

In the context of *Report (Not Announcement)*, I am happy to introduce French writer Jacques Jouet. Jacques Jouet, among different activities, is one of the most prolific members of OuLiPo (Ouvroir de Littérature Potentielle), a group created in the early sixties in Paris by Raymond Queneau and François Le Lionnais, among others. This group has included until now writers, mathematicians, and artists like Marcel Duchamp. The purpose of this group's activity is to build and apply mathematical and linguistic rules in literature ; as one of its members said, "to build the maze from which we will attempt to escape." The following interview with Jacques Jouet focuses on Metro Poems, a writing practice he defined and experienced in subway travels. As this method is directly linked to Oulipo's constraints, I have asked the author about the group's activities nowadays. If the Metro Poems obviously need an urban context to be experienced, everybody is able to notice that the main purpose of this practice is to provide a place for poetry in daily life.

METRO POEMS

By Jacques Jouet

Translated from the French by Ian Monk

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Poèmes de métro have been published in French by P.O.L. in 2000.

What is a metro poem?

From time to time, I write metro poems. This poem being an example.

Do you want to know what a metro poem consists of? Let's suppose you do. Here, then, is what a metro poem consists of.

A metro poem is a poem composed during a journey in the metro.

There are as many lines in a metro poem as there are stations in your journey, minus one.

The first line is composed mentally between the first two stations of your journey (counting the station you got on at).

It is then written down when the train stops at the second station.

The second line is composed mentally between the second and the third stations of your journey.

It is then written down when the train stops at the third station. And so on.

You must not write anything down when the train is moving.

You must not compose when the train has stopped.

The poem's last line is written down on the platform of the last station.

If your journey necessitates one or more changes of line, the poem will then have two or more stanzas.

An unscheduled stop between two stations is always an awkward moment in the writing of a metro poem.

Poetry

1

The opening line will immediately reveal an opening conviction:
if metro poems are good at speaking knowledgeably about experience, or about poetry,
then the external tick-tock, against which discourse buckles down,
is quite exactly mimicked by the time it takes to go between two stations.

This regular alternation of darkness and light from the window
Chimes neatly with the stripes of a zebra when rearing up on its hind legs,
black, white, the filling of lines and the spaces between lines,
vibration, silence, waiting for the oral performance that I'm imagining on Tuesday 28
November

next. I'm writing with a sort of exaltation,
more than any other I've experienced when writing metro poems,
caused by the risk of having to read out the poem aloud in public
and conscious of the advantages of distancing and correction which here, largely speaking, are
impossible and undesirable
and which will find their precise counterbalance in the energy generated by the restriction of
this situation.

I always have in mind the fact that the number of lines in the poem has been predetermined by
the place where I've decided to go:
the concluding line wasn't forecast, but turns out well, being written down on the platform of
LA MUETTE¹ station.

¹ 'The Dumb Woman'.

2

Yesterday's poem took up the time of a necessary and unavoidable journey.
The only reason for today's journey is the necessity of the poem.
Yesterday's blatant coincidence with the "dumbness"
should be raised pointedly in order to go on speaking about poetry
which could be as silent as the tomb proverbially is,
given that poetry, among all the other uses of language,
is the only one able to natter on about nothing
while remaining unafraid that anyone will grasp just how nothing now tastes like something.

What a fine almost civic justification,
emptying language absolutely and filling it absolutely,
thus making a straw tongue to allow the void to take over and then break the camel's back,
gaping and singing,
alternatively or at once,
if you can imagine a heavy dinner leaving your guts empty.
The apologies pronounced by a homeless newspaper vendor
easily outpace the narrowness of my thought.
By shrinking my head a little into my shoulders, I let that repetitive downpour of reality pass
by.
But the next line has problems shaking itself dry.
It's probably soaking things up instead.

