

Robert Guiette

THE ADVENTURE OF FORMAL POETRY [1946]¹

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This is the first ever English-language translation of a lecture delivered by the Belgian medievalist Robert Guiette, then working at the University of Ghent, at the beginning of 1946. Entitled “L’aventure de la poésie formelle”, and together with “La poésie formelle en France au Moyen Age”, this was one of Guiette’s most influential pieces, presenting his ideas – that announced those of Paul Zumthor some decades later – about a medieval poetry based on a formal esthetic.

It is only from the point of view of tradition, of technique, of rhetoric, and of “poetics” (in the way Paul Valéry understood the term) that it is possible to consider the whole genre of the courtly song. It is obvious that there is no way to put all the songs of the northern French poets on the same level: one cannot suggest that all courtly French lyrics are of equal value.

In the works of the northern French poets, the courtly mode is an imitative mode; it is consequently the product of a creativity detached from emotional spontaneity.²

When the northern French poets decided to “sing about love” in accordance with the courtly mode, they adopted the poetic attitude that I call “formal poetry.”

How is this different from a certain classicism that André Berry likes to find in the work of the troubadours? As he says:

Classical beauty is not perceptible to the eyes of every generation: one can perceive it clearly only during periods of reason and equilibrium. The troubadours are classical in the broadest sense of the term. They are classical because of the eternal precedence they give to the form over the idea, because of their unique, exclusive, sometimes exaggerated taste for poetic form. They are classical because of their love of brevity, of precise elegance, of perfection: they present themselves to their listeners not as priests or prophets, as the outmoded cliché would have it, but as artisans or goldsmiths. [...] They are also classical because they are reasonable, because of their sovereign reserve which often makes them, like Malherbe, banish vain trappings, because of their hatred of useless detail, because of the discipline they impose on the imagination. They are classical, finally, because of their abstract view of things, because of the pleasure they take in assessing their feelings and passions. Lavishing wonders of rhythm and word on commonplaces [...] pushing artistic effort to the point of the miraculous: this is what the troubadours wanted and the most illustrious classical authors of all time never aimed at anything else. (xvii)

If one understands what André Berry says, everything seems clear: it is not enough for poetry to give “precedence [...] to the form over the idea” to create a formal poetry. We shouldn’t confuse formal poetry with the perfection of form. Nor should we confuse it with refinement of style or with preciousness. This is not a pointless question, but a matter of the very nature of the poetic emotion. I am concerned with a different phenomenon. The goal of formal poetry is not to express something (a subject), but rather to reveal a form in full flower (here, a courtly song).

I have emphasized the unchanging aspects, the resemblances; this is not because the divergences, the variety, the individual traits escape me. It is because these traits are not the essence of the poems. I think it is more important to point to another order of facts: the tradition that unites them and the importance given to the form, that which is precisely anti-romantic: the structure. This structure is not, moreover, necessarily in equilibrium or symmetrical; it can also be dynamic.

Romanticism sought to give each poet his drama. This explains the efforts that were made – that are still being made – to assign an amorous adventure to each poem. Do the stories of Nostredame’s *Lives of the Troubadours* do anything else? And yet it seems evident to anyone who reads Jean de Nostredame with attention that he invented his stories, that he thought of them a bit as romances.

I have thus tried to situate the songs outside of biographical categories, on an artistic plane.

I can only agree with Italo Siciliano: “When we say that Romanticism can

be found in the Middle Ages or that the Middle Ages were romantic, we are the victims of an illusion”(548). The Middle Ages were not homogenous. Five centuries of literature contain everything: but far fewer confessions of naïve men than has been believed. Their art was created of traditions, of modes of feeling and understanding, some of which are foreign to us and that we would be wrong to underestimate.

When one examines courtly poetry, one sees that one is dealing with a traditional art, an art whose nature it has become difficult for us to enjoy because of our long-standing habit of looking for other things in poems. Sensitivity to form did not last.

Why did formal poetry stop being written?

As long as courtly poetry flourished, its whole store of commonplaces remained alive; they constituted a “poetic language” in the true sense of the term. When one made use of it, one employed the surest, the most effective, the richest, and, in the true sense of the term, the most poetic technical means available.

As long as a poetic system is alive, one does not fear employing the most conventionally poetic means. But when this system has withered away, its commonplaces seem dead because the terms in which they were expressed and which perhaps suited them best seem old fashioned. The best-tested technical means become ineffective; they are empty ornaments, unconvincing puppets. They have lost, precisely, their evocative power: they are signs that no longer signify. At that moment, true poets loath THAT which around them is perhaps still called “poetic” out of habit or ignorance. They try to renew the material, to escape from convention, by turning back to daily life,³ to what is real, or by some other artifice.

This is what we see happen. When the strength of formal creation has been spent, tradition seems fossilized.

Italo Siciliano has noted:

The Lady (often without pity), the Lover (always more a martyr than the last one) continued to live a contrived and monotonous life for centuries. Illuminated and immobile, the former continued even in the fifteenth century to provoke the most outdated rhetoric and the hollowest debates. Willing to serve and wait, timid, weepy, whimpering, the Provençal Lover was still the Lover of the fifteenth century, moping about in the Forest of Long-Waiting, suffering in the Chasm of Dejection, serving the most beautiful of women and dying for Lady Cruel-in-Love. (317)

The precious grace of the elegant and courtly circles fell into the hands of other rhetoricians. (I say this without contempt since I hold rhetoric to be one of the laws of formal poetry.) The formal instinct evolved at the same time that the audience changed.

All fashions, in worldly circles, end by ceasing to please. The great lords lost their interest in formal poetry. They were no longer able to understand it. On all sides, various appealing literary genres offered other esthetic formulas that did not require the same kind of attention. Around 1200, lyric courtly poetry began to flourish in the large, prosperous cities of northern France, where aristocrats and burghers rubbed elbows. The themes remained the same, but the general spirit was such that the concern for formal originality disappeared. The burghers and the professional minstrels, in Arras, for example, seem to have recognized the elegance and interior aspect of the genre. But the nature of the formal game escaped them. "Instead of seeing what distinguished each song from all the others, they stopped at the traits they had in common. In their hands, lyric poetry, which had until then been the very personal instrument of a refined cult, became a literary genre, and like all literary genres, it began to crystalize in well-defined forms. This is how, little by little, the lai, the ballad, the rondeau formed: short poems where the combinations of stanzas, measure, and rimes became more and more rigid" (Lucien Foulet, cited in Bédier and Hazard, 87). Formal variety and subtlety, formal inspiration, was replaced by a small number of forms – which were, moreover, very successful – but of an increasingly rigorous fixity.

Contrary to what one might at first think, this evolution was a sign of the poets' loss of the creative instinct for forms and the public's loss of a formal sensitivity that allowed them to take pleasure in what had been the essence of the songs.

These new forms are marked, underlined by obvious refrains, conspicuous rimes that structure the stanza or the poem in an almost mechanical fashion.

The listener's curiosity was still aroused by the musical combinations, but the poem's music was, so to speak, conventional. Development inspired by form was soon replaced by erudite development. It became a science rather than a living formal art.

The forms became frameworks in which various matters could be presented. They were decorated with methodical difficulties and virtuosités. Eustache Deschamps's one thousand ballads show true dexterity but not a formal sensitivity.

At this moment, as Petit de Julleville remarked, "lyric poetry took on brand new forms in which it underwent an unforeseen development" (II, 336). Henceforth, one was no longer concerned, it seems, with formal emotion, but rather with formal difficulties. The works in verse seem, in many cases, like the elaborate works of an overly-complicated goldsmith. There was a tendency to advocate "mechanical skill."

And yet Guillaume de Machaut, a brilliant musician, did not disdain fixed forms. He was among those that made them popular. In his work, they seem far from frozen. Machaut, it is true, filled them with gems of wit, learning, harmony. But within the rigidity of time-honored forms, he strove to write verses of great suppleness. Surrounded by the banalities, the platitudes of mediocre poets, he succeeded in creating subtle "inventions." But let there be no mistake, this is not a case of what I would consider to be pure formal instinct. The form generates poetry only indirectly, the work of variation is no longer perceptible. Other elements have come to the fore. All the resources of love casuistry are invoked. The principles of courtly doctrine are renewed by the application of allegory. Learned allusions, references to reality are mixed in. The poet, his "I," pretends to show itself openly. The poet no longer manifests himself only in his "game," he begins to talk about "himself." Scholasticism appears in poetry, without losing any of its pedantry. This is what came to be called the alliance between court poetry and school poetry. Use is often made of ideas, of feelings, of an invention of the subject that carries us further and further away from attention to forms.

The prosodic ornaments – ever more complicated rimes (leonine, equivocal, etc.), plays on sounds, plays even on words – did not[, however,] always exclude, in the very heart of formulas, some formal creation.⁴ In Machaut's work, for example, might not one want to consider this rondeau to be a formal creation or, at least, a formal game?

Quant Colette Colet colie,
Elle le prend par le colet.

When Hughette hugs Hugh around the neck
She puts her arms around his little neck.

Mais c'est trop grant merencolie,
Quant Colette Colet colie.

But it is most melancholy,
When Hughette hugs Hugh around the neck

Car ses deux bras à son col lie
Par le dous semblant de colet,
Quant Colette Colet colie,
Elle le prend par le colet.

For she hugs her two arms around his neck
In the sweet way of a hug
When Hughette hugs Hugh around the neck
She puts her arms around his little neck.⁵

The subject is insubstantial and almost without importance. A word functions as the theme and determines a form that inscribes itself like an arabesque above the anticipated formula. And is there not a curious resemblance between this poem and the rondeau of François Villon:

Jenin l'Avenu,
Va-t-en aux estuves;
Et toy la venu,
Jenin l'Avenu,

Jenin Wash-Naked
Go to the bathhouse;
And when you get there,
Jenin Wash-Naked,

Si te lave nud
Et te baigne es cuves.
Jenin l'Avenu,
Va-t-en aux estuves.

Wash yourself, naked,
And bathe in the tubs.
Jenin Wash-Naked,
Go to the bathhouse (VI, 84).

It sometimes happens, for various reasons, that a poet seems to come close to the art of the courtly northern French poets. But when he does, who would dare assert that it is a case of the old formal game? I am tempted to see in these cases a sort of pastiche, perhaps a sort of parody. The poet gives his work only the outer appearance of a courtly song.

When a poet like Machaut sings about courtly love in the rational and moralizing tone dear to the school of Jean de Meung, he is an artist who is not unaware of the resources provided by the form. He is perfectly aware of the complex problems of the two musics: the music of the poem as a verbal form and that of the melodic form. He thus observes "how he understands the music; he speaks about his own compositions and he explains how he conceived them and what he expects from them" (Gérolde 322). But music is a "gay science." It "wants people to laugh and sing and dance. It has no interest in melancholy [...] And it is by no means through sound only that it makes people rejoice" (Prologue, 85-94).

Basically, nothing could be less romantic. One declared, one sang that one was dying of love, etc. . . . ; but there was no drama. The ideological subject had

to be absorbed entirely by the constructed work.

Since he was a prestigious musician, Machaut seems to have valued a formal inspiration, which he did not in fact separate from the sentimental or ideological inspiration, more than technique. Does not the author of the *Règles de seconde rhétorique* [*Rules of Second Rhetoric*] write that it was Machaut “who invented all the new fashions and the perfect lays of love?”⁶ If he was the inventor of the perfect genre, it was undoubtedly he who fixed the type. A certain academicism was born. By which I mean a formal academicism. One sought to make these fixed form poems interesting through another kind of novelty by piling up difficulties. One went from creation to constraints.

The more the ideological element became complicated – by a refinement, for example, of the most artificial courtly ideal, or by scholastic play like pedants – the more the learned technique became difficult – through the ornamentation of the verse and the stanza by the flashiest virtuosités – and the less one concerned oneself with formal creation. The public’s attention was so far diverted from the form that it no longer recognized any types but the most heavily accented and took pleasure especially in them. Apollonian form gave way to a recitative that made surprise and pathetic effects possible. The poetic matter was renewed and bloomed, calling on all kinds of real or allegorical elements; the poetic act that expressed the very being of the poet by means of its play was replaced by true or pretended confessions, by allusions to the poet’s life, to his personal adventure. Subjective continuity took the place of the unity that had been above all of a formal nature.

One must not be misled, however: when poets like Colin Muset, Rutebeuf or François Villon mix confessions with traditions, pseudo-truths with stylistic conventions, one should not conclude too easily that nothing in their works is taken over from the formal esthetic. It is, of course, important to distinguish beautiful aspects of the form from what I have called a formal esthetic or formal poetry. Each of these arts proceeds, in many places, according to different principles. These poets – Villon as much as the others – have a feeling for form; but only occasionally do they seem to reduce their subject to a simple raw material by virtue of the form.

Villon marks the moment when poetry stopped being formal and became expressive and dramatic. The recitative won out over the tune. Villon’s work is simultaneously musically excellent and entirely spoken. The word won out over the song. And yet, there is in François Villon’s work an extremely subtle

concurrency between the recitative and the stanza.

All the investigations and the pomposity of the Grands Rhétoriciens [Grand Rhetoricians] could not bring back formal poetry as it had existed when it created the courtly song. One probably finds its last traces in certain particularly traditional passages in the work of Villon. His work, on the whole, is based on a very different esthetic. The destiny of formal poetry was interrupted for a long time.⁷

January 31, 1946.

Notes

1. This is the text of a paper read in 1946. I have limited myself to cutting out some examples and digressions. I added some bibliography to it and some references to a few more or less recent publications.

2. Cf. Bezzola, 82-83: "First of all, one cannot forget that the medieval and ancient poet, like the sculptor, the painter, the architect, the musician and even the thinker and the philosopher, created according to a model born of the very soul of the work of which he dreamed, and he did not do so in the first instance to express his individual feelings, as modern estheticians would have us believe was the case with poets in every age. The style of an entire period arises from this attitude of the poet and the artist, from which the style of the following period will come forth by means of slow changes. The poet's creation, the artist's, always undoubtedly remains an individual creation, but the further we go back in time, the more clearly we see this individual creation fit itself consciously into the style of the period and the vast system created by its predecessors. The medieval author, like the ancient one, is not only an individual lost in a chaotic and hostile world; he is a person, which is to say he feels himself to be an individual but also and above all a member of an organism, of human society. The style he adopts, to which he submits without feeling any constraint, is the expression of this organism. The changes that the poet, the artist make in the style of the period and that transform it almost imperceptibly – contrary to what modern revolutions achieve – correspond to a slow spiritual and social transformation of society."

3. Compare Huyghe, 1958, vol. II, 339.

4. [Trans. note: I have modified the original text here slightly by making this sentence the first of this paragraph rather than the last of the preceding one.]

5. Machaut, vol. II, Rondeau CCXXXVII.

6. Langlois, 1890 ; Langlois 1902, 2nd treatise. Cf. Forrest Patterson, I, 119ff.

7. One might perhaps look pertinently for analogies and differences between formal poetry and so-called competitive poetry, which, from poem to poem, develops the same theme further and further and constitutes, when the various pieces are brought together, a game of variations. But it should be noted that in this genre (eighteenth or seventeenth century) the form is subordinated entirely to the idea. Cf. Jacob.

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