

Oulipo

The Book of Eleanor

Translated by Ian Monk

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Preface

In January 2013, Xavier Kawa-Topor, director of the Abbey of Fontevraud, wrote to Jacques Roubaud:

“(...) the recumbent statue of Eleanor is presented in the Abbey of Fontevraud next to those of Henry II Plantagenet and Richard Cœur de Lion. It depicts the queen holding an open book over her chest. Apparently, this is one of the first depictions in western art of a woman reading.

Above all, this book is open to reveal two blank pages. Taking these blank pages as an invitation, we should like to use them as the basis for a project of literary creation so as to reply to this unanswerable question: what is Eleanor of Aquitaine reading?

We think that this could well be the starting point for a collective project, which we should be delighted to consider with the Oulipo. As Eleanor was the granddaughter of the author of *vers de dreit nien*, I am applying to you with this in mind.”

The Oulipo, which adopts rules so as to explore the potentialities of language, was attracted at once by this invitation to work on a virgin book, as a lead *par excellence* towards a potential oeuvre. This book of stone, now become a symbol of its very medium given its absence of content, was an invitation to consider the new potentialities of reading in a digital environment. And producing a project of this sort would allow me to pursue my own explorations of forms of digital writing.

What is the recumbent statue of Eleanor of Aquitaine reading? Nothing, because the book is blank; nothing, because her eyes are closed and, even if they were open, they would be looking over her book. What book could Eleanor have been reading? Most probably a psalter, but perhaps another book from her era: in Latin, Provençal, old French or Middle English? What languages did Eleanor speak?

Such questions remain in suspension around this “musician of silence”, this figure anticipating Mallarmé.

The Oulipo’s proposal for this blank book is twofold: a collection of texts and an installation in the Abbey.

The *Book of Eleanor* is thus a series of texts, or an ‘interpretation’ of this blank book, as one book among an infinite number of possibilities. Composing one of Eleanor’s books in fact comes down to renouncing the potentiality provided by a blank page, which contains both nothing and everything. So the Oulipo has traced out a path, by providing guidelines for this exploration and offering a book, one alone, among an infinite number of possibilities, but a book tied to the blank book by its evocations of both nothingness and fullness.

From the outset of this project, we decided that the book should have a threefold inspiration, associated with Eleanor’s life: the poetry of the troubadours, because Eleanor was the granddaughter of William IX, the founder of the *trobar* tradition; the Bible, because the most probable hypothesis is that Eleanor was depicted reading her psalter, which led us to involve the scriptures, but also Robert of Arbrissel, the founder of Fontevraud; then finally the ‘Matter of Britain’, because Eleanor’s daughter, Marie of France, Countess of Champagne, was the protector of Chrétien de Troyes and contributed to the spread of this literary tradition. The central figure of the collection is of course Eleanor, set in the histories of both literature and her family.

This book is made up of 31 texts, some medieval (in their original versions with translations, or else only in translation) and some contemporary. They were written in Occitan, French or English. The texts that have been especially composed for the Book of Eleanor are mostly poems, generally based on ancient poetic forms. A few poems have been composed for the area around the recumbent statues, based on a form proposed by Paul Fournel. The idea of projecting these poems around the tombs was subsequently abandoned, but the literary constraint remained.

This *book* is being presented in the Abbey during the summer of 2014. This installation aims at exploring the potentialities of the various media used for reading and the effects they might have on forms of

writing. We are living in a transitional period, in which the classical model of the book, which has been slowly refined over the centuries, now coexists with new digital media, which have not yet reached a state of stability (on the one hand web-search engines, on the other e-books) and which provide new digital ways of reading. In this shift from the codex to the screen, to quote the words of Roger Chartier, we need to examine and experience these on-going transformations: what changes will this lead to in the way we read, but above all in the way we write? We no longer write in the same way when a temporal dynamic becomes possible in a text, when fixed or moving images can be partners of the act of writing, and when readers can even become involved in the writing process. Digitisation is accompanied by a blurring of the borders between the arts, so that literature and the visual arts can experience new forms of dialogue.

We are inviting today's visitors to become readers of this book in its different material states. At the heart of this experience is the stone book held by Eleanor, and the fact of reading which it thus presents. The visitors are asked to multiply their experiences by moving between the various points of access, so as to sense the various mutations associated with such forms of reading.

