

Jacques Roubaud

Poetry and Orality

I

@ 1 In order to speak of oral poetry I must necessarily speak of written poetry.

@ 2 Let me then begin at the beginning: the notion of poetry on which I'll stake my claims here does not emerge until after the fall of the tobar (the art of the troubadours).

@ 3 The tobar, or the art of the troubadours, finds expression in the *canso*, a form that unites word and sound.

@ 4 The trobar indissolubly interlaces a particular language and its music. The Provençal term for this craft is *entrebescar*.

@ 5 The breaking of the bond between word and sound, which occurred during the fourteenth century, brought about a new double form called poetry. This form would combine the words of a language in writing and in speech such that they would be indissociable.

@ 6 That other form which brings word and sound together has by no means disappeared; we call it song.

@ 7 A song is not poem and a poem is not a song.

@ 8 The words of a song deprived of their sounds may constitute a poem; or not. The words of a poem put to music may constitute a song; or not.

@ 9 It's an insult to poetry to call song poetry. It's an insult to song to call it poetry.

II

@ 10 From the fourteenth to the end of the nineteenth centuries the form poetry maintained its existence and autonomy in relation to other types of language arts: philosophy, rhetoric, literature, etc.

@ 11 Poetry exists in language and in poems. A poem is the union of four forms.

@ 12 Quartet of forms and a score.

@ 13 I think a poem has two internal and two external aspects.

@ 14 Two external aspects: the written form, the oral form. Both are fixed (the oral as well as the written) and constitute the score. Of course, there are many possible

executions of the oral form, performances; just as there are many possible executions of the written form, written performances. The score is the coupling of these two external forms of a poem. For me, they both always exist (though one perhaps only virtually). Plus, their relationship is always antagonistic, which is good (this conflict helps constitute the rhythmic component of poetry).

@ 15 Two internal aspects: the wRitten form (*wRitten*: a term coined out of necessity for this purpose; orally the homonym of written) and the aural form (aural: holds the same homonymic relation with oral as wRitten does with written). Internal to what? To the person receiving the poem. The reader is included in defining poetry as a quartet of forms.

@ 16 The external aspects of a poem are interpersonal. They are transmissible to practically anyone who speaks and reads the language in which a given poem is composed. The internal aspects are personal. They are in the mind of the reader-listener; essentially non-transmissible from one person to another; they are always in movement within memory: movement of images, of thoughts. Ultimately, the external written form is idle, but not the internal mental page that constitutes the wRitten form.

@ 17 There's no poem without reading. And, in the interior reading, like in the external aspects, one form confronts the other; they collide.

@ 18 A poem cannot be reduced to its external aspect alone. If it has not entered a single **mind**, a poem does not yet exist.

@ 19 In addition, the very constitution of a poem as an object of language also depends on the fact that there remains an irreducible variability of interior readings among a wide variety of people. It's perhaps banal to remark that there are always differences in the way any linguistic enunciation is received and interpreted from one person to another. But in modes of speech other than poetry, meaning must be considered public, ideally transmissible; that which is not transmissible is not part of the meaning. In the case of poetry, it's the exact opposite—which is not to say that poems do not contain a transmissible meaning; if there is one, it's there as a surplus.

III

@ 20 In France, during the period that culminates at the end of the 19th century, all four aspects are in harmony: meter and rhyme guarantee a relatively easy passage from the page to the ear, from virtual seeing to virtual hearing.

@ 21 But these dynamics change with the assault against traditional form (the rhymed alexandrine in France, the iambic pentameter in English speaking countries). From then onward Poetry distinguishes itself via 'breaking the line,' and quite differently from the way that technique is used in prose. It's a fairly weak constraint and requires in oral performance some attempt to mark to the end of lines.

@ 22 Until the 60s in France, the (masked) persistence of certain fundamental traits of traditional verse (essentially, the coincidence of line breaks and syntactical units) allow the previous dynamics between oral and written poetry to remain unchallenged. It's the golden age of the **SFV (Standard Free Verse)**. Denis Roche, however, dismantles that soft "consensus" and forces "free verse" to enter a period of turbulence.

@ 23 Meanwhile (in the 50s and 60s), American poetry recovers its lost orality (from Ginsberg to Creeley) and invents the **OFV (Oral Free Verse)**, which successfully realizes the formal ideal of free verse (accomplishing what the Surrealists had failed to do in their "breaking the line"): their line break has a fundamentally oral nature. What's written is entirely subordinated. This OFV is extremely present thirty or forty years later. And it's steeped in an almost universal blindness on the part of American poets with respect to the particularities of written form in poems (cause for a rude awakening for quite a few French poets when confronted with translations of their poems that totally disregard all that is implicitly understood as obsessive flourish: typesetting, line spacing, the role of white space, etc).

