



BIROn - Birkbeck Institutional Research Online

Kawakami, Akane (2022) Scatter and resist: Ferrier writing Fukushima. *Journal of Romance Studies* 22 (1), pp. 49-71. ISSN 1473-3536.

Downloaded from: <https://eprints.bbk.ac.uk/id/eprint/52551/>

Usage Guidelines:

Please refer to usage guidelines at <https://eprints.bbk.ac.uk/policies.html> or alternatively contact lib-eprints@bbk.ac.uk.

Scatter and Resist: Ferrier writing Fukushima

Michaël Ferrier is a French academic and writer based in Japan whose seven books, to date, have won numerous prestigious prizes.ⁱ He is also committed to introducing literary and artistic aspects of Japanese culture to a Francophone audience through collections of essays that he edits, as well as a website, devoted to Japanese art, literature and history, that he has created and maintains himself.ⁱⁱ His own writings on Japan have been called ‘post-japoniste’ⁱⁱⁱ, together with those of writers such as Gérard Macé, Philippe Forest and Jean-Philippe Toussaint. These are authors who all write in full knowledge of the stereotyping images of Japan that preceded their own attempts, and through their better-informed and historically aware works have fuelled a contemporary renewal of French interest in Japanese culture.

As a full-time member of the French literature teaching staff at Chuo University, Ferrier was in Tokyo on 11th March 2011 when the three disasters, now often referred to collectively as ‘Fukushima’ in the west, struck the Tohoku region in quick succession: the earthquake, registered at 9 on the Richter scale, the fourth highest in the world since modern measuring instruments began to keep records; the tsunami it unleashed, devastating the Tohoku coastal area and killing almost 18,500;^{iv} and the nuclear disaster with its appalling and still incalculable consequences, placed at level 7, the highest point on the scale. Ferrier travelled to the Tohoku region a few months afterwards, and upon his return published *Fukushima, Récit d'un désastre [Fukushima, Account of a Disaster]*, a first-person account of his own experiences, interviews with survivors, extracts from other disaster narratives and a highly critical assessment of the Japanese authorities’ response to the nuclear catastrophe.

He did not stop there, however. During the past ten years, Ferrier has spent extraordinary amounts of time and energy on memorializing the disaster through a varied and numerous series of writing and editing projects. His 2012 book was the first of these; he also wrote the scenario of Kenichi Watanabe's *Le Monde après Fukushima [The World after Fukushima]*, which came out in the same year.^v In 2013 and 2014, he published two essays, on the landscape of Fukushima and on the art that has been produced in response to the disaster.^{vi} *Art press*'s June 2015 edition contained Ferrier's 'Visualiser l'impossible : l'art de Fukushima' ['Visualizing the impossible; the art of Fukushima'], another piece on artists who have attempted to respond in their individual ways to the events of 11th March 2011. These pieces were followed in 2016 by *Penser avec Fukushima [Thinking with Fukushima]*, a collection of academic essays edited and prefaced by Ferrier; in the same year, he wrote the 'Fukushima' entry in the *Dictionnaire Sauvage Quignard*.^{vii} 2021 saw the publication, timed to coincide with the anniversary of 3.11, of *Dans l'Oeil du désastre: créer avec Fukushima [In the Eye of the Disaster: creating with Fukushima]*, a collection of writings, interviews and artworks by and with photographers, artists, filmmakers and dramatists, edited and prefaced by Ferrier who also took part in most of the interviews.

This enormously prolific effort has resulted in the significant dissemination in French^{viii} of important information and awareness-raising.^{ix} He is far from being a lone voice, of course, as Francophone writers such as Philippe Forest, Eric Faye, Philippe Nibelle and Nadine and Thierry Ribault have all written eloquently and movingly about various aspects of Fukushima in the wake of the disaster.^x However, Ferrier's oeuvre is unique in its sheer variety and volume; it has also been accompanied throughout by a sustained meditation on how to write about such a catastrophe, what genres might be the most appropriate, and how different individuals have responded to the need to witness. In this article I will explore the different ways Ferrier finds to write about 'Fukushima', mainly in the 2012 *Fukushima, Récit*

d'un désastre, but also with reference to his other essays and prefaces. I will analyse the stylistic and generic hybridity which results from Ferrier responding generously to the demands of the reality he seeks to represent; in *Fukushima*, his writing style adopts what I will call an 'aesthetic of scatteredness' which is based on a non-human model of resistance and survival that he encounters on his travels. And this aesthetic also aptly describes, as I will show, the collective identity and impact of Ferrier's writings about the events of 3.11.

In the introduction to *Penser avec Fukushima*, the multi-authored collection of essays on Fukushima published in 2016, Ferrier considers the question of whether or not 'Fukushima' is an appropriate appellation for the triple disaster of 11th March 2011. Quoting the sociologist Mori Chikako, he points out that the disaster has come to be known as 'Fukushima' all over the world except for Japan, where it is referred to as '3.11' – not read 'san juu-chi', which would mean 'three-eleven', but 'san ichi ichi', 'three one one'. Mori discusses how, in contrast with '9.11', calling the disaster 'Fukushima' has the exoticizing effect of placing the disaster 'elsewhere' for most of the world.^{xi} Ferrier's essay goes on to work through the implications of choosing to describe the event as an 'accident' as opposed to a 'catastrophe', as well as how neologisms and subtle alterations to the meanings of everyday words have colluded to minimize and distance the impact of the disaster in the minds of readers and listeners. One of his examples is the choice of the term 'fuite d'eau' ['leak'], reminiscent of minor domestic mishaps, but used notwithstanding in an article in *Le Monde* to describe the millions of tons of radioactive water escaping from the reactors.^{xii} Ferrier's introduction ends with the importance of 'penser avec Fukushima' [thinking *with* Fukushima], rather than 'après' [after]; the choice of the latter preposition would dismiss the event into the past and lead readers to ignore the fact that Japan and the whole world will, at least in some form, be living with the effects of the disaster for many years to come. The

essay concludes that it is essential, in order to maintain a mental and philosophical awareness of the event, to ‘nous encourager à la déviance, à la déviation ou à la désobéissance [...] pour que Fukushima ne soit pas cet immense gâchis auquel nous assistons aujourd’hui, mais une formidable invitation, individuelle et collective, à la recherche et à l’invention’ [‘to encourage us to deviance, deviation or disobedience (...) so that Fukushima is not the immense waste that we are witness to today, but a formidable invitation, individual and collective, to research and to invent’].^{xiii}