In concrete terms, the staging is centred around the blank, stone book which Eleanor is reading, and which is lit up by a beam of light. Around the stone book, in the area surrounding the tomb effigies, the *Book of Eleanor* has been set out in different forms:

- As a printed volume, in the very same format as the stone book, which is distributed to visitors;
- In two large-format copies, which are presented on two lecterns, where they can be consulted, while also being projected onto screens on one of the walls of the nave (the texts being visible in both reading environments, with the screen showing the movements of the hands on the book);
- In an online format, accessible from two touch-screens and on Fontevraud's website;
- Finally, as a video presentation, shown on a screen on the other wall of the nave, which displays the texts, projected dynamically onto an image of the tomb effigies. This form exploits the

potentialities of time in the display and the reading of texts, but also in the inscription of texts in images.

Each situation used for the diffraction of a text imposes choices, because not all formats are legible in all media. While prose is hard to place on a screen, short forms and complex formal structures can find new ways of making themselves visible there. We still use the term 'book', but the characteristics of a book (numbered pages, a table of contents, an ending...) have been blown apart. This diffraction of content over different media raises questions about the very notion of a book. Poems shown in an animated display on a screen completely lose their basis in any representation of a book as a collection, i.e. a set of pages bound together.

Before arriving at this idea for the installation, many other possibilities were explored, and it seems to us interesting to retrace this path. Before visiting Fontevraud, the idea was to project texts onto Eleanor's actual book. A random projection or a loop of texts would have provided an illusion of potentiality: a fixed medium accommodating all possible texts, unlimited by any number of pages, or volume, or weight. At the same time, we also considered the idea of having screens set up in the Abbey, with tablets to be distributed to the visitors. During our first visit, with Jacques Roubaud in August 2013, the idea of a projection onto the book was dropped: it was too small, grey and worn by time ... It then occurred to me that, on the altar, we could have a large-scale representation (be it realistic or abstract, various possibilities were weighed up) of the book and of Eleanor's hands, on which the texts could be projected. On entering the Abbey, the visitors would come face-to-face with a large book, just as Eleanor is holding hers. Around the altar, the alcoves would be used as spaces for reading on tablets, with an area for listening to texts (in a sound shower). During a second visit, with Elena García-Oliveros, this idea was also abandoned. Leaving aside the technical problems, the potent symbolism of the altar and the break in atmosphere between it and the area with the tomb effigies made this project unfeasible. Concentrating the installation around the effigies, in a more intimate space suited to reading, with the possibility to consult a digital version of the book, seemed the best option. Elena then suggested the idea of a projection of texts onto the area with the

effigies, which could then be rounded off by a projection onto the cupola. The idea of an animation on the façade also arose, as a means to connect the interior with the exterior of the building. Later, during a meeting with Elena via Skype (our preferred way of working during the entire project), we arrived at a third proposition: printing the book, then displaying the interactions of the public with this object, using a screened projection of their hands leafing through it, thus reminding us that reading is a gesture, associating the hands with the eyes. Other proposals involving closer interactions with the public, allowing people to read and record texts, were made... But technical and temporal restrictions came into play, thus focusing the project and concentrating it exclusively around the effigies.

What follows is the result of all these compromises. It does not exhaust all the possibilities, but it does offer a journey between forms of reading media, articulating texts with images, introducing time into the reading of texts, and visibly displaying the reader's situation. This installation, based on the texts but allotting a central role to a visual dimension, is also an occasion to consider and discuss the possible, yet complex, encounter between the worlds of text and of image, and between the worlds of the book and of the visual arts.

We should now like to leave the readers and visitors free to navigate, read and so construct from these pages the contents of their own blank book.

Valérie Beaudouin

Initiated by Xavier Kawa-Topor, this project has been possible thanks to the unfailing support and accompaniment of Françoise Baudin and Matthieu Robichon throughout its set-up.

A sub-commission of the Oulipo, made up of Valérie Beaudouin, Marcel Bénabou, Paul Fournel and Jacques Roubaud, piloted the entire project.

The texts were composed by: Michèle Audin, Valérie Beaudouin, Marcel Bénabou, Frédéric Forte, Paul Fournel, Jacques Jouet, Ian Monk and Jacques Roubaud.

Jacques Roubaud selected, translated and/or versified the texts by the troubadours, from the Bible and by Chrétien de Troyes.

The editing and French version of William IX's poems are by Katy Bernard.

Valérie Beaudouin, Marcel Bénabou and Jacques Roubaud defined the structure of this collection. The presentation notes for the texts are by Valérie Beaudouin.

Ian Monk translated the entire collection into English.

