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That stench of whelk

Dread, poetry and fish under capitalism

By **Hilary Davies**



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Sardine processing plant, Quiberon, Brittany | © JEAN-SEBASTIEN EVRARD/AFP via Getty Images

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ON THE LINE

Notes from a factory

Translated by Stephanie Smee

Joseph Ponthus

Drawns, king crabs, crayfish, whelks, lobster: if you're starting to salivate, this book will

Put a stop to that. For two and a half years, Joseph Ponthus worked as an “intérimaire” (an agency worker on a short-term contract) in a fish processing plant, then an abattoir, in Brittany. “Entering the factory / Of course I was ready for / ... The cold / The shifting of heavy loads /... The production line / The modern slavery”. Yet sorting cooked prawns is positively pleasant compared to shovelling whelks into vats “That stench of whelk / Of dead rat of sludge of piss and bad wine / Mixed / Macerated / Soaked / I don’t even notice it any more”. It gets worse in the abattoir, where the author finds it impossible to escape the taint of blood (appreciated by his dog when he comes home) or the fat, the shit, the body parts unexpectedly falling on him from the slaughterhouse floor above; where powerful hierarchies obtain between offal workers, skinners, branders and carcass loaders; where, despite the drudgery and horror, he knows he is working in “the Rolls Royce factory of the region” because a stint there may lead to a permanent job.

On the Line is a long prose poem, a ballad of at first strangely disparate elements. It is, in large part, an unrelenting account of what the industrialization of the food industry produces: monotony, exhaustion, a soul-altering deadening of affect in relation to oneself and the animals who suffer. More unexpected is the pervasive sense of dread: dread of the clock, of machinery breaking down (because that delays the production line), of the bosses; dread of more work, dread of no work.

Ponthus stands in a venerable line of critical witnesses to the structures of capitalism, one obvious example being Simone Weil. Her essay “Factory Work” recounts her experiences on a production line in the 1930s; the effects on the workers are identical to those Ponthus describes eighty years later, and one word sums them up: servitude. “The working man, though indispensable in the production process, is accounted as practically nothing in it ... things play the role of men, men the role of things.” The fact that, in Ponthus’s case, the machines and workers are interacting with sliced-up dead animals only underlines the point, as does the difficulty with temporary contracts, which create a permanent state of anxiety about whether he will get any money from anywhere at all.

Ponthus resembles Weil in other ways, too. Although she entered the factory by choice, out of solidarity, and he does so because he cannot get work in his area of qualification as teacher and social worker, neither can escape the fact that they are intellectuals, a word with particular socio-political connotations in French cultural life. In an interview with the former Communist newspaper *L’Humanité* in 2019, Ponthus freely acknowledged his debt to Marx, Lacan and Foucault. This is a man with a mission as well as an empty cupboard, even if he knows he’s only a “part-time anarchist”. The fact that two of the many prizes awarded the book were given by and for the general public demonstrates how successfully he managed to reconcile these ironies.

Ponthus is an outsider by virtue of his education, but he shows throughout a genuine love and respect for his colleagues on the line. He's a mate. Even when he deserts them to try and get a job back in his area of expertise, they wish him good luck with no trace of resentment, and welcome him back when, predictably, things don't work out. The unadorned, direct, demotic language, expertly rendered by the translator, Stephanie Smee, is also a tribute to the lives they have to lead.

Interwoven with the unsparing day-to-day grind is a thread of lament and celebration. A distant ancestor of the author is Pontus de Tyard, one of the Pléiade poets, and *On the Line* is sprinkled with references not only to Apollinaire, Ronsard, Aragon and Claudel, but also to the poets of the French people and the street - the chansonniers Charles Trenet, Barbara, Jacques Brel and Julien Clerc. One of the very few ways Ponthus's co-workers let their souls fly is by singing. And a staple of the chansonniers' subject-matter is love, often in the most unpromising of circumstances. What is Ponthus's other mission, aside from political radicalism? His love for his wife. Joseph Ponthus died of cancer in February 2021, at the age of forty-two, but the final section of the book brings all that he has endured and experienced under the umbrella of praise: "There are my dirty nails the stinking body I can no longer even smell and the shower I've not yet had // 'There is the love that carries me gently away' //... There is the fact there will never be / Any / Final full stop / On the line."

Hilary Davies is a co-translator of Yves Bonnefoy's Prose, 2020

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