Although this introduction to *Penser avec Fukushima* postdates *Fukushima, Récit d’un désastre*, Ferrier certainly followed his own, as yet unwritten advice when composing the earlier work. *Fukushima, Récit d’un désastre* embodies deviance in its generic hybridity; its three parts, of unequal length, are made up of different genres as well as being hybrid within themselves. There are also frequent if brief metanarrative asides about how best to represent what the narrator – who appears to be the author, ‘Michaël’^{xiv} – sees and hears, specifically within the context of disaster writing:^{xv} ‘que peut-on écrire devant [...] une catastrophe hors norme?’ [‘What can you write when faced with (...) a non-standard catastrophe?’] (Ferrier 2012: 166)

The sections are chronologically ordered, taking us from the day of the earthquake, 11th March 2011, to roughly eight months later, when the narrative is completed. In an interview with *Ballast*, Ferrier says he wrote the book in exactly eight months, starting on 11th March and sending the manuscript to Gallimard on 11th November of the same year. It is also in this interview that he discusses how his choice of structuring the book into three sections might be viewed:

Ici, j’ai choisi une division très simple, en trois parties. Ces trois parties correspondent bien entendu aux trois phases de la catastrophe : « *Le Manche de l’éventail* » (le séisme), « *Récits sauvés des eaux* » (le tsunami), « *La demi-vie, mode d’emploi* » (la catastrophe nucléaire). Mais elles peuvent tout aussi bien s’entendre comme les trois actes d’une tragédie ou les trois

vers d'un haïku, chacun mettant l'accent sur un des aspects du désastre et correspondant à un élément naturel : terre (qui tremble), mer (qui déferle), air (qui circule, propageant la contamination radioactive).

[Here, I chose a very simple division, into three parts. These three parts correspond, of course, to the three phases of the catastrophe: 'The handle of the fan' (the earthquake), 'stories saved from the waters' (the tsunami), 'half-life, a user's manual' (the nuclear catastrophe). But they can just as well be understood as the three acts of a tragedy or the three verses of a haiku, with each one emphasizing one of the aspects of the disaster and corresponding to an element of nature: the earth (which quakes), the sea (which surges up) and the air (which circulates, spreading the radioactive contamination)].^{xvi}

The sections, be they acts in a tragedy or representative of three elements of nature, are very different from each other. The first, 'Le manche de l'éventail', starts on 11th March 2011– in the very hour, in fact, when the narrator's apartment begins to tremble – and consists of what might be called a phenomenological representation. Aurélie Briquet's excellent article on this work describes it as 'une véritable phénoménologie du tremblement de terre [...], dans une écriture qui engage tous les sens'.^{xvii} It is a detailed and personal description of the experience of living through an earthquake, in a style which reflects and at times mimics the content, both of the periods when the earth is moving and those of apprehensive waiting. The earthquake starts with a noise like that of insects, but grows into louder sounds and of course movement, random yet somehow seeming to work together, moving through the house in a gradual crescendo:

Maintenant, c'est une foule de bruits qui arrivent, qui trépignent et s'entrechoquent. Des bruits mats, des bruits clinquants, des bruits sourds ou aveugles, des bruits qui se lèvent et d'autres qui vont rampant. [...] Toute une palette de bruits comme je n'en ai jamais entendu, un opéra nouveau genre, la cavalcade des sons... Dans la cuisine, les tiroirs s'ouvrent les uns après les autres, du bas vers le haut, déversant sur le sol un orchestre de fourchettes et de baguettes, de couteaux et de petites cuillers. Les verres à pied font des claquettes, les assiettes des castagnettes.

[Now, a crowd of noises arrives, jumping up and down and clattering. Dull noises, clinking noises, deaf and blind noises, noises that rise up and others that crawl along (...) A whole palette of noises of a kind I have never heard, a new style of opera, a stampede of sounds... In the kitchen the drawers open one after the other, from the bottom to the top, pouring out

onto the floor an orchestra of forks and chopsticks, knives and teaspoons. The stemmed glasses tap dance, the plates play the castanets.] (Ferrier 2012: 27)

Ferrier's syntax and diction reproduce the actual sounds and movements which make the invisible quake manifest, multiplying the verbs, the clauses, and the rhymes; his words record the non-human event as much as his human reactions to it. Some of the sounds reflect the earthquake precisely by being described as movements: 'des bruits qui se lèvent et d'autres qui vont rampant'. The metaphors of the 'opéra nouveau genre' and 'un orchestre' give a unity to the random collection of noises, although there is of course already a unity of place, the kitchen, reinforced by the rhyming names of the objects that belong there: 'fourchettes et [de] baguettes [...] les verres à pied font des claquettes, les assiettes des castagnettes'.

As the sounds thus come together they seem to form a living entity, a writhing, roiling creature which reminds the narrator that Japanese culture has traditionally imagined earthquakes as catfish:

Le vacarme est immense. Rien de nécessaire ne semble pouvoir grouper ces sons, les assembler ou les réduire au chiffre d'un événement comptable. Les vibrations saturent chaque point de l'espace et le rendent incompréhensible. Oscillation, éparpillement. Tout se ramifie et se désagrège. On dirait une bête qui rampe, un serpent de sons, la queue vivante d'un dragon. Je comprends tout d'un coup pourquoi les Japonais représentent le tremblement de terre sous la forme d'un poisson-chat, mi-félin, mi-mollusque. Quelque chose comme un corps agile, somptueux, caverneux, qui se défait et se reforme quasi instantanément.

[The din is immense. Nothing necessary seems to group these sounds together, to assemble them or reduce them to the level of a calculable event. The vibrations saturate every point of the available space and make them incomprehensible. Swinging, scattering. Everything dividing up and disintegrating. It's like a crawling beast, a sound-snake, a live dragon's tail. I suddenly understand why the Japanese represent earthquakes as catfish, half-feline, half-mollusc. It's like an agile creature, sumptuous, cavernous, which deconstructs and reconstitutes itself from moment to moment.] (Ferrier 2012: 29)

The metaphor of the fish, like the earthquake being made visible and audible through its effect on the household objects, is slowly *made real* through the description of the movements trembling through the house. Trying to make sense of the random and incomprehensible vibrations, the narrator imagines a series of motivated movements, ‘une bête qui rampe, un serpent de sons, la queue vivante d’un dragon’. And these movements gradually add up to the catfish, the entity that he had only known of as a metaphor, but which now embodies all aspects of the terrifying experience he is encountering in the flesh. The passage shows a rare instance of a metaphor coming to life through an empirical rendition of the phenomenon which originally gave birth to it.