@ 24 In poetry, as in many things, the influence of the United States takes no time to make its impression. And the predictable result has been the decline of OFV (much like the degradation of the English language into a commercial mumbo jumbo).

IV

@ 25 Many years ago, when examining modern poetry from a formal viewpoint, at least in most so-called "western languages," I gleaned that a single form of poetry dominated. It's versified in a uniform manner and can be used universally. It's what I have termed **International Free Verse**, or **IFV**.

@ 26 Description of **IFV**: Alongside the overall homogenization of the world (economic, financial, musical, ideological, dress-sense, gastronomic, etc) during the last quarter of the century, and under the obvious influence of poetry written in American English (an involuntary but real side effect of the domination that highly militarized state exerts over all others), verse has suffered its homogenization. Free verse, as written in French by the Surrealists and their followers, was still far too dependent on the history of French verse, defiantly standing against the memory of alexandrine verse. The **IFV**, however, is unfettered by such trappings.

@ 27 To be brief, like **SFV**, the **IFV** is written and characterized by page settings that differ from those used in prose, but with line breaks that "prudently" adhere to syntactic structures.

@ 28 The excessive line-on-line enjambments common among American poets until the 60s are severely condemned by the **IFV**.

@ 29 I'm not even speaking about disarticulations à la Denis Roche (breaking the line in the middle of a word, for example).

@ 30 **IFV** is generally found in short poems, or sequences of poems.

@ 31 **IFV** is verse with a universal vocation: it's easy to translate, and can be practiced in at least all western languages, and probably in all the languages of the world.

@ 32 As opposed to the French Surrealists' free verse, it owes little or nothing to the measures and rhythms of the traditional prosody of the languages it so enthusiastically colonizes. No provincial slavery!

@ 33 In order to examine the oral presentation of **IFV**, (its written presentation can be seen in magazines and books) at the international poetry festivals (or festivals featuring poetry) which I have attended over the past few years, I decided to listen to the largest possible number of readings and try to follow what was going on if I had the written text, or else a translation in one of the languages I can more or less understand (though some phenomena require no advanced understanding of the words). Here is what I've concluded:

@ 34 Practically all of these multinational poets who read their own work in such circumstances solve the problem of how to present it orally in an extremely simple way. They read it exactly as if they were reading prose. It's obvious that there are several ways of orally (and aurally) reconstituting what the written score of a poem provides. One of them could be the manner I've just described (though I don't see what it has to going for it, unless you're following the written text of the poem; and little even then). (It would be more interesting to do this with metrical verse, or rhymed metrical verse, in front of an audience aware of the laws of prosody).

@ 35 But in reality, there isn't the slightest intention in this herd-like practice of reading. It's quite simply the way everyone does it. Things should be done as usual, nothing should be strikingly different from this new universal law. This also has consequences on the writing of such poems.

@ 36 There's one slight exception - a certain number of poets (I'm tempted to say, especially American ones, but my investigations have not advanced far enough to be categorical) make a clear distinction from prose: they emphasize the ends of their lines by raising their voices slightly (like actors at the Comédie Française in the 50s). In this way, we're assured that it's poetry we're hearing.

@ 37 The absolute rule about what can be said in a poem written in **IFV** is accessibility. Not only must the poem in IFV contain no difficulties of comprehension or of linguistic construction, it must also avoid anything particularly striking, unless it's lexical (and in a tone acceptable in a travel agency), and certainly not adopt the incomprehensible manner in which traditional poetry used to chop up and divide what it had to say. Hence the total rejection of anything formal, the domination of narrative verse, of ethical exclamations (limited to subjects recognized by CNN) etc... it's easy to see what the consequences of such limitations are.

@ 38 In such a context, why maintain the distinction between poetry and prose, as limited by the distinction between verse and non-verse? But the fact remains (still in this context) that it's unseemly to drop the visual elements that characterize IFV. Why is this?

@ 39 You may object that if you are invited to an international poetry festival then you must in some way distinguish yourself as a poet, and that the simplest exterior sign which is most easily recognizable to all organizers of international festivals is, of course, the use of IFV. You might well so object and you'd be right. But I think there's more to it than that: the very existence of this modest way for poetry to survive (extremely modest: except when there's some exceptional political context, audiences for any given poet are meager) is linked to what I have already termed (in a different context) a ghost-effect. The overall devaluation of poetry provokes a pitiful attention to its few places of survival. It becomes something decorative, a way for the "cultured" (so long as the proceedings do not cost them more than a tiny fraction of what they'd pay to see an opera or exhibition) to prove the height of their culture. But if, and only if of course, the poets are serious and well behaved. So their poetry must be serious and well behaved too.