If, in poetry, language looks rhyme in the eye,
the steps of the staircase cut out according to rules,
the apologies of the newspaper vendor or the headlines of the evening press
exist, but are in practical terms overwhelmed by the diapason of the poem,
a shared reason for going on that's necessary and futile,
and soon cast doubt over which is the diapason to which.
Between each of the lines, the poem's superposable elements,
there is a void occupied by the surrounding air,
the air and all the other words that aren't poetry
because they are part of the chaos of journeys crossing randomly.
Disciplinary poetry.

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Title: "Metro Poems" and Others
By: François Piron
From: the metro and/or somewhere in Paris

3

Poetry isn't natural, doesn't have green fingers, in fact, it has no fingers at all.
Poetry is artificial to an extent that nothing else in the world is artificial.
Poetry is so artificial that it's hard to credit quite how far it's gone.
With long strides, poetry flees from what's natural.

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From those who ask nothing from poetry, poetry still asks
something, while asking itself if, over and above its modest tenacity, it shouldn't cross over
more wilfully
the mental *cordons sanitaires* set up by the contemporary vice squad.
There are gaps through which the stainless steel blade of a neighbourhood poem could be
slipped.

Proclaiming the virtue of a fringe profession sounds to me like a lousy bout of sulking in
public.

I don't like the idea of poetry being pure, clean and innocent,
unapplied, inapplicable, or outside literature.

Poems shouldn't be afraid of being composed on tee-shirts,
or the poet being paid per line.

All orders accepted.

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INTERVIEW

François Piron: *Here is a list, coming with my first question: this is a list of the stations of the Paris metro, in alphabetical order. My question is: did you cross all of them? In other words, did you write the Metro Poems during your daily casual movements, or did you travel with the purpose of writing? How do you define the Metro Poems: as a literary genre or as a constitutional walk?*

Abbesses; Alésia; Alexandre Dumas; Alfort - Ecole Vétérinaire; Alma - Marceau; Anatole France; Anvers; Argentine; Arts et Métiers; Assemblée Nationale; Auber; Aubervilliers - Pantin Quatre Chemins; Avenue Emile Zola; Avenue Foch; Avenue Henri Martin; Avron; Balard; Barbès - Rochechouart; Bastille; Bd Masséna; Bd Victor; Bel Air; Belleville; Bérault; Bercy; Bibliothèque; Billancourt; Bir Hakeim; Blanche; Bobigny - Pablo Picasso; Bobigny - Pantin - Raymond Queneau; Boissière; Bolivar; Bonne Nouvelle; Botzaris; Boucicaut; Boulainvilliers; Boulets - Montreuil; Boulogne - Jean Jaurès; Boulogne - Pont de Saint-Cloud; Bourse; Bréguet - Sabin; Brochant; Buttes Chaumont; Buzenval; Cadet; Cambronne; Campo Formio; Cardinal Lemoine; Carrefour Pleyel; Censier - Daubenton; Champ de Mars - Tour Eiffel; Champs Elysées - Clémenceau; Chardon - Lagache; Charenton - Ecoles; Charles de Gaulle - Etoile; Charles Michels; Charonne; Château d'Eau; Château de Vincennes; Château Landon; Château Rouge; Châtelet; Châtelet - Les Halles; Châtillon - Montrouge; Chaussée d'Antin - La Fayette; Chemin Vert; Chevaleret; Cité; Cité Universitaire; Cluny - La Sorbonne; Colonel Fabien; Commerce; Concorde; Convention; Corentin Cariou; Corentin Celton; Corvisart; Courcelles; Couronnes; Créteil - L'Echat; Créteil - Préfecture; Créteil - Université; Crimée; Croix de Chavaux; Danube; Daumesnil; Denfert Rochereau; Dugommier; Dupleix; Duroc; Ecole Militaire; Edgar Quinet; Eglise d'Auteuil; Eglise de Pantin; Esplanade de La Défense; Etienne Marcel; Europe; Exelmans; Faidherbe - Chaligny; Falguière; Félix Faure; Filles du Calvaire; Fort d'Aubervilliers; Franklin-D. Roosevelt; Gabriel Péri; Gaîté; Gallieni; Gambetta; Gare d'Austerlitz; Gare de l'Est; Gare de Lyon; Gare du Nord; Garibaldi; Gentilly; George V; Glacière; Goncourt; Grande Arche de La Défense; Guy Môquet; Havre - Caumartin; Hoche; Hôtel de Ville; Iéna; Invalides; Issy - Plaine; Ivry sur Seine; Jacques Bonsergent; Jasmin; Jaurès; Javel; Jourdain; Jules Joffrin; Jussieu; Kennedy - Radio-France; Kléber; La Chapelle; La Courneuve - 8 Mai 1945; La Fourche; La Motte-Picquet - Grenelle; La Muette; La Plaine - Voyageurs; Lamarck - Caulaincourt; Latour Maubourg; Laumière; Le Kremlin Bicêtre; Le Peletier; Ledru Rollin; Les Gobelins; Les Halles; Les Sablons; Liberté; Liège; Louis Blanc; Louise Michel; Lourmel; Louvre - Rivoli; Luxembourg; Mabillon; Madeleine; Mairie d'Issy; Mairie d'Ivry; Mairie de Clichy; Mairie de Montreuil; Mairie de Saint-Ouen; Mairie des Lilas; Maison Blanche; Maisons-Alfort - Alfortville; Maisons-Alfort - Les Juilliottes; Maisons-Alfort - Stade; Malakoff - Plateau de Vanves; Malakoff - Rue Etienne Dolet; Malesherbes; Maraîchers; Marcadet - Poissonniers; Marcel Sembat; Marx Dormoy; Maubert - Mutualité; Ménilmontant; Michel Bizot; Michel-Ange - Auteuil; Michel-Ange - Molitor; Mirabeau; Miromesnil; Monceau; Montgallet; Montparnasse - Bienvenue; Mouton Duvernet; Musée d'Orsay; Nation; Nationale; Notre-Dame de Lorette; Notre-Dame des Champs; Oberkampf; Odéon; Opéra; Ourcq; Palais Royal - Musée du Louvre; Parmentier; Passy; Pasteur; Pelleport; Père Lachaise; Péreire; Pernety; Philippe Auguste; Picpus; Pierre Curie; Pigalle; Place d'Italie; Place de Clichy; Place

des Fêtes; Place Monge; Plaisance; Poissonnière; Pont de l'Alma; Pont de Levallois - Bécon; Pont de Neuilly; Pont de Sèvres; Pont Marie; Pont Neuf; Port Royal; Porte d'Auteuil; Porte d'Italie; Porte d'Ivry; Porte d'Orléans; Porte Dauphine; Porte de Bagnolet; Porte de Champerret; Porte de Charenton; Porte de Choisy; Porte de Clichy; Porte de Clignancourt; Porte de la Chapelle; Porte de la Villette; Porte de Montreuil; Porte de Pantin; Porte de Saint-Cloud; Porte de Saint-Ouen; Porte de Vanves; Porte de Versailles; Porte de Vincennes; Porte des Lilas; Porte Dorée; Porte Maillot; Pré-Saint-Gervais; Pyramides; Pyrénées; Quai de la Gare; Quai de la Rapée; Quatre Septembre; Rambuteau; Ranelagh; Raspail; Réaumur - Sébastopol; Rennes; République; Reuilly - Diderot; Richard Lenoir; Richelieu - Drouot; Riquet; Robespierre; Rome; Rue de la Pompe; Rue du Bac; Rue Montmartre; Saint-Ambroise; Saint-Augustin; Saint-Denis; Saint-Denis - Basilique; Saint-Denis - Porte de Paris; Saint-Fargeau; Saint-François-Xavier; Saint-Georges; Saint-Germain des Prés; Saint-Jacques; Saint-Lazare; Saint-Mandé - Tourelle; Saint-Marcel; Saint-Maur; Saint-Michel; Saint-Michel - Notre-Dame; Saint-Ouen; Saint-Paul; Saint-Philippe du Roule; Saint-Placide; Saint-Sébastien - Froissart; Saint-Sulpice; Ségur; Sentier; Sèvres - Babylone; Sèvres - Lecourbe; Simplon; Solférino; Stalingrad; Strasbourg - Saint-Denis; Sully - Morland; Télégraphe; Temple; Ternes; Tolbiac; Trinité; Trocadéro; Tuileries; Vaneau; Varenne; Vaugirard; Vavin; Victor Hugo; Villejuif - Léo Lagrange; Villejuif - Louis Aragon; Villejuif - Paul Vaillant-Couturier; Villiers; Vincennes; Volontaires; Voltaire; Wagram

JJ: Jacques Jouet : The Metro Poem is now a genre in poetry. I passed by all of these stations at least twice, because I used to cover twice the whole metro network, in one shot (15 hours and a half). I used to travel especially for some poems as I used some casual trips (due to the life we live) for some others.

FP: *According which parameters did you make these travels especially dedicated to writing poems ?*

JJ: Exhaustiveness of the metro network; available time; expected size of the poem.

FP: *The Metro Poem is a simple and rigorous methodology. Can we imagine to practice it in any place (which includes a metro) or do you think the Paris Metro is a specific place?*

JJ: The Paris Metro is really ideal when it comes to the distance between two stations and its relationship to stopping time at the station, and when it comes to the constancy of the relationship. In Moscow, for instance, the distance is much longer. You can compose in your head a very long verse, but the stopping time to transcribe it isn't proportional. So that's a problem. Still, I did some in Izmir, St. Petersburg, Moscow, Minsk, Warsaw, Montreal, Cologne, Lille, Lyon, et cetera.

FP: *You're still a member of Oulipo, aren't you? Is that still interesting work? What's Oulipo doing today?*

JJ: Oulipo is still around. It's a very exciting group. Oulipo looks for constraints in literature that become forms.

FP: *I read something of yours that really pleased me. It was a list of books that only exist inside fictions. The list impressed me, in both a literary and a contemporary art sense, as an extremely important form or even genre, in the limitless possible series that it opened, in the rigor it demands, and especially in its resulting total absence of hierarchy. Any comments?*

JJ: A list does have these qualities. It is syntactic, the degree one of writing. There is no degree zero.

FP: *In the "Subway Poems," do you add any other rules to the inside of the rhythmic writing structure?*

JJ: Hardly ever, except when the subway car stops between two stations. Then I have to change the verse I'm working on in my head into an alexandrine of two hemistiches underlined by a slash.

FP: *In an interview, Harry Matthews said that the originality of Oulipo was that it didn't establish a group of writings. You yourself wrote that Oulipo wasn't a school of literature. Does that mean that the works of the Oulipians are at a level of abstraction within or without literature, one of the possible paths of execution that, consequently, would be a theoretical structure produced by the group?*

JJ: Yes, that's about right, given that "literature" could also give a damn (which it often does) about Oulipo as a crafted and conceptual treasure. Not to mention that one or another Oulipo writer can decide to write such and such a book without recourse to Oulipoian tools. At least that's what I believed for a long time. Today, I see it a bit differently. For an Oulipo writer (I'd better say for myself), the Oulipo beacon (craft and reflection), is always illuminating a path, so that it is constantly attracting attention, even in a negative way.

FP: *I'd say that Oulipo is a group that maintains a healthy idea of the avant-garde, that it is simply the creation of the new, and that because of this it escapes from the burden of a disenchanted postmodernism. Has Oulipo taken a position on these problems?*

JJ: When you're part of it, you don't want to brag about it. I think that Oulipo isn't part of the avant-garde, because it is part of a full slate, not an empty one. Oulipo is neither sad, nor disenchanted, nor blasé, nor disengaged. It wants to be resolutely premodern.