The installation in the abbey of Fontevraud was conceived in collaboration with the visual artist Elena García-Oliveros.

This project has involved a large number of participants: Jérôme Vogel for the Web design, Raúl Martín Burgos for the digital development, Scouap (2LUX Studio) for the technical choices, Laurent Vié for the furniture design and the Fontevraud teams throughout the entire process.

The inauguration is to be accompanied by a reading/concert conceived together by the Oulipo and the Tre Fontane Ensemble which, for this occasion, has prepared a concert devoted to William IX.

William IX

Farai un vers de dreit nien

I'll make a song of just nothing:
Not of me nor any other,
Not about love nor about youth,
Or anything,
For it was found when fast asleep
And on horseback.

I do not know when I was born,
I am neither joyful nor sad,
I am neither distant nor near,
Nothing to do,
Because I was made by the night
On a hilltop.

I do not know when I'm asleep,
Nor when awake, if I'm not told;
For a trifle, my heart would break
From stinging pain;
Which matters to me like nothing,
By saint Martial !

I am sick and think I shall die;
All I know is what I can hear.
As for a doctor of my stamp,
I can see none;
He would be good, if he cured me,
And bad, if not.

I have a love, I know not who;
I've never seen her, by my faith;
She does me neither good nor harm,
Who really cares?
I have neither Normand nor French
In my household.

Though never seen, I love her so;
She's done me neither right or wrong;
When I don't see her, I feel fine;
This matters not:
For I know one who is nobler,
Finer, greater.

I have no idea where she lives,
If on a hill or on a plain;
I dare not state her offenses,
They matter not;
And heavily her presence weighs,
And so I leave.

I've made a song of none knows who;
And now I shall send it to one
Who'll send it to another still
In the Poitou
So that I shall be sent from his case
The counter-key.

William IX

This poem is considered to the founder of troubadour poetry. It is a *canço* that raises the question of nothingness and opens a tradition of debates on this subject (see below the *Tenson of nothingness* by Aimeric of Peguilhan and Albertet de Sisteron). Jacques Roubaud has provided an interpretation of this tradition in *La fleur inverse. Essai sur l'art formel des troubadours* (Paris: Ramsay, republished by Les Belles Lettres). William IX's poem was written in Provençal (*Languè d'Oc*). The French edition and translation are

by Katy Bernard, a specialist in troubadour verse, and was published in 2013: *Le Néant et la Joie. Chansons de Guillaume d'Aquitaine* (Fédérop).

Nothing Much Pome

I'll make a poem about very little I suppose I could do it about nothing and in prose but I know nothing about 'nothing' except what men disclose who gives a shit? I wrote it in pink while in my bed clothes then slept for a bit

I was born in nineteen thirty-two I'm sometimes happy, and sometimes blue I grow old now but was once spruce and new who gives a shit? yesterday was grey and today's drab too so goes it!

When I'm asleep I'm sure I'm not awake there's a bug in my heart that has me shake when I need to stand I put on the brake who gives a shit? when I stay sitting for ages all my limbs ache and tingle like grit

I have a good doctor her name is Hardy she takes my blood pressure and care of me then gives me some pills from the pharmacy which hit the spot like nothing else so really things are picking up a bit

I have a wife who I'm married to I know her and she knows me too our flat is rather cramped as you just have to admit we bump into each other all day through the night's more like it

My poem's done I'm going to sign jacques roubaud that's my name
then online I'll email it to the oulipians who'll all whine they don't
give a shit and 'where's the constraint?' it's hard to shine when no
one gets it

Jacques Roubaud

This poem adopts the formal structure of William IX's "*Vers de dreit nien*"
("Song of just nothing")

Ben vueill que sapchon li pluzor

I would like everyone to know
How finely coloured is my song;
It comes from such a fine workshop
For I have bloom of this trade,
In verity,
And this song will be the proof of it,
Once it's been made.

I know both reason and folly
I know of both shame and honour
I know of both courage and fear;
If I'm offered a game of love,
Far from a fool,
I'll set about choosing the best
And not the worst.

I know the one who praises me
And the one who wishes me ill;
I know the one who laughs at me
And those who like my company
I know fine well;
Thus must I shall give them all joy
And happiness.

Blessed be he who brought me up,
And who granted me such a trade,
For it has never failed me:

I can now play on a cushion
Jack of all trades;
I know far more than my neighbour
Whate'er you think.

Praise be to God and Saint Julian:
I've learnt so much of the sweet game
That I've always the upper hand;
For any who wants my advice
No refusals,
And no one shall ever leave me
Without my word.

