

Introduction

Varieties of Light

Emmanuel Hocquard, one of the poets to whom this book responds, takes a great interest in a particular kind of question: the kind that, as he puts it, has no object. For its ostensible object is the reply.

Si la réponse est *ceci*
qu'est-ce que ceci? est une question sans objet

If the reply is *this*
what is this? is a question with no object. (*Theory of Tables*, 34)¹

In these lines you may sense the tremor or blink that frequently occurs in Hocquard's pages—it can bring you up short—when something opaque suddenly turns transparent, or vice versa: clarity abruptly blackens. Dark/light. Bright/dim. For the question whose object is instead its answer seems by turns so obvious there is no point asking it *and* utterly inscrutable. Thus, the blackness of a fish's back glimpsed by the protagonist of Hocquard's novel (*Aerea in the Forests of Manhattan*), alternates swiftly in sea water with the white flash of the fish's belly. Curved surfaces of fallen leaves underfoot in Manhattan's Riverside Park cast shadows on each other, while their thin edges catch the pale winter sunlight and gleam. "Alternation of shimmering and fading, of brilliance and matte" (*Aerea in the forests*, 104/*Aerea dans les forêts*, 102).²

“Toutes les évidences lui sont mystère,” Anne-Marie Albiach wrote, and Hocquard cites her, as though the observation applied to him.³ Everything obvious is for him an enigma. Each clue is a mystery, everything clear obscure. Sometimes in the blink between the light and the dark something seems to come unfastened just for an instant.

Une fraction de seconde
un trou de lumière grand
comme une pointe d'aiguille (*Théorie des tables*, 29)

A fraction of a second
a light-hole as large
as the point of a needle (*Theory of Tables*, 29)

Something opens and snaps shut, like a camera's shutter, and in the interval (as large as it is tiny) you see—what you do not. A “nonvisible” is suddenly exposed.

Jacques Roubaud, the other protagonist in this book, places his own variety of odd question at the heart of his life's work. I believe he calls it “l'auto-énigme” because it bears solely upon itself. The question is: What is it? Or you might say, the question asks, What am I? Dominic Di Bernardi's translation of “auto-énigme” is “self-riddle.”

Roubaud sometimes calls it “mute question”—when he is thinking of the young knight Percival, dumbstruck in the palace of the Fisher King. Had Percival known what question to ask when he saw the mysterious objects passing before him, shining lance and gleaming cup, he might have cured the ailing king and redeemed his wasted land. But no: “question sans question,” “question muette.”⁴

The questionless question, inasmuch as it is the answer that nothing can provide, resembles light, which nothing illuminates. According to Pseudo Dionysius, an early sixth-century Christian Neoplatonist who inhabits Roubaud's universe, light makes all things visible, but is not itself among these things. It does not itself figure among the visible things of this world. Light itself is black. At the heart of Roubaud's work there is “some thing black,” an enigma. It is the black beauty of light.

So, darkness and light, dark tones and pale, blindness and sight contribute a good deal to this book. Their contrasts and paradoxical interchanges play a big part. Their reversals, too, as in silver halide photography, where black

is also light, as Hocquard observes. Roubaud cites Faraday remarking that in Talbot's early negatives "all the lights are black and all the shadows luminous."⁵ Roubaud's black sun, the awful, closed countenance of light when it withdraws into itself, leaving the world derelict, is doubled by a snow-white sun, the star of melancholy and memory. There is "some thing black"⁶ in Roubaud, and then too "the light, there // the light // there, there // in the street // lapped up light / the light, there."

La lumière, là

la lumière

là, là

dans la rue

la lumière bue,

la lumière, là

la lumière,

là

(*Poésie*, 13)⁷

I count on such dark/light, black/white juxtapositions to provide this book with an unobtrusive underlying order: a pattern that can surface from time to time, but also recede, modestly.

