

## The Rhythm Party Manifesto

HENRI MESCHONNIC

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*Henri Meschonnic, who died in April 2009, was one of the most important figures in French poetry and poetics in the latter half of the 20th century. Although he was firstly a poet, he is perhaps most famous for his magnum opus of poetics, the Critique du rythme (Lagrasse: Verdier, 1982), in which he argued that rhythm far exceeds metre or the segmentation of language, but also involves the continuity of language and experience. Here and elsewhere, we see him probe the interrelations between poetics, translation, philosophy, and linguistics, in order to see the 'poem' in its individuality (as opposed to an essentialised 'poetry' that he saw his contemporaries celebrate, as though in exclusion) as inextricable from all of these disciplines. The rhythms of poetry also attained in his work an irreducibly political import, for rhythm is an inalienable moment in the accomplishment of an individual subject: a political system that tries to eradicate rhythm, in other words, will cut human beings off from the full texture of their experience. He has never enjoyed a wide reception in the English speaking world, partly as he cut against the grain of much of the French thought to have been taken up in literary studies and poetics in Britain and America, but also partly due to the difficulties in translating his work. These difficulties—which, unfortunately, will become increasingly evident as the 'manifesto' translated here progresses—arise from his dense workings of the possibilities of the French language, not only regarding the semantic valency of words but also the shifts, often at first imperceptible, of style, register, and modes of address, which characterise his style. Yet Meschonnic*

*was himself a celebrated translator, most notably of the Old Testament, where he saw a rhythm that could not be attributed either to verse or prose. The ostensible purpose of the current translation being to introduce his work to an Anglophone audience, it has not always been possible to provide the same rigour of translation to Meschonnic's prose rhythms as he did to those works he translated; one can witness the rhythms of the manifesto first hand in his Célébration de la poésie (Lagrasse: Verdier, 2001), or at <http://www.berlol.net/mescho2.htm>.*

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Today I need, in order to be a subject, to live as a subject, to make a place for poems. A place. What I see around me being called 'poetry' for the most part tends—strangely, infuriatingly—to refuse a place, its place, to what I call a 'poem'.

There is, in French-style poetry, and for reasons not foreign to the myth of the genius of the French language, the institutionalisation of a cult devoted to poetry which involves a concerted absence of poems.

There have always been fashions. But this fashion exerts a pressure, the pressure of many accumulated academicisms. An atmospheric pressure: the air of the times.

Opposed to this suffocation of the poem by poetry, there is a necessity to demonstrate [*manifeste*],<sup>1</sup> to demonstrate the poem, a need that some of us sense from time to time, in order to escape a speech suffocated by the power of literary conformisms that do nothing except to aestheticise schemas of thought which are in fact schemas of society.

An idolatry of poetry produces voiceless fetishes which pass themselves off as, and are taken as, poetry.

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<sup>1</sup> Meschonnic's use of *manifeste* here involves a verbal punning central to his argument. It is at once to 'demonstrate' (as in, to follow a political demonstration), to 'render manifest', and to put in a 'manifesto'.

Opposed to all poetisings, I say that there is a poem only if a form of life transforms a form of language and if reciprocally a form of language transforms a form of life.

I say that it is only in this way that poetry, as an activity of poems, can live in society, can do to people that which only a poem can do—people who, without this, will not even know that they are being desubjectivised, dehistoricised, until they are no longer themselves but rather products of the marketplace of ideas, the marketplace of feelings, of behaviour.

Instead of the activity of everything that is poem contributing, as only this activity can, to constituting people as subjects. No subject without the subject of the poem.

For if the subject of the poem is lacking from the other subjects of which each one of us is the result, there is at the same time a specific lack and an unawareness of this lack, and this lack impacts on all other subjects. The baker's dozen of subjects that we are. And it isn't the Freudian subject that will save you. Or will save the poem.

Only the poem can unite, hold affect and concept in one mouthful of speech which acts, transforms our manner of seeing, hearing, feeling, understanding, talking, reading. Translating. Writing.

In this the poem is radically different from the story, from description. Both of which name. Which remain within the sign. And the poem is not of the sign.

The poem is what teaches us not to use language. It alone teaches us that, contrary to appearances and to habits of thought, we do not use language.