@ 40 Within these formal boundaries you can say anything that is feminist, multiculturalist, anti-racist, anti anti-personnel mine-ist, you can Chernobylize at length, or burble on about peace and your grandmother, so long as no one suspects you of playing "formal games" or of being "difficult," which would be "elitist," "non-democratic" and probably in breach of the rights of man and an insult to NGOs.

@ 41 In the realm of **IFV**, form becomes increasingly secondary. This tendency is particularly manifest in public readings. I have listened to tons of them over the past ten years: the dominant tendency is to read "as if it were prose." This tendency is present and on the rise among American poets too. Of course, more often than not these so called "poems" are quite simply short prose texts. And, since it's rather tricky to relate a full narrative in a short text, poetry risks becoming nothing more than "short prose."

@ 42 To conclude this point, **IFV** is the essential form of **SIP (Standardized International Poetry)**, whose servants are **POWs (Poets of the World)**.

V

@ 43 The drift of IFV toward "short prose" is but one modality of poetry's extinction.

@ 44 Others abound. Denis Roche, who toiled at dismantling free verse, belonged to a self-proclaimed avant-garde, the TEL QUEL group. One of its goals was to eradicate poetry and replace it with what would be called LE TEXTE.

@ 45 That onslaught had no long-term effects (with the possible exception of a more modern version: post-poetry). Nonetheless, there's a tendency to reinforce the growing marginalization of poetry within the contemporary context, to accelerate its loss of

“market share” in the commerce of the so-called “cultural products” (poetry is vanishing from bookstores, publishing catalogues, and the purportedly literary segments of newspapers or television programs), by theorizing its erasure, by openly rejecting its traditional techniques, now dismissed as passé, and finally by replacing poetry with something else, as if to extend “TelQuelism” into the 90s. It’s an energetically pursued tendency, finding easy shrift in the newspapers

@ 46 Where one once read the slogan “Poetry is Dead,” one now reads “Poetry is Elsewhere.” That is, elsewhere than in poems as I have described them and as they continue to be written.

@ 47 Of course, the meaning of “Elsewhere” is variable. For Dominique de Villepin, the former Prime Minister of France, it means EUROPE. For others, it means the SUNSET. Some argue, and more affirmatively, that it means SONG, ROCK AND ROLL, etc.

@ 48 The so-called “arts” sections of newspapers increasingly promote elaborate and carefully thought-out strategies opposing the survival of poetry-form as I have described it. Take, for example, RAP...

@ 49 Or SLAM; as of late, the French practitioners of these arts have extolled their desire to be crowned the “real poets” of the 21st century.

@ 50 And finally there’s PERFORMANCE POETRY. Developed in France (and elsewhere) from the 50s onward, this brand now enjoys some currency in the press after more than fifty years of being ignored. This sudden show of favor is part of the same strategy, the erasure of poetry.

@ 51 Just about anything may be encountered in the guise of “performance poetry”: music, declamation, theatrical bits, acrobatics, or “primal screams,” etc. And all of it presented with an utter scorn for the written word.

@ 52 Which is entirely understandable: if one were to commit to paper what normally constitutes this type of “poetry”—assuming it contains words from any given language—, we would be in the presence of an absolutely mediocre texts. Reading it would be deadly boring.

@ 53 I have nothing against these activities. In the best cases, they make for a high quality spectacle. But why call these events “poetry” as opposed to something else? Why not simply calling them a PERFORMANCE?

@ 54 I think the reason is clear: to benefit from the aura still associated to the word POETRY, to ride the coattails of what I call the GHOST-EFFECT of poetry.

VI

@ 55 I am not a prophet. It’s possible that what I call poetry will disappear (except among the belated few), vanish into prose, or be replaced by “performance.” There is,

however, at least one group of writings, initiated nearly half a century ago, in which the link between the oral and written is thriving and aligned with the counted and rhymed tradition. I am referring to writing under constraint as it's practiced by the OULIPO. It has as much to offer prose and "performance" as it does poetry. In a paradoxical reversal of the "crise de vers" at the turn of the nineteenth century, Oulipian practice tends to submit prose to poetry.

— Translated by Jean-Jacques Poucel