For several different qualities and colors of light, and also varying degrees of obscurity—fog and cloudiness—pass through this book as well. The light of dawn that slowly encroaches on the circle of electric light that has shone since long before daybreak on Roubaud's desk. The weakened light late in the evening hesitating over the uneven surface of a wall, suggesting to him a quivering fountain with nymphs all around it. The agitated clouds reflected in a puddle of rainwater, seen from a streaming window. The rainbow hues of darkness, thanks to Hocquard. "For in darkness too are rainbow colors," he writes, citing Lucretius.⁸ The gleam of ceramic shards, laid out on an archeologist's table on the Mediterranean coast where Hocquard grew up, or the sparkle of glass strewn in pieces on another table—this one set up one morning at a garage sale, I gather (on the banks of the Delaware, where he visited)—to display old bric-a-brac. Among the jumbled items were several made of "Depression Glass." Dinner plates, ashtrays, bud vases shone with a singular brilliance in the morning sun. He lists them, and names their colors.

Green, pink, amber, white, black amethyst; more rarely blue.

(*Ce qui n'advient pas* [unpaginated; my translation])⁹

He called one of his poetry books *L'Invention du verre* (*The Invention of Glass*)¹⁰ and another *Conditions de lumière*.¹¹ There he pictured language as a trove of radiant fragments: one has but to gather some up, he said, and place them, gleaming among themselves, in a clear glass bowl. Roubaud contemplates pale honey spreading across a white plate, and also urges, "Watch how yellow penetrates fields and leaves, how blue gains the cedars, watch the violet petals of the sun."¹²

The Play of Light will follow an uneven path, with one train of thought often sidetracking to another. My aim is not to offer a complete account of the work of any of the writers I consider, or to construct, based on analyses of their texts, an argument about the condition of poetry in France from the 1970s to the present. I do not see a consistent theory made of concepts or preoccupations common to them all. Instead, I propose to move about among the books of Roubaud and of Hocquard, of Danielle Collobert, of Jacques Jouet and Anne Portugal, drawing some of these books into a juxtaposition that shows each one to great advantage (I hope), while providing at the same time a milieu suitable for brief appearances by a few philosophical hypotheses, bearing on identity, for example, on not-being and being, on communication, and secrets. These will just pass through like the colored lights that Anne Portugal evokes when she describes people and poems passing through public gardens. "They have the fugitive state of leaves, of fountains," she observes: "the dazzle of lights, or of winter's extreme nudity. They are among others. They are the others" ("The Garden," 40).¹³

They—the hypotheses, that is, that pass through this book—owe a good deal to certain philosophers: to Ludwig Wittgenstein, for one, because both Roubaud and Hocquard refer to him explicitly. Hocquard adopts one of his statements practically as a motto: "A poetic work"—a *philosophical* one, actually, in Wittgenstein's words—"consists essentially of elucidations."¹⁴ Hocquard liked to take the stance of a private eye, and I don't doubt he had *Philosophical Investigations* in mind when referring, in a voice like Philip Marlowe's, to the murky affairs in language that he has to clear up. Various propositions from the *Tractatus* are like touchstones for him: "The world is all that is the case," for example. Or, "The subject does not belong to the world: rather, it is a limit of the world." Hocquard's insular side, his "tests of solitude" continually recall the solipcism in Wittgenstein which, "when its implications are

followed out strictly, coincides with pure realism. The self of solipsism shrinks to a point without extension, and there remains the reality co-ordinated with it.”¹⁵

Roubaud, too, keeps a collection of Wittgenstein concepts, such as “language games,” and “forms of life,” for use in various connections. He practically always indicates that it’s a Wittgenstein of his own that he evokes: “a pseudo-Wittgenstein.” The distinction in the *Tractatus* between “saying” and “showing” underlies the relation he describes between his own poetry and his prose, and it informs the “biipsism” (not solipsism, now, but “biipsism”) that he and Alix Cléo Roubaud lived together—he, a poet, “saying,” and she, a photographer (avid reader of Wittgenstein, too), “showing.”