Which is not to say that, as an unthinking inversion of terms would have it, language uses us. Something which, curiously enough, would have all the more relevance on the condition of our delimiting this relevance, of limiting it to kinds of manipulation, as we find incessantly in operation in advertising, propaganda, mass-communication, non-information, and all forms of censorship. But then it is

not language which uses us. It is those who manipulate, who pull the strings of the puppets who we are in their hands—it is they who use us.

But the poem makes of us a specific subject-form(er).<sup>2</sup> It exercises in us a subject that we would not be without it. That is, through language. It is in this sense that it teaches us that we do not use language. But we become language. One can no longer be satisfied simply to say, if other than as a somewhat vague presupposition that we are language. It is more accurate to say that we become language. More or less. A question of sense [*sens*].<sup>3</sup> Of the sense of language.

But only the poem that is poem teaches us this. Not that which resembles ‘poetry’. All made. In advance. The poem of ‘poetry’. This poem encounters merely our culture, itself highly variable. And, to the extent that it tricks us, in making itself pass for a poem, it is harmful. For it muddles both our relation to ourselves as subjects and our relation to ourselves as we are in the process of becoming language. And the two are inseparable. This product serves to make and remake us into a product. Instead of an activity.

This is why critical activity is vital. Not destructive. No, constructive—constructive of subjects. A poem transforms. That’s why naming, describing, are worth nothing to the poem. And to describe is to name. That is why adjectives are revealing. Revealing of our confidence in language—and this confidence in language names, does not stop naming. Look at the adjectives.

This is why to celebrate, which has so often been taken for poetry, is the enemy of the poem. For to celebrate is to name. To designate. To enumerate substances like beads of the rosary of that sacred taken to be poetry. At the same time as accepting it. Not only accepting the world as it is, the ignoble ‘I have only good to say of it’ of Saint-John Perse, but accepting every notion of the language through

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<sup>2</sup> *Forme-sujet*: Meschonnic’s compound brings together both that which forms a subject, and the form a subject takes.

<sup>3</sup> The French word *sens* is another which Meschonnic employs in its semantic fullness, to encompass ‘direction’, an individual ‘meaning’ and a more generalised ‘meaningfulness’, and also the ‘senses’ themselves. Particularly noteworthy here is that *sens du langage* can mean a sense *for* language, a sense *of* language, but also ‘sense’ such as it takes place *in* language and languages.

which it is represented. The unthought link between the genius of place and the genius of language.

A poem does not celebrate, it transforms. This is what I take Mallarmé to be saying when he states: 'Poetry is the expression, through human language brought back to its essential rhythm, of the mysterious meaning of aspects of existence: in this way it gifts authenticity to our time on earth [*séjour*] and constitutes the only spiritual task'. There where some believe that it's out of fashion.

For the poem, I insist upon the decisive role of rhythm in the constitution of language-subjects. Because rhythm is no longer, even if certain philistines haven't realised it, the alternation of the tick-tock on the cheek of the metronomic metrician. But rhythm is the language-organisation of the continuum of which we are made. With all the otherness which founds our identity. Come in, metricians, it merely requires a poem for you to lose your feet.

For rhythm is a subject-form(er). The subject-form(er). That it renews the meaning of things, that it is through rhythm that we reach the sense that we have of our being undone [*défaire*], that everything around us happens as it undoes itself [*défaire*], and that, approaching this sensation of the movement of everything, we ourselves are part of this movement.

And if the poem-rhythm is a subject-form(er), rhythm is no longer a formal notion—form itself is no longer a formal notion, a notion of the sign—but a form of historicisation, a form of individuation. Down with the old couple of form and meaning. Poem is all that, in language, realises this refrain that is a maximal subjectivisation of discourse. Prose, verse, or line.

A poem is an act of language which only takes place once and which restarts ceaselessly. Because it makes subjects. Does not stop making subjects. Making you. When it is an activity, not a product.

This is a manner more rhythmic, more language, of transposing what Mallarmé called 'authenticity' and 'time on earth'. 'Time on earth', a term still too static to express instability itself. The 'the only spiritual task', yes, I'd say once more yes, in

this world swept away by the vulgarity of conformisms and the market of the sign, or alternatively to abandon the attempt to be a subject, a historicity in progress, in order to be just a product, an exchange value among other commodities. What the technicisation of mass communication merely accelerates.

No, words are not made to designate things. They are there to situate us amongst things. If one sees them as designations, one demonstrates the most impoverished idea of language. And the most common. It is the combat, but as it always has been, of the poem against the sign. David against Goliath. Goliath, the sign.