The experiential and phenomenological remain centre stage as the earthquake ends, the Tokyoites take stock of the damage, begin to find out about the horrors that have befallen Tohoku, and learn to live with the incessant aftershocks. The phenomenological perspective extends to the whole of the population of Tokyo, as the earthquake has made everyone newly conscious of the real, physical nature of their bodies: ‘on se retrouve seul, les sens aiguisés, dans un univers multiforme de sons et d’objets, d’odeurs, de goûts et de corps, tous soudain retrouvés dans l’immédiateté du réel, sa précision absolue’ [‘you suddenly find yourself alone, your senses sharpened, in a multiform universe of sounds and objects, smells, tastes and bodies, all suddenly there in the immediacy of the real, its absolute precision’] (Ferrier 2012: 63-64). The narrator’s body develops a new, almost animal ability to evaluate the aftershocks, which are almost incessant for several weeks afterwards, and their degree of danger:

C’est un savoir de grotte, de caverne, toute une érudition archaïque qui remonte par les veines, les fibres, les terminaisons nerveuses. Je n’ai jamais mieux ressenti tout ce qui nous rattache aux plantes, aux fleurs, au biologique comme au végétal, au vivant.

[It’s a knowledge that comes from the time of the caves, the grottoes, a whole, archaic erudition that rises up through your veins, your fibres, your nerve ends. I have never felt more

clearly everything that connects us to plants and flowers, to animals and vegetables, to life.] (Ferrier 2012: 69).

As his perspective on his day-to-day existence shifts away from the anthropocentric norm,^{xviii} following the shock of the earthquake, and his body becomes an instrument, a sensor which registers and reacts automatically to the ‘prosodie frissonnante’ [shuddering prosody] (Ferrier 2012: 61) of the quaking earth, his writing, too, changes. His style responds to the daily barrage of aftershocks by inclining to short paragraphs capturing scattered impressions, brief quotations from a variety of writers, and a typography which mirrors the narrator’s continually jolting mind (and body):

La vie s’arrête et reprend en permanence, on vit le monde en discontinu. Étrangement, les mots à trait d’union se mettent à fulminer sous mon stylo, ma prose se charge de tirets et d’incises comme un curieux équivalent typographique de la saccade des jours : on est toujours sur le qui-vive, on oscille entre le remue-ménage, le tohu-bohu et le sauve-qui-peut.

[Life stops and starts on a permanent basis, you live in a discontinuous world. Strangely, hyphenated words start to fulminate under my pen, my prose starts collecting dashes and clauses like a curious typographical equivalent of the staccato rhythm of the days; you’re always on the look-out, you swing between the topsy-turviness, the hurly-burly and the free-for-all.] (Ferrier 2012: 73-4)

It is as if both his body and his prose adopt an attitude of scatteredness, mirroring the reality of the aftershocks, in order to resist the earthquake and its (after)effects: instinctively, and against the traditional human view that continuity is preferable to discontinuity, his writing hand – like his body – adapts to the continually shaking earth and begins to mimic its rhythms. This body-based knowledge of the earthquake is also a salutary counterpoint to the images that have completely taken over the representation, especially abroad, of the disaster, ‘un véritable tsunami médiatique, hypnotique, qui n’explique rien, qui submerge et engloutit lui aussi’ [‘a veritable media tsunami, hypnotic, which explains nothing, which also submerges and drowns you’]. (Ferrier 2012: 44)

The historical and literary context of Japanese writings about earthquakes – Japanese literature has chronicled its quake-ridden past throughout its long history – helps to situate both the narrator and his writing within a well-established lineage. The 9th-century chronicles entitled *Nihon sandai jitsuroku*, for instance, offer him an example of how writing itself can act as a seismographic instrument, a recording device:

Le huit juillet 868 : « La terre trembla, faisant crouler, ça et là, des maisons-clôtures à l'extérieur et à l'intérieur de l'enceinte du palais. »

Le neuf. *Nawi-furi-ki*. « La terre trembla. »

Le douze. *Nawi-furi-ki*. « La terre trembla. »

Le treize. *Nawi-furi-ki*. « La terre trembla. »

[8th July 868: the earth trembled, causing fenced-in houses here and there to crumble, inside and outside the palace grounds.

9th. *Nawi-furi-ki*. 'The earth trembled.'

12th. *Nawi-furi-ki*. 'The earth trembled.'

13th. *Nawi-furi-ki*. 'The earth trembled.']

(Ferrier 2012: 69)

These records – essentially, a simple list – closely resemble the lists that the narrator himself has been making of the aftershocks and their magnitudes on the Richter scale (Ferrier 2012: 64). The scatteredness of Ferrier's prose style makes it easy for it to incorporate other writers and writings; the 9th-century chronicles as well as Claudel's 'À travers les villes en flammes', an account of the Great Kanto earthquake of 1923 when Claudel was the French ambassador in Japan (Claudel 1952). These writings about earthquakes from earlier periods, some very ancient indeed, give both historical and literary context to an experience which, thanks to its immediacy and intensity, would otherwise be completely immersive and all-consuming.

This section ends on a meditation of sorts, on the literal and metaphorical significance of ‘ôgi no kaname’; the pivot of a fan, the still point around which everything opens and closes, and without which the whole structure would cease to function. The ‘ôgi no kaname’ plays a crucial (pivotal) part in one of the classic scenes of Japanese history and literature, immortalized in the pages of *Heike Monogatari (The Tale of the Heike)*.^{xix} The Heike and Genji clans are facing each other one still evening on the seafront, the Heike side on ships and the Genji on the shore. At the start of what will become the battle of Yashima, the Heike, in their arrogance, challenge the Genji archers to pierce the pivot of a beautiful fan on which a golden sun is depicted on a crimson background, attached to the end of a long stick held up by a lady-in-waiting on one of their ships. A young archer takes up the challenge:

Une prière du fond du cœur, et la flèche part. Elle touche en plein cœur de la cible et brise l'éventail à un pouce du rivet. *Ôgi no kaname*... Le manche de l'éventail se brise et le beau soleil d'or sur fond rouge chute dans les flots.

