

HENRI MESCHONNIC / A Rhythm Party Manifesto¹

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Today, in order to be a subject, to live as a subject, I need to make a space for poems. A space. What I see most people around me calling poetry strangely and unbearably seems to refuse a space, its space, to what I call a poem.

There is, in one French poetry, for reasons which are no strangers to the myth of the genius of the French language, the institutionalized worship of poetry, which produces a programmatic absence of the poem.

Trends—they've always been around. But this trend exerts a pressure, the pressure of several, accumulated academic-isms. Atmospheric pressure: the current climate.

Contrary to this smothering of the poem by poetry is the necessity to protest, to manifest the poem, a necessity some people feel from time to time, in order to air out a speech smothered by the power of literary conformities. These conformities only aestheticize the blueprints of thought, which are the blueprints of society.

An idolatry of poetry produces voiceless mascots that pose as, and are taken for, poetry.

Against all poeticizations, I say there is a poem only if a shape of life transforms a shape of language and if reciprocally a shape of language transforms a shape of life.

I say that it is only in this way that poetry, as the activity of poems, can live in society, can do what only a poem can do for people who, without poems, wouldn't even realize that they were undoing their subjectivity and their historicity to become nothing other than products in the market of ideas, the market of feelings, and the market of manners.

Whereas the activity of any poem contributes as only it can to people's constitution as subjects. There's no subject without the poem's subject.

Because if other subjects lack the poem's subject, the subject each of us results from, there is at once a specific lack, and the unconsciousness of this lack, and this lack awaits all other subjects. The 12 or 13 subjects that we each are. And it's not the Freudian subject who's going to redeem you, or rescue the poem.

¹ French text: <<http://www.berlol.net/mescho2.htm>>.

Only the poem can link, hold together affect and concept in a single spurt of speech which acts, which transforms the ways of seeing, hearing, sensing, understanding, saying, reading. And translating. And writing.

In this way the poem is radically different from the recital of description. Which names. Which stays within the sign. And the poem is not of the sign. The poem is what teaches us to no longer make use of language.

The poem is alone in teaching us that, contrary to the appearances and habits of thought, we do not make use of language.

This idea does not mean, following a mechanical reversibility, that language makes use of us. Which would be more relevant, curiously, provided that this relevance were limited to the standard manipulations of language, such as those that readily arise in advertising, propaganda, the all-communicating non-information, and all forms of censorship. But after all it is not language which uses us; it's the manipulators who work with their hands the puppets that we are. It is they who make use of us.

But the poem makes us into specific subject-dispositions. The poem plays us out as the subjects that we wouldn't be without it. It does this via language. It's in this sense that the poem informs us that we don't make use of language, but we become language. We can no longer be content to say, except as an extremely vague preliminary, that we are language; it is more fair to say that we become language. More or less. It's a question of meaning: the meaning of language.

But only the poem that is a poem informs us. Not the poem that resembles poetry. Pre-packaged. Poetry's poem encounters only our Culture—also variable. And to the extent that it dupes us by passing as a poem, it is noxious. Because it conflates our relationships with ourselves as subjects and our relationships with ourselves in the midst of becoming language, and the two are inseparable. This poetry-product tries to make and remake us into products, instead of activities.

It's why the activity of critique is vital, not destructive. No, constructive. Constructive of subjects.

A poem transforms, which is why naming and describing are worth nothing to the poem. To describe is to name. Which is why the adjective is tattle-tale: telling the secrets of language and nouns, it doesn't stop naming, designating. Watch the adjectives!

It's why celebration, which has often been taken for poetry, is the enemy of the poem. Because celebration nominalizes. Designates. Marks out substances according to the rosary of the sacred that's taken for poetry. At the same time, it accepts. Accepts not only the world as it is, the vile "I have only good to say of it" of Saint John Perse, but celebration also accepts all the assumptions of the use of language through which it is represented. The unthought link between the genius of place and the genius of a language.

A poem doesn't celebrate, it transforms. It's in this way I take Mallarmé's statement: "Poetry is the expression, by human language, brought back to its essential rhythm, of the mysterious meanings of the appearances of existence: in this way it bestows some authenticity to our stay and constitutes the only spiritual task." Here, where certain people believe that poetry is outmoded.

As for the poem, I claim rhythm's major role in its constitution of language-subjects. Because rhythm is no longer, even if certain illiterates haven't noticed, the back-and-forth play of the metronomic grammarians: rhythm is the language-organization of the continuance we are made of. With all the alterity which founds our identity. Scram, grammarians! All you need is a poem to lose your footing.