This is also why I believe that one would be wrong to affix, once and for all, Mallarmé's 'the absent of all bouquets' to the banality of the sign. The sign absent of things. Especially when one opposes it to the 'true life' of Rimbaud.<sup>4</sup> One remains within the discontinuity of language opposed to the continuity of life. Mallarmé himself knew that on a stone 'pages will only close again with difficulty'.

It is here that the poem can and must do battle with the sign. Must devastate the representation that is agreed upon, taught, canonical. Because the poem is the moment of a listening [*éconte*]. And the sign merely brings us to see. It is deaf, and it renders deaf. Only the poem can put into voice, make us move from voice to voice, make of us a listening. Give us all of language as listening. And the continuity of this listening includes, imposes a continuity between the subjects that we are, the language that we become, the ethics in action that is this listening, whence the politics of the poem. A politics of thought. The 'rhythm party'.

Whence also the derisory quality of the interminable refrain by poets of the ivory-tower poetism, in Hölderlin, of 'poetically man dwells upon this earth—*dichterisch wohnet der Mensch auf dieser Erde*', a Hölderlin passed through the essentialisation of Heidegger, where the currently fashionable pseudo-sublime situates itself. No, of course not. Man dwells semiotically on this earth. More than ever. Not that I'm taking issue with Hölderlin. No, I'm taking issue with the

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<sup>4</sup> Rimbaud, 'Une saison en enfer': 'La vraie vie est absente. Nous ne sommes pas au monde'.

Hölderlin-effect, which isn't the same thing. The chain link essentialisation in language, in the poem (with the neo-Pindarism that comes out of it, and which also is fashionable), and the essentialisation of ethics and politics.

Poetism is the alibi and the preservation of the sign. With its *de rigueur* cliché-quote, the prayer-mill of poetising: 'and wherefore poets in a time of distress?—*und wozu Dichter in dürftiger Zeit?*'

It is—oh yes, it's like that—against this that we need poems, again poems, always poems. Rhythm, again rhythm, always rhythm. Against the generalised semiotisation of society. Which some poets have believed (or given that impression) they could escape through the ludic. The love of poetry, instead of the poem. Digging their own grave with their rhymes. Poetic distress more than time of distress.

The clarity of the poem remains to be thought through. Whence what is at stake, in the necessity of extricating Mallarmé from the interpretation that continues to flatten him upon the sign, again and again isolating over the last forty years the same words, the 'elocutionary disappearance of the poet'. But never 'the poem, enunciator'. Mallarmé-symptom. Reduced merely to questions of meaning. Which allows him to continue to be seen as a difficult poet, the poet of 'difficulty'. Of the obscure. No change, or very little, since Max Nordau. Always the imbeciles of the now.

In dragging Mallarmé back into his epoch. Doubly closed in, Mallarmé: in the sign, and in symbolism. Anachronism, 'the orphic elucidation of the earth'. The complacent means for continuing not to think the poem. Whilst at the same time sacralising poetry.

What is at stake—if we are to render audible Mallarmé's orality and clarity—is the poem. Against the learned idiocy of the sign.

What is at stake—suggesting rather than naming as a universal of the poem. Thus a universal of language. One cannot be clearer, when he said: 'to work with mystery with a view to the later or to the never'.

Now, contrary to those who no longer believe in Mallarmé's words on 'the orphic elucidation of the earth', and without losing any more time with some descriptivistic enumerators of names of towns, I would say that the poem, the very smallest poem, a Spanish 'copla', is our superseding [*reléver*]<sup>5</sup> this challenge postponed, eluded in Mallarmé's non-realisation of his 'Book', in essentialising poetry, instead of hearing the endlessly renewed forms of Mallarmé's own 'modern Odyssey', in what he wrote rather than in what he did not write, and in all the voices that have been their own voice.

Because, with each voice, Orpheus changes, and starts anew. An Odyssey starts anew. One must hear it, oh men of little voice.

With a poem, it isn't a mode of seeing [*voyance*] that is at work, as an entire tradition, initially poetic, later poetising, believed. But 'the only task of the poet', to start off again from Mallarmé—for initially there is one, and only the poem can give us what is its alone to do—is to listen to everything that one doesn't know that one hears, everything that one doesn't know that one says, and everything one doesn't know how to say, because one believes language to be made of words.

Orpheus was one of the names of the unknown. A vulgar and common error is to believe him stuck in the past. Instead of seeing that what he designates continues in each and every one of us.