In this world her images; my words. The biipsism of the images and language. to show, to tell.¹⁶

Such Wittgenstein topics, adapted for his own purposes, coexist in Roubaud’s mind with other key ideas, and key riddles and intriguing formulae that have caught his attention in a number of philosophers from the Middle Ages to the present (Nicholas of Cusa’s “*Li non Aliud*,” for example, or Alexius Meinong’s “stateless beings,” or David Lewis’ “ersatz worlds”). Wittgenstein’s conviction that there is no such thing as private language comes into play in the present book because I want to listen for a private, intransmissible language in Roubaud, one that says, but not anything. I want to follow Roubaud along one in particular of his various paths: the path of the impossible, “*la voie de l’impossible*.”

Giorgio Agamben is another philosopher on whom *The Play of Light* draws, and this is partly because he and Roubaud are, in a way, colleagues: both remarkable readers of medieval literature and thought, who develop similar interpretations of *fin’ amor*. The Middle Ages saw early on, they seem to agree, how unnatural love is. The procession of ghosts through Roubaud’s writing, the dim forms shedding all their attributes at dusk, the images swimming into sight in the darkroom recall Agamben’s “phantoms of eros.”¹⁷ Nothing to win, or possess.

More significant, though, for *The Play of Light*, is no doubt the fact that in one of his poetry books Roubaud borrows a number of passages straight from Agamben’s *Coming Community*.¹⁸ They bear on “whatever being” and on “potentiality.” Roubaud borrows these passages and “twists” them, as he states. He thinks Agamben may not recognize them. They ally for him though, I think, the dread in poetry, and the dread of it.

As far as I know Hocquard never mentions Agamben, but I suspect that he tacitly alludes to his “potentialities” in one poem at least, which I will discuss, and where—on account of this silent allusion—Hocquard passes for a while into Roubaud’s neighborhood. (This drift happens from time to time, for various reasons.)

Let me emphasize that Agamben and Wittgenstein are present in this book only via a small number of particular concepts that Hocquard and/or Roubaud draw attention to, puzzle over, or mobilize. I do not aspire here to confront more than a few facets of Agamben’s or of Wittgenstein’s work—the ones that surface in Roubaud’s twists, or Hocquard’s adaptations, and that illuminate, in turn, certain riddles in the poems. It might be said though, that Agamben leaves a more conspicuous mark on the present book. Whereas I might have dwelt on *potential* as it is celebrated in the activities of the *Ouvroir de Littérature Potentielle* (the *Oulipo*—that long-lived literary group of which Roubaud has been a pillar since 1968), instead, I speak of Agamben’s potentialities, and of the potential for impotence that he brings out, in particular. In fact, this might be considered a somewhat distinctive characteristic of *The Play of Light*: not to dwell, that is—at least, not very much—on the *Oulipo*, and to favor, instead, over the wealth of potential, the impotence in Roubaud.

Because of this propensity for underachievement, my readings in this book might claim a kinship with a certain nonproductive current in contemporary literary theory. Instead of pursuing meanings that can and even must be affirmed and developed, it bends toward language’s nonrealizing dimension. I think of the distinction Werner Hamacher makes in his *95 Theses on Philology* between propositional language, “the medium and object of ontology as well as of all the epistemic disciplines under its direction,” and “meaningful but nonpropositional language,” which “knows no ‘is’ and no ‘must,’ but only a ‘be’ and a ‘would be’ that withdraw themselves from every determining and every determined cognition.” Hamacher allies reading and thinking with this withdrawal, which is to say with poetry, and not with any “object.” The philology to which he is devoted “only turns to that which is for no one and nothing.”¹⁹ Such indifference (being for no one and for nothing) inspires an aimless love—longing, but not for anything that could ever be an object or a goal.