Because rhythm is a subject-disposition. The subject-disposition. If it is through rhythm that we get the sense that we have to undo ourselves, as everything around us starts to undo itself, and if in approaching this sensation of the movement of everything we ourselves are a part of this movement, it is because rhythm renovates the meaning of things.

And if the rhythm-poem is a subject-disposition, rhythm is no longer a formal idea, form itself is no longer a formal idea, (that of the sign), but a shape of historicity, a shape of individuation. Down with the old pair, form and meaning. The poem is all that which in language fulfills this recital—the extreme subjectivization of discourse. Prose, verse or line.

A poem is a language act which only takes place once and which ceaselessly re-begins. A poem makes the subject. It doesn't stop making the subject. Of you. Where the subject is an activity, not a product.

A way, a more rhythm-ed, a more languaged, way to transpose with what Mallarmé called "authenticity" and "sojourn." Sojourning, a word still too static to really express the instability. But now "the only spiritual task," yes, I would say, yes again, in this world stolen by the vulgarity of conformism and the market of the sign,

is to renounce being a subject, a historicity in process, to be nothing but a product, an exchange-value amongst other merchandise. What the technicalization of the all-communicating only serves to accelerate.

No! Words are not made to designate things. They are there to situate us among things. If we see them as designations, we show that we have an extremely impoverished concept of language. The most common also. That's always been the poem's battle against the sign. David against Goliath. Goliath, the sign.

It's also why I believe that we are wrong to keep connecting Mallarmé's "the vacancy of all bouquets," to the banality of the sign. The sign vacates things. Above all when we oppose it to the "true life" of Rimbaud. We stay within the discontinuity of language as opposed to the continuity of life. Mallarmé knew that "the pages will badly shut" on a stone tablet.

It's here that the poem can and must strike the sign. To devastate conventional, standard canonical, representation. Because the poem is the moment of a listening. And the sign is only given to sight. It is deaf and it deafens. Only the poem can voice us, move us from voice to voice, make a listening of us, give us all language as listening. And the continuity of this listening includes, imposes a continuity among the subjects that we are, the language that we're becoming and the active ethic that is this listening, from which a politics comes. A politics of thinking. The Rhythm Party.

From that to the ridiculous and inexact revival of ivory tower poeticizing of Hölderlin by poets—"man lives poetically on this earth." A Hölderlin worn out by Heideggerian essentialization, where a pseudo-sublime fashionably situates itself. No, not that. Man lives semiotically on this earth. More than ever. And don't believe that I'm blaming Hölderlin. No, I'm blaming the Hölderlin-effect, which is not the same thing. The assembly line essentialization of language, of the poem (with the accompanying neo-Pindarism which is fashionable) and the essentialization of ethics and of politics.

Poeticization is the alibi and the maintenance of the sign. With indispensable hand-me-down quotation, the prayer-mill of poeticization: And why are there poems in this miserable time—"und vozu Dichter in durftiger Zeit?"

It is—oh yes, it's like that—against all that that the poem, more of the poem, is necessary, always the poem. Rhythm, more rhythm, always rhythm. Against the generalized semioticization of society. Which some poets believed, or made believe, they could escape with the ludic. The love of poetry instead of the poem.

Digging their wishing-well with their ditties. Poetic destitution more than a time of destitution.

There's the brilliance of the poem to think about. From which the stakes—the need to disengage Mallarmé from the interpretations which keep hammering him to the sign, by isolating the same words for 40 years: “the locutionary disappearance of the poet.” But never “the poem, enunciator.” The Mallarmé-symptom. He is reduced to only the business of meaning. Which permits us to consider him a difficult poet, the poet of difficulty. Obscurity. With no change, or so little since Max Nordau. The never-changing fools of the present.

Hammering Mallarmé to his era. Mallarmé: twice entombed. In the sign and in Symbolism. The junkshop called “the Orphic commentary of the earth.” The complaisant way to continue to not think the poem. By sacralizing the poem.

At stake: to make heard orality and the precision of Mallarmé—that's the poem. Against the foolish wisdom of the sign.

At stake: The capacity of the poem to suggest and not to name. Thus, the capacity of language. We cannot be more clear, as Mallarmé said: “to mysteriously work towards lateness or neverness.”

So, contrary to those who no longer believe in Mallarmé's word on the “Orphic commentary of Earth” and without losing any more time with those descriptivist enumerators of place names, I would say that the poem, the slightest poem, a Spanish *copla*, takes up the deferred challenge eluded by Mallarmé, who in his unrealized “Book” failed his modern Odyssey and poetry-essentializing quest, rather than hearing the infinitely renewing forms in what he wrote, more than in what he didn't write, rather than hearing all the voices which have had their own voice.

Because with each voice, Orpheus changes and begins again. An Odyssey begins again. Those with very few voices should listen to him.

Within a poem, it's not an inspiration which is at work, as an entire tradition, poetic at first, and thus poeticizing, had believed. But to depart again from Mallarmé (since to begin he had a duty), the “only duty of the poet” (and only the poem can give us what it is alone in doing) is listening to all in which we don't know that we hear, all in which we don't know, which we say, all that we don't know how to say because we believe that language is made of words.

Orpheus was one of the names of the unknown. It is a vulgar and common mistake to attach belief to the past instead of to what the past continues to designate for each of us.

And as for the *Odyssey*, the modern *Odyssey* that Mallarmé speaks of, another vulgar mistake was and is still to confuse this modern *Odyssey* with journeys and their stories, with the transference of epics and received ideas. This extends to the confusion of the epic with monument and the inordinately large. The poem shows that the *Odyssey* is within the voice. In all voice. Listening is the poem's journey.

And if listening is the voice's journey, then it abolishes in itself the academic binary between lyric and epic. As does as the definition of painting already taken up by Poussin from an Italian of the 16th century, before Maurice Denis cited it: "some colors assembled in a certain order." This definition already annulled the binary opposition between the figurative and the abstract.

It only remains to say: it's painting or it's not painting. As Baudelaire already said. It's a poem, or it's not a poem. It passes. It does anything to seem like one. To seem like poetry. To seem like thinking. Since there is a poem of thinking or there's only fakery, the maintenance of order.

Yes, in a certain sense, every poem, if it is a poem, a straying of the voice, and not a fickle reproduction of the poetry of the past, every poem has within it an epic. And it leaves to the craft museums the idea of the lyric that some contemporaries have tried to bring back as the taste of the day, by making it recite a rosary of traditionalisms with the ordinary ignorance of the subject of the poem: the confusion between the I and the me, between voice and song, between language and music. Confusions, it is true, which even poetry's past has helped to give birth.

But the poem signals life. Life, which resembles the poem, because life wants to possess experience of poetry, putting on airs if it can't be, if it can't signal the book.

Consequence: this binary recycles the one ordinarily posed between life and literature. And a poem is that which is most opposed to literature, in the sense of the book market. A poem is made in the reversible relation between a life become a language, and a language become a life.

Outside the poem, the "anything goes" of pretension proliferates these pitches which keep repeating and serving the misinterpretation of Rimbaud's saying: "We must be absolutely modern." Decidedly there is nothing more present-tense than the "Under attack I retort that my contemporaries don't know how to read," of Mallarmé. Once again it's the fool of the present who utters these misinterpretations. The same one who is the fool of language.

A poem is made from what we go towards, what we don't know, and from that which we draw on, take refuge from, that which is vital to recognize.

For a poem, it is necessary to learn to refuse, to work up a whole list of refusals. Poetry only changes if we refuse it. Just as the world is only changed by those who refuse it.

I include among my refusals: No to the sign and its community. No to this bloated poverty that confuses language and a language and speaks only of a language without knowing what it says, speaks only of a memory of a language, as if a language were a subject; no to the poverty that speaks of an essential relationship between the Alexandrine and the genius of the French language. Don't forget to breathe every 12 syllables. Have a measured heart. A mythology which is without a doubt no stranger to the homecoming played out by the stylish games of academic versification. And if it was just for a laugh, it's no good. Already Aristotle had identified those who write verse to hide the fact they have nothing to say.

No to the consensus-driven sign, in the generalized encoding of the media-world.

No, we don't go to things. Because we don't stop transforming them or being transformed by them, through language.

No to the poeticizing phraseology that speaks of a contact with the real. To the opposition between poetry and the external world, which opens only to speaking about. Enumerating. Describing. Naming again. It's not the world which is there, it's the relationship with the world. And this relationship is transformed by a poem. And the invention of a thought is this poem of thinking.

No, poetry is not in the world, or in things. Contrary to what some poets have said. Rash language. Poetry can be only in the subject which is subject to the world and subject to language as the face of life. We'd confused the feeling for things and things themselves. This confusion leads to naming, to describing. Quickly punished naïveté. The proof, if any were needed, that poetry is not in the world, is that the non-poets are there, as are poets, and they don't make a poem of the world. A horse goes around the world and remains a horse.

Living is not enough. Everyone lives. Feeling is not enough. Everyone feels. Experience is not enough. The discourse of experience is not enough. If there is to be a poem.

No to the illusion that living precedes writing. That seeing the world modifies the gaze. When it's the opposite: the demand for a meaning which isn't there and the

transformation of meaning by all the meanings that change our relationship with the world.

If living precedes writing, life is only life and writing is only literature. And in the end it shows. At least we must learn to recognize the difference. Teaching ought to attend to that.

No to seeing in place of hearing. Some poets have believed that they were speaking of poetry by entirely emphasizing the look, the gaze. They lack the sense of language. The turmoils of the gaze are effects not causes. A manner of speaking which masks its own lack of thought. A strong opposition takes place between thinking via received ideas, and thinking one's voice, having voice in one's thinking.

No to Rimbaldisms which sees poetry in Rimbaud's departure from the poem.

No when the interior and exterior are opposed, when the imaginary and the real are opposed, this apparently undebatable fact of opposition. Which prevents us from thinking that we are only their relationship.

No to metaphor taken for the thought of things, the sole way to speak, when it's only a pirouette, prettiness.

No to the separation of affect and concept, that cliché of the sign which makes not only the faux-poem but the faux-thought.

No to the opposition between individualism and collectivity, this social effect of the sign, this unthinkability of the subject, and therefore of the poem, which turns into literature, to poetry as parlor game, that ring-a-ding-ding of renga—those pretend group-made poems.

No to the confusion between subjectivity, that psychology where lyricism got stuck, those instruments we force to sing, and the subjectivisation of the subject-face which is the poem.

No, no when we oppose, so conveniently, transgression to convention, invention to tradition. Because for a long time there's been an academicism of transgression as there is an academicism of tradition. And because, in both cases, we oppose the modern to the classic, by mixing the classic with a neo-retro. And in both cases, we have misrecognized the subject of the poem, its radical invention, which always makes the poem and which relegates these oppositions to their confusion, the unthinkability that masks the totality of the market.

No as well to the easy opposition of ease and difficulty, transparency and obscurity. No to the clichés of hermetism. The sign is largely responsible because it irrationalizes

and effectively obscures its own unthinkability. It is that brilliance which is obscure. The cliché of French brilliance. As for the poem, we won't make it mend an old wound.

No to poetry as the endorsement of the poem since then the poem is immediately an intention. Of poetry. Which can produce only literature. The poetry of poetry is no longer poetry just as the philosophical subject isn't the subject of the poem.

To protest isn't to give lessons nor to predict. There is protest where the intolerable is. A protest can't be tolerable. That's why a protest is intolerant. The mushy dogma of the sign, invisible, doesn't pass for intolerance. But if everything in it were intolerable there would be no need to protest. A protest is the expression of urgency. Stop taking it for a transgression. If there were no risk, there would be no more protest. Liberalism doesn't show that it's the absence of liberty.

And a poem is a risk. The work of thinking is also a risk. To think is what a poem is. The only thing that makes a poem is a poem: that which has got to be a poem in order to be a poem, and that which has got to be a thought in order to be thinking. Thus the necessity: to think of value and meaning inseparably. To think this inseparability as a universal of the poem and of thought. The historicity of value and meaning is their necessity.

Because by principle a thought, even if it is particular, always takes place within an order of experience, and it will always and necessarily be true. So it is by no means a lesson for what they call the coming century. No more than it is the report-card of this century, this effect of language, the temporality-effect of the sign: this is the discontinuity of century-ism.

All in all, the poem protests, and for the poem there is the protest that refuses the separation between language and life. To recognize the separation as an opposition not between language and life but between a representation of language and a representation of life which repositions the sham interdiction of Adorno (that it is barbaric and impossible to write poems after Auschwitz), that some try to turn around by playing out Paul Celan as an example, while they remain at the same impasse that Wittgenstein showed with the example of pain. Pain can't tell of itself. But precisely—a poem doesn't tell. It makes. And a thought intervenes.

These refusals, all these refusals, are indispensable for the coming of a poem. To writing. To reading. So that to live transforms itself into a poem. So that a poem transforms living.

The pinnacle, in this seeming paradox, is that it is not just a question of self-evident truths but of misrecognized truths. Which is the comedy of thought.

But it is only via these refusals, these pulses of thought, that there have always been poems, breathing in the unbreathable. And a thinking of the poem is necessary to language and to society.

NOTA BENE: This version of November 2, 1999, constitutes the second and provisionally definitive one.