And 'The Odyssey', the 'modern Odyssey' of which Mallarmé speaks, another vulgar error has been, and still is, to confuse this with voyages and their stories, with the decalcomania of epics and the received ideas that we had of them. Just like confusing the monumental and the unwieldy. The poem demonstrates that the odyssey is in the voice. In all voices. Its voyage is listening.

And if listening is the voyage of the voice, the academic opposition between lyric and epic is thereby abolished. Just as the definition of painting, already borrowed by Poussin from a XVIth century Italian master, before being restated

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<sup>5</sup> This is the word French translators of Hegel employ for *aufheben* (to supersede or sublate).



by Maurice Denis, as ‘colours assembled in a particular order’, cancels out in advance the opposition between figuration and abstraction.

What remains is simply: it is painting, or it is not painting. As Baudelaire was already saying. It’s a poem, or it’s not a poem. It looks like a poem. It does all it can to look like a poem. It resembles poetry. Resembles thought. For there is a poem of thought, or else there is merely a fake [*simili*]. Nothing but the preservation of order.

Yes, in a new sense, each poem, if it is a poem, an adventure in voice, some sort of reproduction of the poetry of the past, has something of epic within it. And let’s leave to the art museum and traditions of language the notion of lyricism that some contemporaries have tried to reintroduce into the taste of the times, by making it a prayer of the rosary of traditionalisms: the confusions between the ‘I’ and the ‘me’, between voice and song, between language and music, in a common ignorance of the subject of the poem. Confusions, it is true, that poetry’s own history has contributed to bring to life.

But the poem gives signs of life. What resembles it, because it wants to be poetic, to have the air of a poem even if not to be one itself, gives signs of being a book.<sup>6</sup>

The consequence: this opposition coincides with that normally made between life and literature. And a poem is that which is most opposed to literature. In the sense of the book trade. A poem happens in the reversibility between a life become language and a language become life.

Outside the poem abounds the bullshit of pretentionisms, those constructions that continually repeat the nonsense so widespread about Rimbaud’s phrase: ‘Il faut être absolument moderne’. Decidedly, nothing is more up-to-date than Mallarmé’s ‘My riposte in the face of their aggression, is that my contemporaries don’t know how to read’. Again the imbecile of the now who speaks, in this nonsense. Who is also the imbecile of language.

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<sup>6</sup> Here Meschonnic is punning on *vivre* [to live], and *livre* [book].

A poem is made out of what we are going towards, which we do not know, and what we draw back from, which is vital to recognise.

For a poem, one must learn to refuse, to set to work an entire list of refusals. Poetry will only change if we refuse it. Just as the world will only be changed by those who refuse it.

Amongst my refusals I put: no to the sign and to its society. No to that overblown impoverishment that confuses language in general with an individual language [*le langage et la langue*], and speaks only of a language [*langue*] without knowing what it is on about, of the memory of a language, as if a language was a subject, and of an essential relation between the alexandrine and the genius of the French language. Don't forget to breathe every twelve syllables. Have a metrical heart. A mythology by no means unrelated to return to fashion of the ludic in academic versification. And if it was meant to make us laugh, it didn't work. Aristotle had already recognised those who write in verse to hide the fact that they've nothing to say.

No to the sign-consensus, in the generalised semiotisation of the world of communication.

No, one does not get to the things themselves. For one does not cease to transform them and be transformed by them, through language.

No to the poetising phraseology that speaks of a contact with the real. To the opposition between poetry and external world. Which leads poetry merely to speak about. To enumerate. To describe. Again—to name. It isn't the world that is there, it is the relation to the world. And this relation is transformed by a poem. And the invention of a thought is this poem of thought.

No, poetry is not within the world, within things. Contrary to what poets have said. A linguistic imprudence. It can be nowhere but in the subject who is subject in the world and subject within language as sense of her life. We have confused the feeling of things and the things themselves. This confusion instructs us to name, to describe. A naïveté quickly punished. The proof, if such was needed, that poetry

isn't within the world, is that non-poets are in the world just as poets are, and do not make of this world a poem. A horse goes around the world and is still a horse.

To live is not enough. Everyone lives. To feel is not enough. Everyone has feelings. Experience isn't enough. The discourse on experience isn't enough. For there to be a poem.

No to the illusion that living precedes writing. That to see the world modifies the gaze. When it is the opposite: the need for a sense that isn't there, and the transformation of sense by all the senses that changes our relation with the world.

If living precedes writing, life isn't anything except life, writing nothing but literature. And that's evident. At least one must learn to recognise this. This is what teaching should be.

No to seeing taken to mean hearing. Some poets have believed that they speak of poetry in stake everything on seeing, on the gaze. What is lacking is a sense of language. The revolutions in the gaze are effects, not causes. A manner of speaking which hides its own unthought. The strong opposition lies between thinking via received ideas, and thinking one's voice, having one's voice in one's thinking.

No to the Rimbaudism that sees Rimbaud as—poetry taking off from outside the poem.

No to when one opposes inside and outside, imaginary and real, that apparently unquestionable self-evidence. It prevents us from thinking that we are nothing other than the relation of the two.

No to metaphor taken as the thought of things, when it is simply a means of circling around them, being pretty instead of being the sole way of saying.

No to the separation between affect and concept, that cliché of the sign. Which makes not only the fake poem, but also the fake thought.

No to the opposition between individualism and collectivity, that social effect of the sign, that unthought of the subject, thus of the poem, which treats literature, poetry like a party game, that old-fangled tune [*rengaine*] of the 'renga'—those would-be poems that one makes in teams.

No to the confusion between subjectivity, that psychology, in which lyricism remains trapped, those metres one has people sing, and the subjectivisation of the subject-form that is the poem.

No, no to the convenient opposition between transgression and convention, invention and tradition. Because there has been for a long time an academicism of transgression just as there is an academicism of tradition. And because, in both cases, one opposes the modern to the classic, in merging the classic with neo-retro, and in both cases one has misrecognised the subject of the poem, its radical invention which has always made the poem, and which returns these oppositions to their confusion, to their unthought, masked by the dictates of the market.

No also to the ease which opposes the easy and the difficult, transparency to obscurity, no to clichés on hermeticism. The sign is there for good reason, irrationalising its own unthought, which it indeed renders obscure. It is its clarity which is obscure. Like French clarity [*la clarté française*]. But the poem, one shouldn't play that old trick on it again.

No to poetry as that at which the poem aims, for straight away it becomes an intention. To poetise. Which can't therefore create anything but literature. The poetry of poetry being no more poetry than the philosophical subject is subject of the poem.

To demonstrate [*manifeste*] is not to give lessons, nor to predict. There is a manifesto when there is something intolerable. A manifesto can no longer tolerate. That is why it is intolerant. The soft, invisible dogmatism of the sign does not itself come across as intolerant. But if everything in it were tolerable, there would be no need for a manifesto [*pas besoin de manifeste*]. A manifesto is the expression of emergency. Even if it just comes across as incongruous. If there were no risk, there would no longer be a manifesto. Liberalism does not show that it is the absence of liberty.

And a poem is a risk. The work of thinking also is a risk. To think what a poem is. What makes a poem a poem. What a poem must be to be a poem. And for a

thought to be a thought. This necessity, to think inseparably value and definition. To think this inseparability as a universal of poem and thought. Their historicity, which is their necessity.

Even if this thinking is particular, it has in principle taken place in a practice, it will necessarily always be true. It is thus in no way a lesson for that which is called the century to come. No more than the academy's summing-up of the century. This effect of language, the temporality-effect of the sign. The discontinuity of centuryism.

To summarise, the poem demonstrates and what the poem must demonstrate is the refusal of the separation between language and life. To recognise this as an opposition not between language and life, but between a representation of language and a representation of life. Which resituates Adorno's intended interdiction (that it is barbaric and impossible to write poems after Auschwitz), which some people wish to invert with Paul Celan in the role of the inverter, whilst they remain in the same unthought, as Wittgenstein shows through the example of pain. It cannot say itself. But then, a poem does not say. It does. And a thinking intervenes.

This refusal, all these refusals are indispensable so that a poem should come—to be written, to be read. So that living should transform itself into a poem. So that a poem should transform living.

To cap it all, if this also seems somewhat paradoxical, this is because it isn't simply a question of truisms. But misrecognitions. This is the comical in thinking.

But it is only by these refusals, which are the heartbeats of thought, so as to breathe in the unbreathable, that there have always been poems. And that a thinking of the poem is necessary to language, to society.

*translated by David Nowell Smith<sup>7</sup>*

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<sup>7</sup> I would like to thank Geoffrey Nowell-Smith for his help and advice in preparing this translation.