If distraction like this presents a problem—I allude to Paul North’s book, *The Problem of Distraction*—this is in part at least because it is not an experience that anyone can, properly speaking, have. “I am distracted” is not something anyone can really say. “No one is distracted,” North writes.²⁰ No

one's grammar, which does without subjects as well as objects, informs the language I try to hear in *The Play of Light*. And no one's life is what I want to share, in a vacant patch of oblivion, just between us, where no one can encounter anyone, the way a cat can look at a king.²¹

Indeterminate, featureless life is a secret message my book hopes to confide—"anonymous life," to borrow the title of a different book, by Jacques Khalip.²² This life, though "ravishing" for Hocquard at least, does not animate or brighten anything up. It is one with the "indifference of being." And yet one of my principal emphases in this book is the paradoxical *singularity* of the nondescript—the distinction of life so common it belongs to none, solely to none. This particular stress comes mainly in my readings of Hocquard, and it is what links *The Play of Light* to Jean-Luc Nancy. But just as I claim to welcome in this book only a fraction of Wittgenstein, and only the Agamben of "whatever being" and the potential for impotence—just as I hesitate (and really cannot presume) to locate my work within the world of Hamacher and his students—so I wish to greet here, warmly, for reasons of friendship as well as on account of theory, only a handful of French words that Nancy changed for good: *singulier* and *pluriel*, *partage*, *commun*, *communauté*. These terms, the thoughts they carry, the ethical demands they bring to bear as well as their political implications have been pondered and tried by Nancy himself and many others.²³ I am only glad that my book has a chance to send back to Nancy, and to the scholars working from various perspectives on ideas about commons and communities, a response from out in left field, as it were: from an Emmanuel Hocquard often at pains to say how much he prefers detective fiction to philosophy, and who never, as far as I am aware, refers to *The Inoperative Community*,²⁴ or the *Unavowable Community*,²⁵ and who would not, I suspect, be especially pleased to have these ideas "applied" to his pages.

No doubt it is via indifference and "the neutral" that *The Play of Light* reflects Maurice Blanchot. A wish of mine to depart from Blanchot, and the writers in his orbit who for so long preoccupied me, was one of the impulses at the origin of this book. Its second chapter treats a similar, more pronounced impulse on the part of Hocquard, especially. But I place in the foreground of that chapter a question of "intonation," and suggest that reading Hocquard helps one to hear the sound of Blanchot's voice differently.²⁶

Speaking of voice—Hocquard once wrote an "Ode against a Nightingale."²⁷ He'd been kept awake all night by a real one—a terrible squawker, nothing like the warbler in poetry composed by people who, he concludes, might never

have actually heard a nightingale. He would have preferred a pneumatic drill, he writes, or “a contemporary poet.” His indignant vituperations against the obstinate nightingale are funny and intended as a relief from Romantic odes, with their imagery and their music, and their Nature. The real nightingale sounded like a mechanical noise box: “Fabrique de bruit, / mécanique stridente.”

Hocquard’s complaint, I mean to say, is less about his loss of sleep than about lyric poetry—about the song in language that, according to him, puts one to sleep. And he is quick—in many other texts—to assimilate that song (that expressive subjectivity) with “everything we’re used to”: with language that holds no surprises. Sometimes he describes it as a tick lodged in the ear, sometimes as a rumor. All that matters to Hocquard is the interruption of this soporific tune. He writes to provoke a surprise one can’t recover from. I am simplifying his perspective here, to be sure, exaggerating a somewhat dogmatic vein in his thought: his impatient dismissal of expressive language, as though there were never anything to hear in odes, ballads, elegies but a reassuring hum (or as though Literature were necessarily a mere affectation), and his rather unsparing austerity (grammar is my affair, he often declares—grammar, “the skeleton of language.” No music, then, just the bare bones). I put things baldly here in order to acknowledge that Hocquard is a writer with a distinct stance: it is not a foregone conclusion that the startling perceptions to which his writing exposes a serious reader—the ravishing ontological surprises I’ve placed at the center of this book—are of an entirely different order from that stance, that attitude, that circumscribed position.

Roubaud is, if anything, an even more opinionated individual than Hocquard. More contrary. Against practically everyone who has ever longed to throw out the artificial strictures of traditional verse, he defends a concept of tradition and of rules, which he considers the rebels too coarse to appreciate. He is an experimental practitioner of “fixed forms” old and new, who scorns avant-garde theatrics. His first book of poetry was a sonnet book; it was the initial outcome of the decision he made, in 1961, to live. He was close to floundering and wanted something firm to hold onto. The fact that two great contributors to the history of the sonnet (the Sicilian master known as il Notaro, the Notary, whom Dante acknowledges in the *Purgatorio*, and his heir, Cino da Pistoia) were accustomed to juridical language—to the rigor, that is, that informs “the iron language of law”—contributed not a little to the appeal the sonnet had initially for Roubaud.²⁸

World War II was the broader scene of his childhood, and the war was still quite recent at the beginning of the 1960s. Roubaud's family had been in the Resistance. He had a lot of sympathy for poems of that period, which he knew had been written under the threat of death at the hands of the Nazis. And those poems were sonnets: the thirty-three composed by Jean Cassou while in solitary confinement, without pencil or paper, in his head, and *Les Sonnets de Moabit*, written with his own blood by Albrecht Haushofer, one of the conspirators in the plot to assassinate Hitler in 1944. Those two poems were not like each other in any way except their turn to sonnets when faced with brutal death, and Roubaud thought this brought out something essential about the sonnet form: being so very compact, it lends itself extra well to concentration; it focuses all one's mental powers. It's a discipline, good for the memory.

Notwithstanding, though, his strong association of sonnets with the Resistance and with anti-Nazi heroism, another of Roubaud's main reasons for choosing the sonnet form in 1961 was to express in this way his *opposition* to "engaged poetry" and to political freight in poetry (poetry can perfectly well convey meanings of all kinds, including political meaning, he holds, but this is not what it does essentially, as poetry).

This specific gesture of opposition to engaged poetry was part of a whole program of contrariness: Roubaud chose sonnets against the surrealists and their hostility to form; against avant-gardism in general and its conception of poetry as rupture; against the predominance of free verse in France. The contempt widely felt for traditional versification from the *crise de vers* on, fell likewise on traditional forms like the sonnet, and Roubaud chose sonnets in cheerful defiance of writers like Claudel who described them as little music boxes, "tabatières à musique."²⁹ Finally he chose sonnets in 1961 against the idea of a national poetry—a poetry of France, "mère des arts, des armes et des lois" (You must be joking, he writes, in effect, in *Poésie*: we were deep in the Algerian War).³⁰

I will come back briefly, around the middle of this book—in the Interlude—to the formalist character of Roubaud's work and to his first book of sonnets. At this point, I will just note speedily, as if on a poster or a banner, a few more of the opinions he characteristically maintains (preferring Jane Austen to Balzac, for example, Zukofsky to the Beats, Queneau to Breton), not so much because they are especially important to *The Play of Light*, but to signal, as I did for Hocquard, the *posture* that is Roubaud's, impossible to isolate completely

from his poems and prose—lest I appear in this book to present Roubaud’s writing and the thought in it as a sort of oracle.

Joyce **NO**, Stein **SI**!

Philippe Sollers and *Tel Quel* **NO**, Jean-Pierre Faye and *Change* **SI**!

Denis Roche, David Antin **SI! SI**!

Helen Vendler, Rita Dove **NO! y NO**!

I will indicate too, among the signatures he affixes from time to time to one or another of his declarations (e.g., “Jacques Roubaud, poète”; or “Jacques Roubaud, compositeur de mathématique et de poésie”), this one: “Jacques Roubaud, poète provençal”—because, for one thing, since he is actually a “poète parisien,” it suggests that exile is an element of his condition, and for another thing, because it indicates his alliance with a lost language, a ruined world, a scattered company of “compositeurs de poésie,” the *troubadours*.

As I have said, I adopt in this book a discontinuous or mildly distracted mode, and in this regard I am imitating Roubaud’s and Hocquard’s two styles of thinking and of writing. (R. and H. are the two principal figures in this book; the others hover around them, Jouet with his determination to banish the word *impossible* from the French language, Portugal splashing a bright swath toward the end, to answer Collobert’s very dark one at the start. I will introduce Jouet and Portugal later, when they join the gathering; Collobert will enter shortly.) Roubaud, especially in his prose, is unapologetically digressive. I have enjoyed pursuing one or another of his many subjects (how to make jam from cherries that grow only among the perfumed scrub and umbrella pines of Languedoc; recent developments in logic by Lawvere and Heyting or the pre-Adamism of Isaac La Peyrère), only to discover that it has veered off into some other volume, or has dived into an underpass and will eventually return via the upper route. Diverging, ramifying, and doubling back to intertwine are cardinal characteristics of Roubaud’s work.

He also likes to open parentheses within parentheses, and he stashes “bifurcations” and “incisions”—detours in his reasoning, or his remembering; or patches of additional material too big to fit in his prose where they first occur to him—in separate sections of his prose works. He provides a numbering system allowing you to flip to these addenda right away or postpone, hoping to fit them back into the “whole” you will eventually have read. (See *Le grand incendie de Londres* for examples of this arrangement.)³¹

The “thought in speaking” stutters and starts over all the time, he says in the prologue to a volume of poetry intended to be spoken aloud. But it returns to

its initial subject along routes that proliferate and intersect to form a kind of braid.³² In a similar way the various distinct components of Roubaud's entire oeuvre communicate with each other—the prose layer with the poetry, the poetry with the mathematics—the parts belonging to the end of night (which he labors over in the very early morning), with the parts belonging to the end of day (to which he systematically devotes the evening hours). A reader's attention is apt to rove from region to region of this capacious oeuvre, and it is sometimes only a step to a corner that by another route is still weeks away.³³

As for Hocquard, not only does he fight smooth transitions and the seamless continuities they are supposed to guarantee; not only does he stake everything on cuts, interruptions, gaps, holes, favoring disjointed forms like the chronicle, the list, the recipe (patches of words, scrappy voices); not only does he emphasize segmented worlds, splintered space, broken-up languages foreign to each other and untranslatable; he also takes a great interest in a particular kind of unorthodox path he sometimes calls a "chemin de traverse." That means a path cutting across some terrain, perhaps a shortcut. "Interior margin" is another name he has for it. "Le chemin de Wittgenstein," winding through Trinity College, Cambridge, is an example he has sometimes given; also the path of the rhinoceros across the room where Wittgenstein once refused to concede to Bertrand Russell that there *was* no rhino.

So much, then, for my critical approach. It reflects, in its mild way, the writing whose challenge I wish to accept. It may give *The Play of Light* a kind of usefulness different from that of other current books on poetry, in that this one is relatively light on poetics and heavier on poems. I hope I have not weighed them down. In a last comment about my methodology, let me add that for better or worse I remain attached to an idea I expressed long ago in the first book I wrote: there is a form of literary criticism—one among many—which is more or less equivalent to playing a piece of music: an interpretation on the trumpet, say. To play the notes that are written is the way I characterized long ago the literary critical ambition that to this day is my biggest one.

In the lively manifesto called *Poetry, etcetera: Cleaning House*, Roubaud states that poetry says,³⁴ "Elle dit." That is all. It doesn't say something, it doesn't say anything. For saying something, anything with any meaning, requires that there be something else to say, by way of clarification, in answer to someone who, not quite understanding, would ask, "What?" And poetry says nothing that any other words could clear up. It just says what it says by saying. "Elle dit ce qu'elle dit en disant." If there were an answer to the person asking of a poem, "What? What do you say?" it would simply be the poem, which that

person doesn't understand. Poetry hides nothing, shows nothing. There is no solution, one might say, where this enigma is concerned—no solution save the riddle itself, which is therefore as impossible to ask as to answer.

Roubaud's conviction about poetry's saying, but not anything, develops as follows: if something—anything at all—is to be said, the thing cannot just be the utterance itself, it must be something else. Poetry, however, doesn't say anything else. "Elle dit ce qu'elle dit en disant" (*Poésie, etcetera*, 76/*Poetry etcetera*, 77). Again, in *The Plurality of Worlds of Lewis*, 72, alluding to *Bartleby*, "[Poetry] does not say anything. It ' would prefer not to ." Or again: "It does not say except by saying." ("Elle ne dit rien; elle ' préférerait ne pas '. Elle ne dit qu'en disant.")³⁵

Of course, Roubaud does not want to insist that poetry really never says a single thing that any other words could explain. It does, he willingly acknowledges, because it is a game that is played in language, where words laid end to end, no matter how perplexing, always end up having meaning, or at least bits and snatches of meaning. But this meaning, transmissible via other words, is something different from what a poem says by being a poem. It accompanies, combines, or collides with what a poem says essentially, but *that* is unparaphrasable, intransmissible—not, in short, anything that can be said, or that ever is (*Poetry, etcetera* 86/*Poésie, etcetera* 86). By being a poem a poem says something that cannot be said, and is not.

In this book I will collide repeatedly with impossibility ("cannot," "is not"), coming at it from a few different directions, with different writers. I plan some detours, and lighter moments (Jouet!). But here I enter Danielle Collobert's statement, remembered by Roubaud when she died: "Je ne peux pas la poésie." (I am incapable of poetry.)

Her longest work is titled *Say; Dire* in the original (with two parts, *Dire I, Dire II*). *Say*, just say; use up the few words remaining or let them rot; just say. As in *Be, just be*. Or *Live*.

arriver à être
essai — essai

(*Dire II*)³⁶

manage to be
try — try

(My translation)

After her suicide in 1978, when she was thirty-eight, Roubaud composed a text in her honor, and recalled her saying, "Je ne peux pas la poésie. Je ne sais pas ce que c'est que la poésie."

“Tu ne m'en voudras pas de te le dire. Je ne sais pas la poésie.”³⁷

“You won't hold it against me if I tell you. I don't know poetry.”

She wrote in prose, “la prose du récit,” Roubaud said: narrative prose born of poetry's impossibility, its death. Raymond Queneau saw to her first book's publication by Gallimard in 1964.³⁸ It is a series of short narratives, composed in the first person more often than in the third; brief scenes, tiny stories, sometimes dreams, one suspects; descriptions of a small town with a port, and of stones and plants in the town's environs. The title of this book is *Meurtre. Murder*.³⁹

Eventually, when narrative ran down and died too, poetry came back for Collobert, Roubaud said in 1979; it came back but just as exhaustion: for want of the strength to keep writing all the way across the page. Roubaud called the poetry of *Dire I* and *II* nonverse: “cette forme non-vers.” Jean-Pierre Faye published it in the collection *Change* in 1972; four years later he published *Il donc (It then)*,⁴⁰ as well. The broken-up lines resulted from asphyxia, Roubaud thought; it reflected no particular formal plan. Or, it served an inclination not to occupy the page but instead to lodge in blanks, silences, in what remains when nothing is any use anymore, not punctuation, sequencing, or progression.

Bit by bit this nonverse, Roubaud writes, became indistinguishable from “la parole d'identité voulue abolie.” It amounted to the same, I believe, as the answer to the riddle “What am I? Who?” “Parole d'identité.” This is a word sought for, even hunted, like a snark (“parole voulue”), and annulled (“abolie”), like the kind of snark called Boojum, which, if ever captured, disappears right away, along with its captor.⁴¹ “L'Enigme reste énigme, jusque dans les yeux troués du cadavre,” Roubaud writes, somewhere along one of the many twisting paths of his autobiography.⁴² “The enigma remains an enigma, all the way into the eye sockets of the corpse.”

