

PIERRE NEPVEU

ON THE ROAD TO *VRAIE DEMEURE* —THE TRUE ABODE

For Lucie Lambert

WRITING *Vraie demeure* took me on an adventure, an expedition whose destination was a mystery to me. This became clear the moment I received the gouaches from Lucie Lambert, each displaying its lovely gold letter, as if they already contained a language or a story just waiting to be heard. I had never taken illustrations, paintings or photographs as the starting point for my writing. But there, spread out before my eyes, were twenty-six images on which the alphabetical sequence imposed an order and a direction. I had to set out on a journey, walk through this series of spaces as if they were stations, opportunities to pause and then move on toward a horizon as yet unknown.

From our earliest childhood experiences reciting it—often in song—the alphabet feels like a journey. Everyday expressions make this apparently meaningless series of letters into a metaphor for learning, progress, a complete set of events chanted from beginning to end. We talk about the “ABCs” of a skill or body of knowledge. We say a subject has been covered, or a project has been completed “from A to Z,” and in the expressions “D-Day” and “generation X,” the letters point to a decisive event, an era. The alphabet is

never far from storytelling, and the characters, one following the other, convey a sense of the passage of time.

Lucie Lambert’s images had the advantage of opening out this succession in a highly varied way, with abrupt changes in tone or atmosphere. With each image, a new space was opened up, but in contrast to the unalterable order of the letters was the utterly random, unpredictable nature of the forms that went with them: a grid, a floral pattern, broken lines like needlepoint, a splatter of ink, a whorl of dots, a cloud, a mass of geometric shapes. Rather than places, they were motifs, and I found great inspiration in the way they seemed to vibrate. Vibration naturally evokes life: it takes us back to its first stirrings and the promise of its irrepressible fertility.

Thus, through these images, I began to see the alphabet as something with meaning, with movement, as if each letter could now draw from a primordial material, from a kind of organic depth out of which, on each page, there emerged a moment of life, a state of consciousness, an event. These were often happy, although there could also be darker, sadder stations, because this adventure through the letters and images brought twists and turns and obstacles, too. Paradoxically, I was just as strongly motivated by what appeared to me as a hurdle or a rebuff, right from the very first letters. Perhaps by chance, the images corresponding to “a” and “c” suggested to my eyes a grate, a fence, a cloister. It was as

if from the outset, the desire to travel, to walk freely over an open space, was confronted with the need to overcome the force of inertia. Is it not true that when we make a start at something, we almost always face a test of this kind—a wall that we must find our way past, even if it is simply a wall of silence?

To walk freely, to travel: what, then, you may be wondering, is the true abode referred to in my title? I believe this idea of a dwelling-place can carry many meanings. Sometimes it might be a garden, a park where a child’s voice rings out, an orchard where we once picked apples with a loved one. We all have abodes of this kind, where our memory takes us again and again. However, are not all the spaces and experiences we pass through, and above all the time it takes for us to do so, also dwelling-places? Throughout the writing of this collection, carried along by the progression of the alphabet, I often felt as if I was inhabiting the movement itself, at one with the momentum that continually pulled me away from one image to bring me face to face with the next. To put it in another way: as I wrote, I believe I inhabited the very joy of becoming and traveling.

Finally, while the alphabet is a universe unto itself, while its twenty-six letters allow us to say everything there is to say, it is language, with the world it seeks to embrace, that more broadly comprises the true abode. But here we are no longer in a house or a garden: we live in the universe itself, ever expanding toward infinity.

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