrator through his arduous nights, filling the void and countering the stupor induced by the endless repetition of gestures. They prevent the mind from succumbing completely to negation. In this book, Ponthus, who died of cancer shortly after the publication of this text, questions the value of work, but also the redefinition of the values work embodies: the joy experienced in moments of brilliance; what is worthwhile; and time, which passes both too quickly and too slowly. He highlights the inhumanity of a system based on the exploitation of bodies and the extreme precariousness of workers. Although he rarely mentions hierarchical power relations, Ponthus uses extremely refined language (without ever becoming obscure) to describe the alienation of assembly line work, as well as the resistance offered by the power of language and the stubborn refusal to give up.

Reference

Grignon, Claude and Jean-Claude Passeron. *Le savant et le populaire : misérabilisme et populisme en sociologie et en littérature*. Paris : Seuil, 1989.

LANGUAGE: French / Français

CENSORSHIP STATUS: