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Jacques Roubaud

Jacques Roubaud, born in 1932, is a French poet, essayist, novelist and mathematician. He holds two doctorates, one on the experimental mathematics of the group Bourbaki and one in French literature for which he wrote a dissertation called *La forme du sonnet français de Marot à Malherbe. Recherche de seconde rhétorique* (*The Form of the French sonnet from Marot to Malherbe. Research in second rhetoric*). He taught mathematics at the University of Paris X-Nanterre and his writing has been continuously entwining his double interest. His first book of poetry, for example, published in 1966 by Gallimard and called \in (*Sign of belonging*), is a collection of mathematically structured sonnets – the use of a fixed form, especially the sonnet, about which he published several books, being a constant in his work. With this publication, he was inducted into the Oulipo (Ouvroir de littérature potentielle – “workshop” of potential literature), under the tutelage of co-founder Raymond Queneau who was also passionate about mathematics.

His mathematic and literary experience involves numbers, calculations and walks.

Je marche. Je mâche l'air avec mes pieds, je médite l'espace en arpentant la terre, ses routes, ses rues, ses sentiers, ses chemins. [I walk. I chew the air with my feet, I meditate while walking the earth, its roads, its streets, its trails, its paths.] (*le grand incendie de Londres*, 119-120)

From his walks, comes a poetry that mimic the fatal rhythmical alternation of (as he puts it) the prosodic *arsis* and *thesis* (*le grand incendie de Londres*, 1299). For him, language works like a musical line and the numerically determined accents and measures act on memory. This can be illustrated in the research he did with Jacques Lusson for a particular abstract rhythm Theory (*T.R.A.(M,m): question d'une poétique formelle*).

Le Flip-flop du lever-tomber du pied droit puis du pied gauche, et réciproquement (est-il iambique ou trochaïque ? Cela dépend du point de vue), se transmet au cerveau, où il suscite l'éveil des images, des images de mémoire, les images-mémoire qui sont la matière première de la poésie. [The Flip-flop of

the raise-fall from the right foot and left foot, and vice versa (is it iambic or trochaic? It depends on the point of view), is transmitted to the brain, where it causes the awakening of images, pictures of the memory, memory-images which are the raw material of poetry.] (*'le grand incendie de Londres'*, 1300)

Each walk comes with a rule, which removes its predictability while the rules often have to do with numbers or counting. One of these rules, for example, is to note Parisian number plates in ascending order while walking. At other times, Roubaud will focus on the thirty-five stops of the Parisian bus lane 29. This transforms each text into a vertiginous logical construction connecting the writing with feelings and memory. It brings him for example to write:

Ce n'est pas par hazare :	It is not by chance:
Les lignes dont le nom	The lines which have names
commencent par un deux	beginning with two
Partent toutes	All leave
Partaient	All left
Des lazaréens lieux	From Lazarus places

(*Ode à la ligne 29 des autobus parisiens*)

Here, "Lazaréen" relates to the Parisian train station St Lazare, but also makes the poetry born out of the route 29, a sequel of the Lazarus myth. It transforms the moving poetry – from bus-stop to bus-stop – into a miraculous resurrection from the dead or, less dramatically, into a way of bringing places, people or texts from the past (his own and everyone's past) back to light.

This structured poetical motion through past spaces and times is part of his work with the Oulipo. Indeed, the *modus operandi* of the group: raising formal constraints, create new ones, use them and sometimes, come up with a *clinamen* (a deviation or creative inflection from the rule) when falling into deadlocks, is not just a game with literature and language. It helps to bring back personal and cultural memories. The rule, *Joséphine*, he invented in 2006 for example, and named after the mathematician Flavius Josephe (*Histoire des Juifs*, 79 AD), allows him to define an upward and downward poetical form of permutation where a word-rhyme is successively deleted from each verse following the order of the permutation. It therefore relates poetry to a

mathematical decimation problem that was a life and death problem. He also invented the *Mongine* (2006), another rule of permutation inspired by Monge, the 18th century French mathematician and, more famously, the *n-nine*. This rule is related to the *quenine* invented by Queneau as an extension of the *sextine*, a very structured medieval form written in the Romance language of Old Occitan with six stanzas of six lines of six words, changing places on each line, following a combinatorial model. All these rules bring back past mathematical and poetical structures, as well as old names and texts to the present time. But they also draw the self-portrait of a mathematician who sees himself as a descendant of the troubadours. More generally, they put him in line with a very old tradition in literature and in the arts at large: a tradition of erudition that helps the past shape our language and our future.