[A prayer from the bottom of the heart, and the arrow shoots forth. It hits the absolute centre of the target and pierces the fan an inch from the rivet. *Ôgi no kaname*... The handle of the fan breaks and the beautiful golden sun on the red background falls into the waves.] (Ferrier 2012: 90)

The battle is lost before it begins by the destruction of the fan, and the Heike side capitulate several days later, ceding the control of the Imperial Court and therefore of Japan to the Genji dynasty. ‘Ôgi no kaname’ is a term often used in Japanese to designate people or positions which hold together a situation, enterprise or community, and Ferrier suggests – in the appalling context of the three disasters – that there are some such people, many, in fact, who will be essential to their communities and to Japan overall in the immediate future. One of them is Aki, a personal friend who has demonstrated an unprecedented resolve in recent days (Ferrier 2012: 86); others, we suspect, we will meet in Fukushima and its environs in the pages to come. Their description as, essentially, part of an inanimate object – albeit a crucial part – is another instance of the non-human perspective that is one of this narrative’s key

features. In debates within the discipline of the Environmental Humanities, the ‘new materialists’ have called for the abolition of the distinction between the animate and inanimate, in order to view the world as being made up of systems that involve both.^{xx} In such a ‘society’, ‘ôgi no kaname’ is not so much part of an object as a function that comes to be fulfilled by both animate and inanimate elements of the whole.

The second section, ‘Récits sauvés des eaux’, starts with an interlude describing the narrator’s brief sojourn in Kyoto with his girlfriend, Jun; they decide, like many in Tokyo, to spend some time recuperating in the ancient capital untouched by the earthquake. The evocation of Kyoto is poetic, starting with a Verlainian quasi-alexandrine: ‘À Kyoto, tout redevient forme et mélodie’ [‘In Kyoto, everything turns back into form and melody’] (Ferrier 2012: 97). But the calm and harmony of this city, ‘bâtie sur le modèle des anciennes capitales chinoises’ [‘built on the model of ancient Chinese capital cities’], is not to be enjoyed for long in the circumstances, when ‘pendant ce temps, plus au nord, les gens meurent’ [‘during that time, further north, people are dying’] (Ferrier 2012: 103). Jun and the narrator return to Tokyo to prepare for a journey to the north; they load a camper van with provisions and drive up towards Tohoku. From this point onwards, this section becomes a witness narrative, consisting of the narrator’s own impressions interspersed with the stories he and Jun hear from the survivors, their ‘récits sauvés des eaux’ about those people and things that were not saved. The narrator retains his phenomenological perspective, describing his experience of the things that cannot be photographed, for instance the appalling stench of the mud (Ferrier 2012: 159-60), the strangely perpetual sound of the wind that encounters no resistance in the devastated landscape (Ferrier 2012: 122), and the terrifying view of the void – in some places there is simply nothing to be seen, nothing for the eye to rest on, no colours apart from a uniform brown – that assails the human being accustomed to views that make

sense (Ferrier 2012: 119). The perspective shifts constantly as it moves from the narrator's to those of the survivors and the rescue teams, who are often quoted although mostly remain anonymous.

There is also an important metanarrative aside in this section, although contained within and alibied by the narrator's actual itinerary, in which he ponders whether or not it is possible to write about 'une beauté – ou une catastrophe – hors norme' ['a beauty – or a catastrophe – that is non-standard'] (Ferrier 2012: 166). The thoughts come to him as he and Jun approach Matsushima, one of the three most celebrated views of Japan, known since the start of the Edo period as 'Nihon sankei'. The seventeenth-century haiku poet Matsuo Basho was allegedly dumbstruck, albeit temporarily, by the outstanding beauty of Matsushima during the journey that would result in his masterpiece, *The Narrow Road to the Deep North*. The famous view of Matsushima is made up of two hundred and sixty-odd small islands (shima), covered by pine trees (matsu) and scattered all over the bay; the narrator is terrified of seeing what havoc the tsunami might have wreaked on them. When he gets there, however, he discovers that the little islands are all still there, more or less intact. What is more they have protected the bay, and the mainland behind them, from the worst of the tsunami: 'elles ont pour ainsi dire découpé le tsunami en tranches en l'empêchant de frapper frontalement' [they have cut up, so to speak, the tsunami into pieces and stopped it from crashing head on into the mainland'] (Ferrier 2012: 167). This marvellous natural solution to the tsunami gives the narrator his own solution to his writer's dilemma:

Ainsi, ce que n'ont pas pu accomplir les brise-lames ni les murs, les digues et les enceintes, [...] une flottille de petites îles dispersées a réussi à le faire par la seule finesse de son tracé et la bénédiction de ses rivages dentelés.

Du coup, j'ai la réponse à ma question. Écrire donc, par îlots ou par estuaires, par petites notes déferlantes, pointues, blanches ou noires, tout à la fois sauvages et soignées... Ah, Matsushima !

[Thus, what breakwaters, walls, dykes and surrounding walls could not do, a flotilla of scattered little islands succeeded in doing, using just the fineness of its line and the blessing of its jagged coasts.

Suddenly, I have the answer to my question. I will write, then, in the style of islands or estuaries, in little unfurling notes, pointed, white or black, all of them both wild and immaculate... Ah, Matsushima!] (Ferrier 2012: 167-8)

This is the moment in which the principle of scatteredness, a paradoxical but effective mode of resistance both in life and writing and one which Ferrier has been adopting throughout his text, is vindicated by a natural phenomenon.

The discovery that Matsushima has thus escaped destruction is one of the few joyous instances in what is, as might be expected, a section filled with tragic stories, tales of villages that have been completely destroyed such as Kesenuma and Rikuzentakata, split-second decisions which led to the difference between life and death, survivors who stood for days on their roofs in the snow and rain, waiting to be rescued, and the state of the villages closest to the nuclear reactors which have become ghost towns, deserted, except for the animals abandoned by their erstwhile owners.^{xxi} There are also, however, some life-affirming encounters; with Rieko, a young woman who is collecting and cleaning photographs retrieved from the mountains of debris, a professional who normally works at the Tokyo Metropolitan Library but who has pitched up to help (Ferrier 2012: 209-11); an old man who has lost his house and his possessions but not the energy and good humour to discuss Hokusai, Hiroshige, Van Gogh and Cézanne with the narrator in the middle of a devastated cityscape (Ferrier 2012: 212-13); news that an ancient plum tree in Yamada-machi in Iwate prefecture, that was hit by the tsunami but survived, has flowered as it has done for the past three hundred years (Ferrier 2012: 178).