For I'm called the 'Perfect Master'
Never my lady will have me
Without wanting me tomorrow;
For in this trade, I can now brag
I know so much
That I know how to earn my way
In all markets.

I should not brag excessively:
The other day I was refused,
For I was playing a big hand;
At first, it all seemed excellent,
But once tabled
I saw I was on the carpet
My bet played out.

However, she then retorted:
"My Lord, your dice are far too small
I'll ask you now to double them!"
"Even for Montpellier," said I,
"I'll never cede!"
And I raised her lace a little
With both my arms.

When I had lifted up her lace
I threw my dice:
Two then tenderly made a pair
And one an ace.

So I tapped hard upon her lace,
My game was done.

William IX

As an inverted echo of his “song of just nothing”, William IX here presents his talents as a lover and poet with a heavy dose of self-mockery.

The Counter-William

I'll risk a poem that's total
my ego on a pedestal
juvenile and sentimental
et cætera
written straight up and vertical
ex cathedra

I know all about my background
as libertine as it was sound
an education quite unbound
just freva
and rational down to the ground
a cappella

I know when I sleep or I wake
not a single council to take
and my belly will never ache
sursum corda
so then please just give me a break
by Lord Buddha

I'm just disgustingly healthy
for God's sake don't go on at me
or praise your homeopathy
it's a gonna
and screw your psychotherapy
what bla-bla-bla

I simply have lovers galore
and possess the key to each door
I'm the one who they're raunchy for
what charisma
a harem is what I adore
home cinema

I see and detest all these women
because they have all screwed me rotten
all the same I'm still up for it and then
like piranha
they dream of incestuous hymen
a home drama

I keep them under lock and key
in the desert or hostelry
they keep their arses just for me
no agenda
so only fools can go hungry
ball-less wonda

My poem will now name some names
if you want them: Jessica James
and assorted grandiose dames
ah tralala
meanwhile I'm expecting no blames
and no bouva

Jacques Jouet

Based on the preceding *canso* "of just nothing" by William IX, Jacques Jouet here provides a parody of fullness and totality.

Pos vezem de novel florir

As we see once again blossom
The meadows, and the orchards green,
Streams and fountains making merry
Breezes and winds;
Each should now savour the delight
Which is his joy.

Of love, I'll say nothing but good:
Having none, one way or another?
Perhaps I do not have the right.
Yet, easily
It gives great joy to one who serves
All of its laws.

For me it has ever been thus:
When I love, I never delight
From it, nor shall I, nor can I;
And, well aware,
I labour still though my heart says:
"All is nothing".

And yet my hopes are still alive
Still I want what I cannot have.
And so the proverb truly states:
"In verity
For brave hearts, nothing's impossible;
If they can wait".

Nothing will be well accomplished
In love, without paying homage,
And being, to those far and near,
Compassionate,
While giving to those at your court
Your fealty.

He who loves must also honour
Obedience to many folk;
And he must also know how to make
Beautiful things
And while at court never converse
In common speech.

I say that a song's worth rises
When it can be heard in glory,
With each of its words in their place
In harmony
And the sounds that I praise myself
Are rich and good.

Now, to Narbonne, I shall not go
But may my song
Go there, and I would that its worth
Stand as my proof.

No, my Esteve, I shall not go
But may my song
Go there, and I would that its worth
Stand as my proof.

William IX

This is the first poem to express *fin'amor*, the form of perfect love that opened the way to courtly love.

The 'Tenson of Nothingness'

Friend Albert often of tensons all troubadours make a hoard and offer debates about love and others things too if they please but I'll do something that none has done before a tenson on what does not exist you could answer me easily on any subject but on nothing I want your answer and this will be the tenson of nothingness

Sir Aimeric since of just nothing you want me to make an answer I want no other reasoner than myself it seems clear to me that each question has an answer but what to answer to what is not? For a nought is paid by another so to the nothing you offer me I shall answer with silence

Albert I do not think that silence is a valid answer the dumb do not answer their lord the dumb tell neither the truth nor lies if you are silent then how can you answer? nothingness has a name and so if you name it you will speak even if this displeases you or you have answered neither well nor badly

Sir Aimeric so nothing has being all I hear from what you say is wrong follies deserve follies but sense an answer and wisdom I answer to I know not what like one who has gone inside a barrel he looks at his eyes and his face he calls and will be called only by himself for no one else can see him