Danielle Collobert persisted, slower and slower, Roubaud thought, detour by detour, only to end up at the bottom of the circular trap where the sameness of the truth and its extinction awaits. “Elle retrouva après tout détour le même du piège circulaire . . .”⁴³

Roubaud is acquainted with this “*même*,” this “same,” and sometimes calls it “la mort même. identitique à elle même même.” In Rosmarie Waldrop's translation, “Death itself-self. identical with itself-self.”⁴⁴ He considered that the six short poems comprising Collobert's last work, completed just before her death and called *Survie (Survival)*, give their title the lie at the last moment, “because nothing returned from any ‘elsewhere’ except ‘what's the use’ applied to everything.”

je parole s'ouvrir bouche ouverte dire je vis à qui

I speech opening mouth open to say I live to whom⁴⁵

Emmanuel Hocquard published *Survie* the year Collobert finished it (1978), in the collection *Figurae*, put out by Orange Export Ltd.—the press Hocquard directed with Raquel Levy between 1969 and 1986. In the anthology of contemporary poetry that he published later, in 1995, he introduced Collobert by comparing her to a pianist of the sort he admires: she does without pathos. He refers to her “touch,” and says she brought off that tour de force which consists in detaching notes, with dashes, impassively, at the edge of what can be written. “Au bord de l'écrit.”⁴⁶

Born in 1940, only a bit after Roubaud and the same year as Hocquard, Collobert differs from them quite strikingly, not only because she lived so much shorter a life (Roubaud is still writing in the summer of 2019; Hocquard died at the very beginning of that year), but also because she published relatively little during her lifetime (just the four works I've mentioned, published all together by P.O.L. in 2004).⁴⁷ She traveled—by herself, without any stipends or residencies or invitations to readings—far and wide, notably in North Africa (during the Algerian War) and Indonesia, but also in Italy, Germany, Greece, Holland, the United States (whence all the “ailleurs” mentioned by Roubaud), leaving behind here and there one more volume's worth of notebooks, outtakes, fragments, two radio plays. She never bothered to construct any stable dwelling place for herself in the world of French letters, as both Roubaud and Hocquard did, in their two different, eccentric ways.

Hocquard founded, with Raquel Levy, the press Orange Export Ltd., which brought together a small group of friendly writers, including Claude Royet-Journoud and Anne-Marie Albiach, and which published many American poets little known in France at the time, such as Robert Duncan, Keith and Rosmarie Waldrop, Cid Corman, Larry Eigner, and Paul Auster. As director, from 1977 to 1991, of *les lectures de l'ARC*, a long-standing program of poetry readings at the Museum of Modern Art in Paris, Hocquard invited and published many American writers, as well as French ones. As director, with Juliette Valéry, of *Le Bureau sur l'Atlantique*, a center for exchanges of all kinds between French and American poets, which lasted from the end of the 1980s well into the twenty-first century, Hocquard was one of the main animating figures in the small, unconventional, international world of poets that formed during the 1970s on two shores of the Atlantic and that Norma Cole calls a “crosscut universe.”⁴⁸ Roubaud—fabulously prolific, a great formal experimenter and

inventor—has been prominent for a long time. His prose and poetry have appeared steadily since 1967, when Raymond Queneau oversaw the publication of his first volume of poetry at Gallimard, and recruited him for the Oulipo. He was the founder of Le Cercle Polivanov (a center for research in comparative poetics); cofounder of *Change*; and a regular contributor to other important reviews of the time, *Action Poétique* and *Po&sie*—as well as to the Cercle Polivanov’s highly specialized journal *Mezura*.⁴⁹

“je ne marcherai jamais dans leur jeu,” Collobert wrote. I’ll never play their game.

se défendre contre tous

fatigue

fatigue ⁵⁰

defend against all

tired

tired