Having got as far north as they are allowed, to the edge of the contaminated and prohibited zone, Jun and the narrator start back towards Tokyo, and when they pass through

Hiraizumi the narrator is reminded of the famous ‘natsukusa’ haiku composed there by Basho which, although mistakenly read by some as an elegiac poem, actually celebrates the eternal rebirth of nature and of life. Thinking again about the photo-collecting librarian and the ancient art-lover, the narrator realizes that their acts are inscriptions, like Basho’s, imposing their ways of making sense of the madness onto the landscape:

Dans cette géographie égarée, au milieu de ce temps bouleversé et des vies emportées, chacun inscrit à sa manière une syntaxe patiente et décalée, la sienne – et cette inscription prend pour chacun d’entre nous une importance décisive. Dans chacun de leurs gestes, la vie transparait de façon mystérieuse et émouvante.

[In this lost geography, in this time of chaos and scattered lives, everyone inscribes in his or her own way a patient and staggered syntax, his or her own – and this inscription takes on a decisive importance for each one of us. In each of their gestures, life shines through in a mysterious and moving way.] (Ferrier 2012: 218)

The third section, which starts with the narrator’s return to Tokyo, is entitled ‘La demi-vie, mode d’emploi’.^{xxiii} As the first section dealt with the earthquake and the second with the devastation caused by the tsunami, this section focuses on the nuclear disaster. Characterized more by irony than anger, it describes in detail the ways in which the Japanese government and TEPCO, the Tokyo Electric Power Company, collude to give out excessive amounts of information, impossible to understand and evaluate:

Mais le plus sûr moyen d’escamoter l’information n’est pas de la taire : c’est de la rendre publique en même temps qu’un millier d’autres. Dans la pluie désordonnée des bulletins et des communiqués, au milieu d’un jargon technique jamais explicité, les plus savants se perdent et les plus patients renoncent. [...] la vérité, c’est qu’ils ne savent rien.

[The best way to make information disappear is not to silence it: it is to make it public at the same time as a million other facts. In the messy downpour of new bulletins and press releases, surrounded by a never-explained technical jargon, even the most knowledgeable lose their way and the most patient give up. (...) the truth is that they know nothing.] (Ferrier 2012: 237)

Ferrier ferrets out individuals who are prepared to talk to him as long as they can remain anonymous, and interviews someone who was working in one of the reactors at the time, as well as a ‘Mr K’ who worked as a ‘liquidator’ in Fukushima. The accounts are horrific, ring true, and spell out the same, depressing truth that the authorities – the government – and the specialists – TEPCO – have failed to come up with any solutions to the state of affairs in the nuclear reactors and the sea immediately beyond the coastline, in the air above the reactors and the soil surrounding the area. In the meantime the ‘Fukushima refugees’ are ostracised, particularly children who have had to move home and school; blatant disinformation is issuing from certain quarters; the population is fearful without being fully cognizant of what exactly needs to be feared, reduced to excessive hand-washing, avoiding the rain, giving up shaving and eschewing vegetables from the north on their visits to the supermarket.

All of this results in an attenuated form of everyday existence for those who are lucky enough not to be from Fukushima or its environs but are nevertheless affected by the fallout, a kind of life that Ferrier dubs ‘la demi-vie’. He is of course aware that this is the scientific term used to describe the length of time it takes for a given amount of a radioactive substance to decompose by half, but he has decided – perhaps reacting against the Newspeak employed by official announcements or even broadsheet newspapers that he would write about in the preface to *Penser avec Fukushima*, four years later^{xxiii} – to claim the term for his own use. In Ferrier’s usage, ‘la demi-vie’ is the new kind of life that the Japanese have become forced to lead, in which the abnormal becomes normalized, TEPCO scandals are ignored, half-measures (such as the removal of the topsoil in contaminated areas) are applauded and people are scared of the rain and of salads:

L’eau, le vent, les feuilles.

L’herbe, les champignons, les baies.

Se rouler dans l’herbe.

Sentir la pluie sur son visage, au petit matin – odeur de vin et d’algue – dans une rue de Tokyo.

Voici quelques échantillons de ce qui, petit à petit, nous devient de jour en jour un peu plus interdit.

[The water, the wind, the leaves.

The grass, mushrooms, bays.

Rolling around in the grass.

Feeling the rain on your face, in the early hours – the smell of wine and seaweed – in a Tokyo street.

These are a few samples of what, little by little, is becoming denied to us, day by day.] (Ferrier 2012: 289)

This evocation of the ‘demi-vie’ is almost a haiku: the first three lines have a syllabic count of 5/7/5, if the final ‘e’ of ‘l’herbe’ is not pronounced, and the fourth line can also be broken down into lines of roughly the requisite lengths (8/5/5/7). The elegiac tone, the reference to grass and the haiku form itself are reminiscent of the earlier discussion of the haiku Basho composed in Hiraizumi; perhaps the narrator is suggesting that this too will pass – in future generations, the ‘demi-vie’ of 2011 will be remembered, but as a thing of the past – although the scientific meaning of a ‘demi-vie’, hovering still in the background, suggests that such a future is a very long way away indeed.

The section, and the book, ends with a discussion of how Ôe Kenzaburo, the Nobel Prize-winning Japanese novelist, chose to write about the victims of Hiroshima and the doctors caring for them, against the backdrop of the local anti-nuclear protests held every August, in *Hiroshima Nôto* (1965). Ôe wrote a series of works in the sixties and seventies, of which the Hiroshima version was the first, with titles comprised of a place name followed by ‘nôto’, or ‘notes’.^{xxiv} Ferrier describes this as a new, hybrid genre:^{xxv}

Écriture vive, précise, documentée, pour répondre au mensonge et à l'omission. [...] Petits portraits rapides et transversaux, anecdotes suggestives, extraits d'interviews et de lettres insérés au fil du texte – remontées du réel au cœur de la prose – [...] pour redonner la parole aux victimes ordinaires [...]