For Jacques Roubaud, poetic innovation is indeed a matter of proofreading the past (the sonnet being one of its most exemplary forms) and he describes his working method as such:

J'imagine, je lis, je compose, j'apprends, je recopie, je traduis, je plagie, j'écris de la poésie depuis près de quarante ans. Il m'arrive d'en publier. [I guess, I read, I write, I learn, I copy, I translate, I plagiarize, I write poetry for nearly forty years. Sometimes I publish.] (Cahiers de Poétique Comparée, *Mezura* n°9)

Comparing himself as an earthworm, working and tilling the field of poetry, "as his father and grandfather before" (*Les Animaux de tout le monde*, 10), his aim is to perpetuate and help evolve the forms he admires the most – the *sonnet* or the *tanka* (its Japanese double) being some of them. He wants to go backwards to reach the "sharpness and minimal complexity of form" (*'le grand incendie de Londres'*, 1380). Or, to say it differently, his idea is to reach "the node of the error, to take a different path" (*'le grand incendie de Londres'*, 1381). Like Queneau working before him on the medieval *sextine* and far from the surrealism or from the modernist ideal of clean slate, Roubaud wants to invent a new poetry through an act of memory. This work, according to Roubaud himself, started in February 1962 (*'le grand incendie de Londres'*, 1439) after a dream he had (following the death of his brother). This dream gave him the title of a novel he should write: *The Great fire of London* and this novel became his *Project*.

Dismissing a first collection of poetry named *Poésies juvéniles* (Youthful Poem), published at the age of 12 in 1944, and an anthology entitled *Voyage du soir* (Evening journey) in 1952, the *Project* is a description of what made him decide to become a "composer of mathematics and of poetry". It was based on a system of constraints related to mathematics and minstrel poetics, but was later abandoned and redeveloped into another 'project' – a "minimal project" as Roubaud calls it: still really huge, but much more ambiguous. This new 'project', is a 'false' autobiography that allows him to say "I" and recall different episodes of his own life, his successes and his failures, but that is never only about him. It is more the intellectual autobiography of an author currently writing and explaining how his thoughts on poetry and mathematics have evolved, failed and restarted differently. It is the story of his 'project', an act of memory, a game with the rules of autobiography as a literary genre and a recollection of many literary references. Jacques Roubaud calls it his "prose cycle" or "memory prose". It started on 11 June 1985 and has been taking – as a 'work in progress' in six branches (one of them being in two parts) that follows a hyper textual and ramified structure – the oulipian self-consciousness of writing to the extreme. These branches were published one after the other from 1990 onwards and have been reunited (minus one) under the title '*the great fire of london*' in 2009 by the Editions du Seuil. To fulfil this 'project', Jacques Roubaud gave himself a rule: write every morning, before sunrise

sans ratures, sans repentirs, sans impatience, aux mêmes heures toujours, le plus près possible de la continuité myope du présent irréversible et détesté [...] [comme] mesure de mon avance, de l'envahissement du blanc des pages par l'encre, de l'éloignement de tout ce qui a précédé le signe noir initial : ce que je fuis. [Without erasures, without repentance, without impatience, always at the same times, as close as possible to the continuity of this myopic irreversible and hated present [...] [as a] measure of my advance, of the invasion of the white on the pages with the ink, of the removal of anything that preceded the initial black sign: which I'm fleeing.] (*le grand incendie de londres*, 28)

The slow writing drags him away from an initial black sign, "the node of the error" referring here to the sudden death of his young wife Alix Cléo in 1983. She died of pulmonary embolism less than three years after they had married. It allows him to

express his grief and to recall his wife's own project with her own black sign, visible on a set of seventeen photographs exhibited in Arles with the title: *If something black*, the year she died. But it is also a description of how his big *Project* became a 'project' and a deep exploration of memory within writing. *The Loop* (or second branch of the 'project') starts for example, with a very old childhood image of snow in Carcassonne, where snow is very rare. And it finishes also with snow. The snow connects his writing with an outer and an inner space and his memory with the present. But it also transforms an obsessive image – repeated in many other texts and brought back all the way from his real, imagined and recreated childhood – into an emblem of the wandering of old memories, which come back and disappear again and again; similar to the abandoned *Project* that became something else while always being there. In fact, it makes the reader follow Roubaud from loop to loop, from time to time and from book to book, from his poetry to his prose, novels (or pseudo-novels as he calls them), essays or theater – as well as from bus-stop to bus-stop – into his memory process. It shows how the memories come back through the writing and change all the time. It also separates Roubaud's thoughts on memory from Proust's involuntary, spontaneous and uncontrolled memory. Roubaud's recollections actually don't try to recover anything from his past. On the contrary, he insists on wishing to destroy his memory "because of some sadness in it" (interview with Marcella Durand). His work is more of an exploration of the functioning of memory with clear references to Frances Yates magisterial *Art of memory*. The false-true autobiography or true-lie, underlining '*the great fire of london*' mixes indeed very old traditions of memorizing and recollecting long texts. It also relates to other interests such as the "ecological memory".