Le mot nôto, par lequel Ôe choisit d'intituler son livre, a en japonais deux significations presque contradictoires : il désigne d'une part une notation prise sur le vif, fragmentaire et rapide, et d'autre part le cahier qui les contient et les regroupe, leur donnant au bout du compte une cohérence énigmatique. Comme un carnet donc : quelque chose s'ouvre, se déploie, se replie. Au lecteur maintenant de savoir ce qu'il veut en faire.

[It's a lively, precise and informed writing, in response to the lies and omissions. (...) Little portraits, rapid and transversal, suggestive anecdotes, extracts from interviews and letters inserted into the text along the way – surging up from the real into the heart of the prose – to give the ordinary victims back their voices (...)]

The word nôto, which Ôe chooses for the title of his book, has two almost contradictory meanings in Japanese: one the one hand, it refers to notes taken on the hoof, fragmentary and quick, and on the other hand to the book which contains and groups them, and ends up giving them a mysterious coherence. A notebook, then: something that opens, is spread out, then closed. It's up to the reader now to know what he wants to do with it. (Ferrier 2012: 305-06)

This description contains many of the characteristics to be found in *Fukushima, Récit d'un désastre*, as well as in some of his earlier works.^{xxvi} There are clearly similarities between *Hiroshima Nôto* and *Fukushima*, in particular the mixture of elements 'remontées du réel au cœur de la prose'; although the identity of the elements may differ they are all linked to reality, which is perhaps the 'ôgi no kaname' that holds them together. This image of the pivot is echoed in the description of the 'nôto' or notebook, which 's'ouvre, se déploie, se replie'. A work which contains disparate elements, then, but narrated by a first-person voice that bestows a single perspective and an editorial unity on the whole; such a description would fit Ferrier's book as well as Ôe's. As Philippe Forest writes,

Tout témoignage, alors même qu'il est témoignage pour autrui, est à la première personne du singulier. [...] Chacun ne peut légitimement parler que depuis le point où il a été placé, faisant de la catastrophe un récit qui soit conforme à la vision qu'il en eut.

[All witnessing, even when it is carried out for others, is done in the first person singular. (...) No one can speak legitimately except from the point of view where he or she has been placed, giving an account of the catastrophe which conforms to the vision he or she had of it.]^{xxvii}

In one of the essays in *Japon, la barrière des recontres*, entitled ‘Les écrivains de l’irréparable – Robert Antelme and Ôe Kenzaburo’, Ferrier examines *Hiroshima nôto* and *L’Espèce humaine* as two very different attempts to write about events that seem to go beyond what humanity might be expected to bear. Writing about Ôe’s style, he praises ‘l’observation rigoureuse, la modestie affichée du propos, la prise de notes permanente, l’écriture sèche et rapide, sans fioritures, nourri d’une sorte de statistique du quotidien’. The result, in both *Hiroshima nôto* and *L’Espèce humaine*, is ‘une écriture humaniste et élémentaire’. (Ferrier 2009: 133, italics in original) This essay was published in 2009, but clearly Ôe’s example left a lasting impression on Ferrier. His evocation of Ôe as one of his predecessors in the history of disaster writing is both a homage to the older novelist and also an attempt to set up intergenerational echoes between the memories of Fukushima and Hiroshima, as he did earlier in the book between Fukushima and the Great Kanto earthquake through references to Claudel.^{xxviii}

But in my view, a more significant model for *Fukushima* than Ôe’s work is Matsushima, the natural phenomenon which so unexpectedly and successfully resisted the onslaught of the tsunami. As mentioned earlier, it was the multitude of little islands – their collective strength – that broke down the brute force of the tidal wave, and this inspired Ferrier to write ‘par îlots ou par estuaires, par petites notes déferlantes, pointues, blanches ou noires, tout à la fois sauvages et soignées’. In Japanese, nouns do not have plural forms; ‘shima’, meaning island, is the same word however many islands are involved, which makes the name ‘Matsushima’ – the place name that designates the collection of islands – both a multiple and a single identity, grammatically and physically, whose strength resides in its

scatteredness. *Fukushima, Récit d'un désastre*, made up of brief notes, a collection of voices, seemingly improvised thoughts and a scattering of anecdotes, clearly resembles the multiple singularity that is Matsushima. It is also a model we can apply to the ensemble of Ferrier's writings on the disaster; the prefaces, the essays, the scripts and the book can be seen as small islands, each one a separate entity but set in collective resistance against the tsunami of official euphemisms and rewritings, against the silence and sheer forgetfulness that have been building up ever since the actual tsunami occurred ten years ago.^{xxix} The Japanese word for 'prose' is *sanbun* (散文), which literally means 'scattered writing', in opposition to the organised forms of poetry. This scatteredness is relative, of course, and Japanese prose in general cannot be described as a scattered form; but it is possible to think of Ferrier's text adopting the literal meaning of *sanbun* as the guiding principle of its form, a text which consists of elements collected from the scattered debris left by the tsunami, 'remontée du réel au cœur de la *prose*'. It is a style created in response to the representational challenge of a disaster that happened in reality, inspired by a natural phenomenon that withstood the actual disaster.

Adopting a natural phenomenon as a model for his writing can be seen as an acknowledgement by Ferrier of the need to de-anthropocentrize our ways of seeing, thinking and writing. As mentioned earlier, there is a movement within Environmental Humanities to consider the animate-inanimate distinction as a continuum so that reality is seen as being made up of systems that involve both, and objects can be seen as actants with some attributes of agency. Ferrier points out that the official Japanese term created for the triple disaster – *genpatsu-shinsai* (原発震災) – is a neologism combining an abbreviation of 'nuclear power station', and 'shinsai', meaning 'disaster caused by an earthquake', thus acknowledging both the natural and human aspects of the disaster: 'le nouveau vocable

japonais se donne donc à la fois à lire la cause naturelle du désastre, mais aussi l'inextricable responsabilité qui est celle de l'homme dans cet événement' ['The Japanese neologism thus makes clear the natural cause of the disaster, but also the inextricable responsibility of man in this event'].^{xxx} In fact, it has been noted that disasters can act as triggers galvanizing people into acknowledging their environment as a complex mixture of the human and non-human.^{xxx}ⁱ In Japan, where Shintoism has established a tradition of seeing nature as animate, it is perhaps even more appropriate to take our cues from natural phenomena – in this instance, from a group of scattered rocks in a picturesque bay – when attempting to respond to a disaster that was both natural and manmade, something that could only have happened within the 'mesh' of human and non-human elements that constitutes our environment.^{xxx}ⁱⁱ

In *Fukushima*, it is courageous individuals, human and non-human – librarians, 'liquidators', three-hundred-year-old plum trees or aged men with a love of art – who contribute to the overall survival of the community and of the nation, by acting as the 'ôgi no kaname' of the structure of which they are a part. The image of the 'ôgi no kaname', however, has clearly evolved in Ferrier's mind over the ten years during which he has been writing about 3.11. The most recent volume of works on Fukushima he has edited is entitled *Dans l'œil du désastre: Créer avec Fukushima*, and in the preface Ferrier explains his choice of image:

Il existe, au cœur des pires cyclones, une zone de vents calmes et de temps éclatant, [...] où il n'y a pas de précipitations et où le ciel bleu est visible à travers le voile radieux des nuages. Phénomène singulier : on l'appelle l'œil du cyclone. Les artistes sont l'œil du cyclone. Vents violents, pluies torrentielles, vagues dévastatrices se déchaînent tout autour : ils restent calmes dans la tourmente et font apparaître, au centre de la circulation cyclonique, une zone provisoire de discernement et d'émerveillement.

[There exists, at the heart of the worst cyclones, a zone of calm winds and glorious weather, (...) where there is no precipitation and where the blue sky is visible beyond the radiant veil of the clouds. A singular phenomenon: it is called the eye of the cyclone. Artists are the eye of the cyclone. Violent storms, torrential rains, and devastating waves are unleashed all

around them; but they remain calm amidst the tempest and create, at the centre of the cyclonic circulation, a provisional zone of discernment and marvel.]^{xxxiii}

The eye of the storm is similar to the ‘ôgi no kaname’, a point of calm and tranquillity amidst the fury, but there is the bonus of an added perspective; it can see things beyond the storm like the blue sky, ‘une zone provisoire de discernement et d’émerveillement’. Even more significantly, the artist here is not a human being standing in the eye of the storm, but the eye of the storm itself. The human artist has become a non-human phenomenon, the actual viewpoint at the centre of the storm, and witness to the calm beyond it. Ferrier, the artist, had already fulfilled this role in *Fukushima*; the suppleness of his writing allows for other vistas, other perspectives in time and in space to be included beyond the immediate devastation. An eye-witness account, a collection of interviews both contemporary and historical, an autofiction anchored in reality; Ferrier’s *Fukushima, Récit d’un désastre* manages to be all of these things, as does the ensemble of his writings on 3.11, written by the eye of the storm.

ⁱ Prix littéraire de l’Asie, 2005; Prix littéraire de la Porte Dorée, 2010; Édouard Glissant Prize, 2012; Franz-Hessel-Preis, 2015; Prix littéraire Jacques Lacarrière, 2020.

ⁱⁱ He has edited six collections of essays on Japan-related topics, and created a website called Tokyo Time Table (www.tokyo-time-table.com).

ⁱⁱⁱ The term ‘post-japoniste’ was coined by Philippe Forest, but the following definition is both succinct and useful: “on pourrait [...] qualifier de ‘post-japonistes’ les œuvres présentant une prise de distance critique ou ludique par rapport au phénomène du japonisme – quitte à ne pas échapper complètement à la problématique de l’exotisme et à prendre le risque de soulever de nouveaux mythes”. Arribert-Narce, Kuwada and O’Meara 2016: 11.

^{iv} Ferrier quotes the Japanese National Police Agency’s figure of 18,460 missing and dead on 9th October 2015. See Ferrier 2016: 9.

^v Ferrier is also the author of the scenarios for Kenichi Watanabe’s *Terres nucléaires : une histoire du plutonium* (2015), and *Notre ami l’atome* (2020); the three texts were published in 2021 by Gallimard in a single volume, entitled *Notre ami l’atome* (Paris: Gallimard, 2021).

^{vi} Ferrier 2013; Ferrier 2014.

^{vii} Calle-Gruber 2016.

^{viii} There has been an unusually large amount of writing in French on the Fukushima disaster, in comparison with outputs in other languages such as Spanish, German, and even English; perhaps partly due, according to Fabien Arribert-Narce, to the great prevalence of nuclear reactors in France. See Arribert-Narce 2016: 57.