One scientist, Marjorie Linton, made an experiment that inspired me. She tried to transcribe all the different memories she had, which came to about 8,000. After that, she said, "When I tried to add another one, I found that it would be one I had already written down and remembered a bit differently. That's when I stopped. (Interview with Marcella Durand)

Hence the idea to bring back all his poetical memories through a literary and personal dialogue between him and each one of his texts and with the work of many other authors from a different genre, time and language such as Jauffre Rudel, Lewis

Carroll, Victor Hugo, Raymond Queneau, Georges Perec, medieval Japanese poets, 20th century American writers... This writing, as an act of memory, allowed *Le Voyage d'hier* (Yesterday's journey): the first following of *The Voyage d'hiver* (The Winter Journey) by Perec and started the first collective oulipian novel. It also underlines the literary and photographic dialogue he has been having with his late wife since her death. This dialogue started in 1984 with the publication of Alix Cléo's diary. It is still present in more recent books including *Eros mélancolique*, written with Anne F. Garreta (it is about a photographer trying to make a picture of a ghost-woman). Then, it is famously at the heart of *Some thing black*, a book of elegiac poems published in 1986. The poems, alternatively in verse and in prose (another dialogue), are Roubaud's poetic answer to Alix's photographic cycle. They address her directly, expose Jacques Roubaud's grief and transpose, in his own work, the photographs (still on the wall) and the thoughts (from the *Journal*) she left him. One poem tells, for example, of the difficulties to write, "marié(e) à une morte" [married to a dead woman] (*Quelque chose noir*, 63), with a (e), being also a [ə], recalling Alix's own difficulties to write (she abandoned the idea of becoming a writer) "married to a poet" (*Journal (1979-1983)*, 143). This continued dialogue – beyond the grave – captures the essence of love. It is also an answer to her artistic research about the disappearance of her body (she was severely asthmatic) and about the 'future-past' in photography (this 'future-past' was pointed out by Roland Barthes who considered that "whether or not the subject is already dead, every photograph is this catastrophe." (*La Chambre claire, notes sur la photographie*, 150)). But the [ə] reveals also the transformation of her body – without any possibility of recovery – into *pneuma*, this substance that Plato evokes in the *Timaeus* as an intermediate between the material and the immaterial, the body and the spiritual. Alix has become [ə]: a physical, intangible and invisible element that has always been very important for Roubaud and for other writers – he started to write about it long before Alix's death (i.e. *La Vieillesse d'Alexandre*). For him, the [ə] is indeed the memory of a singularity of Romance languages. It is a rhythmical element that comes with the feminine's rimes and thereby, brings back the memory of a breathing female body: Alix Cléo's body with her (difficult) breathing, but more generally, the body of *La poésie*.

For Roubaud, poetry is like a dying (female?) body that he tries to keep alive with extra [ə] or air; thereby elucidating the public reading he has always thought important to give, the insertion of blank between the words and the lines or the

metaphor of the earthworm preventing the world from suffocating under dead words (*Les Animaux de tout le monde*, 10). Hence as well, the rule he gave himself to refer to a period when poetry was shining: the Provençal 12th century.

La poésie la plus contemporaine, pour survivre, doit se défendre de l'effacement, de l'oubli, de la dérision par le choix d'un archaïsme : l'archaïsme du trobar est le mien. [Most contemporary poetry, to survive, must defend itself from erasure, forgetfulness, derision by choosing some archaism: the *trobar* is my own archaism.] (*La Fleur inverse*, 17)

And this archaism can bring some playful results like in the Hortense novels, a cycle of three fiction books whose narrative structure refers at the same time, to the *sextine* and to the English detective novel – *La belle Hortense* (Our Beautiful Heroine), *L'exil d'Hortense* (Hortense in Exile), and *L'enlèvement d'Hortense* (Hortense is Abducted). His *Graal Fiction*, which he defines himself as a mix of the Tale, the Story, the Theory and unpublished revelations from the Arthurian legend and, with Florence Delay, the *Graal Theater* (a cycle of ten plays inspired by the Arthurian legend) have been written in the same spirit. And his lighthearted Poetry for children goes back to the thousands of lines of poetry that he had learned when he was younger. Sometimes, he also inserts colored parenthesis using first red, then blue (for a parenthesis inside the red parenthesis) and green (for a parenthesis within the blue parenthesis)... The choice and order of colours follows, as he puts it, the evolution of how colours appeared in languages. This allows colours and memories, like Homer's wine coloured sea, to take over the narrative. It helps the tradition – and the poetry – to survive.

In fact, Jacques Roubaud's poetic experiments are endless and he is sometimes accused of writing too much. But then he pleads guilty. When asked by Jean-François Puff where he stands in French Literature, he declares he has been just trying not to be exaggeratedly new (Roubaud; rencontre avec Jean-François Puff, 45).

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