-
- ^{ix} Especially as many of these essays are available online on his website, Tokyo Time Table.
- ^x Éric Faye, *Malgré Fukushima. Journal japonais* (Paris: José Corti, 2014); Philippe Nibelle, *Journal d'Apocalypse* (Monaco: Éditions du Rocher, 2010); Nadine and Thierry Ribault, *Les Sanctuaires de l'abîme. Chronique du désastre de Fukushima* (Paris: Éditions de l'Encyclopédie des Nuisances, 2012).
- ^{xi} Ferrier 2016: 18-20.
- ^{xii} Ferrier 2016: 23-25.
- ^{xiii} Ferrier 2016: 35. All translations henceforth are my own, unless otherwise stated.
- ^{xiv} Arribert-Narce suggests in his essay that this book, like many other Fukushima witness accounts, is an autofictional work (Arribert-Narce 2016: 96).
- ^{xv} This self-reflexive aspect of Ferrier's writings on Fukushima makes them highly relevant to the emerging genre of Disaster Writing; his conversations with artists, photographers and filmmakers who have created works about Fukushima in Ferrier 2021 are also significant in this regard.
- ^{xvi} 'Fukushima, c'est une situation de guerre', interview with Michaël Ferrier, 27th October 2017, www.revue-ballast.fr/mickael-ferrier-fukushima-cest-situation-de-guerre/. Last accessed 9/2/21.
- ^{xvii} Briquet 2019: 79.
- ^{xviii} Ecocritics are exploring the implications of a radical critique of anthropocentrism, led by philosophers who engage in 'deep ecology', on literary study. See Glotfelty 2015 for further discussion of this movement.
- ^{xix} *The Tale of the Heike* is one of the masterpieces of medieval Japanese literature, an epic poem that recounts the struggle between the Taira and Minamoto clans for the control of Japan at the end of the 12th century.
- ^{xx} See Emmett and Nye 2017: 141-42.
- ^{xxi} Many Japanese writers and artists have created works dealing with the plight of the animals left behind in the contaminated areas, for instance Takayama Akira's video installation entitled *Happy Island: The Messianic Banquet of the Righteous* (2015), or books such as Kimura Yusuke's short novel, *Seichi Cs (The Holy Land of Cesium)* (Tokyo: Shinchosha, 2015) and Shinnami Kyosuke's non-fictional *Ushi to tsuchi (The Cattle and The Soil)* (Tokyo: Shueisha, 2015). For a discussion of these and other works, see Suga 2017.
- ^{xxii} No doubt a reference to *La Vie, mode d'emploi*; Ferrier is a great admirer of Perec, whose interest in the game of *go*, amongst other things, links him to Japan.
- ^{xxiii} Ferrier calls it 'la novlangue de Fukushima' in Ferrier 2016: 18.
- ^{xxiv} Ôe has also published a book on the Fukushima disaster; see Ôe 2013. This is a very different kind of book, however, from *Hiroshima nôto*; although it also comprises multiple voices, it is an autofictional work, in which Ôe's alter ego Nagae Cogito tells the story of how the earthquake and aftershocks affected his family relationships and his writing style. For an analysis of this work see Haga 2017.
- ^{xxv} In *Japon, la barrière des rencontres*, Ferrier writes in some detail about *Hiroshima Nôto* (Ferrier 2009: 130-36).
- ^{xxvi} 'Petits portraits', for instance, is reminiscent of *Tokyo: petits portraits de l'aube* (Ferrier, 2004).
- ^{xxvii} See Forest 2012: 33.
- ^{xxviii} The Memory Studies scholar Michael Rothberg discusses the interplay between different historical memories in works of literature and art, calling it 'multidirectional memory' and showing how, in works such as Michael Haneke's *Caché* or Didier Daeninckx's *Meurtres pour mémoire*, the memory of *les années noires* is activated by those of the Algerian War – and vice versa. See Rothberg 2009: Introduction.

^{xxix} The Disaster Writing scholar Mark D. Anderson points out how, in the aftermath of disaster, literary and other cultural representations can help in the renegotiation of political power. See Anderson 2011: Introduction.

^{xxx} Ferrier 2016: 23.

^{xxxi} Jane Bennett develops a ‘notion of publics as human-non-human collectives that are provoked into existence by a shared experience of harm’ in Bennett 2010: xix.

^{xxxii} See Emmett and Nye 2017: 141.

^{xxxiii} Ferrier 2021: 12.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Anderson, Mark D. (2011) *Disaster Writing: The Cultural Politics of Catastrophe in Latin America* (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press).
- Arribert-Narce, Fabien (2016) ‘Écrits du 11 mars 2011 en France et au Japon : Écrire la catastrophe, entre fiction et témoignage’, in *Penser avec Fukushima*, ed. Christian Doumet and Michaël Ferrier (Nantes: Éditions nouvelles Cécile Default), 57-96.
- Arribert-Narce, Fabien, Kohei Kuwada and Lucy O’Meara (eds.) (2016) *Réceptions de la culture japonaise en France depuis 1945. Paris-Tokyo-Paris : détours par le Japon* (Paris: Honoré Champion).
- Bennett, Jane (2010) *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham NC: Duke University Press).
- Briquet, Aurélie (2019) ‘L’efficacité de l’écriture dans *Fukushima, Récit d’un désastre* (2012) de Michaël Ferrier : contre la résignation face à la catastrophe’, *Alternative Francophone* 4 (2), 77-91.
- Calle-Gruber, Mireille (ed.) (2016) *Dictionnaire Sauvage Quignard* (Paris: Hermann).
- Emmett, Robert S. and David E. Nye (2017) *The Environmental Humanities: A Critical Introduction* (Cambridge MA.: The MIT Press).
- Claudé, Paul (1952), ‘À travers les villes en flammes’, *Œuvres complètes III (Extrême-Orient)* (Paris: Gallimard).
- Ferrier, Michaël (2004) *Tokyo, petits portraits de l’aube* (Paris: Arléa).
- Ferrier, Michaël (2009) *Japon, la barrière des rencontres* (Nantes: Éditions Cécile Default).
- Ferrier, Michaël (2012) *Fukushima, récit d’un désastre* (Paris: Gallimard).
- Ferrier, Michaël (2013) ‘Fukushima : la cicatrice impossible’, *Cahiers de l’Ecole de Blois* 11, 72-79.
- Ferrier, Michaël (2014) ‘Fukushima ou la traversée du temps : une catastrophe sans fin’, *Esprit* 405, 33-45.
- Ferrier, Michaël (ed.) (2016) *Penser avec Fukushima* (Nantes: Éditions nouvelles Cécile Default).
- Ferrier, Michaël (ed.) (2021) *Dans l’œil du désastre: Créer avec Fukushima* (Vincennes: Éditions Thierry Marchaisse).
- Forest, Philippe (2012) ‘La cendre des cerisiers’, in *L’Archipel des séismes. Écrits du Japon après le 11 mars 2011*, eds. Corinne Quentin and Cécile Sakai (Arles: Picquier).
- Glotfelty, Cheryl (2015) ‘Literary Studies in an Age of Environmental Crisis’ in *Ecocriticism: the Essential Reader*, ed. Ken Hiltner (London: Routledge), 120-133.
- Haga, Koichi (2017) ‘Literary Ground Opened in Fissures: The Great East Japan Earthquake and Ôe Kenzaburo’s *In Late Style*’, in *Ecocriticism in Japan*, eds. K. Suga, Y. Masami and H. Wake (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books), 103-120.
- Ôe, Kenzaburo (1965) *Hiroshima nôto* (Tokyo: Iwanami Shinsho).

Ôe, Kenzaburo (2013) *Ban-nen yoshiki shu: In Late Style* (Tokyo: Kodansha).
Rothberg, Michael (2009) *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization* (Stanford: Stanford University Press).
Suga, Keijiro (2017) 'Invisible Waves: on some Japanese artists After March 11, 2011' in *Ecocriticism in Japan*, eds. K. Suga, Y. Masami and H. Wake (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books), 173-187.