Albert I am truly he who calls and sees his face and you the voice that answers for I first made the call and an echo is nothing it seems to me and so you have just, and I hope this will not bother you, drawn a zero by answering thus and if it is like this that you reason only a madman would believe in your nothing

Sir Aimeric interweaving you are skilled in and are praised for it most people do not understand you nor you yourself it would seem for you have started up such a reasoning that I shall extricate myself from it whatever it means to you but you will remain embarrassed and harcel me in vain I will answer you but shall not tell you what

Albert what I tell you is true so I say that nothingness is visible if from a bridge you stare fixedly your eyes will tell you that you advance constantly and that the flowing water remains motionless

Sir Aimeric this is neither good nor bad this thing you have started because you advance as little as the mill with a wheel on its side which moves all day and does not budge

Aimeric of Peguilhan and Albertet de Sestaro

Tenson JR - MB

jrjr *My dear Marcel* Oulipians often have debates among themselves. They discuss potentiality, constraints and other things when they see fit. But I shall now do what no other member of the Ouvroir has done before: a discussion about what does not exist. I am sure that you would answer me easily on any subject, but I want your answer to nothing and this will be our *tenson of nothingness*.

mbmb *My dear Jacques*, as you want just nothing as an answer to you, I can do so quite simply. It is clear that all questions have answers, just as each answer has its question. But how to answer to what is nothing? As you are offering something which is not, I shall answer by staying silent.

jrjr *My dear Marcel*, I do not think that silence makes for a valid answer. A dumb Oulipian could not answer President Le Lionnais. You do not answer by staying silent. But I spoke to challenge you. Nothingness has a name and to name it you must speak, even if this displeases you. Otherwise, you will have answered neither well nor badly.

mbmb *My dear Jacques*, your answer, if I may say so, has no actual meaning. It is nothing but a 'know not what'. You are leaning over a well. But the truth will not emerge. All you will see there is yourself. You will question but who will answer?

jrjr *Marcel*, my old friend, you are the one who has fallen into a well. Each time you answer me, you just echo my words. And what exactly is an echo? Nothing, it seems to me.

mbmb *Jacques*, the most unbelievable constraints are your speciality and you are praised for this. Most of us do not understand them, and neither do you, I fear. Do you want my answer? Here it is. I answer, but I will not tell you what.

jrjr Be serious. I tell you that nothingness is visible. Go to the Pont Mirabeau and stare down at the Seine. Your eyes will prove to you that you are constantly advancing and that the flowing water is motionless.

mbmb How facile. And why not the mill with its wheel on one side which moves all day and doesn't advance? Are you claiming that nothingness is just an illusion? What utter nonsense!

jrjr Don't take it like that!

Jacques Roubaud

Based on the tenson of Aimeric and Albertet, this text features a debate about nothingness between Jacques Roubaud (jrjr) and Marcel Bénabou (mbmb).

William IX, nuffin' pome

(Voices of assorted of crib figures, shepherds, squeaky clean, runny-dozed, snotty, rasping, inspired, constrained.)

Whatchi compose?
— Composed naught.

Whatchi verse?
— Versed naught.

Watchi sing?
— Sang naught.

Why'chi compose naught?
Why'chi verse naught?
Why'chi sing naught?

— (Just was.)

Source: Jean Tardieu, *Monsieur Monsieur*, Gallimard, 1951.

Jacques Jouet

A monostich for William IX

Nothing's pure beauty is a song forever.

Jacques Jouet

Robert of Arbrissel and the Psalms

The life of the blessed Robert of Arbrissel

Saint Robert received in heritage the protection of Christianity. He was born and was raised near Rennes, in Brittany, that province that he later honoured with his Priesthood.

His father was called Damalioque; his mother Orguende: and their village's name was Arbrissel.

From his earliest childhood, he showed great maturity in his behaviour and chose whole-hearted chastity, without ever tarnishing its repute.

Robert preaches

Allowing himself to be followed by very few members of the church, he went into towns and preached in the middle of public squares with such fervour, such effect and such fruit, that before very long a countless multitude of the faithful, of both sexes, leaving behind the world's vanities, followed him everywhere, as the indubitable path to salvation. For he rejected no one whose heart God had touched, and made no exceptions for sex, age or condition, thus imitating he who came for all men. It was a delightful spectacle to see him at the head of this army of God, with neither regiments nor combat, and without baggage; in a word, armed from head to toe like the first Missionaries. You would have sworn that they were the united troops of Angels who, driven by a celestial fervour in still-mortal bodies, were leading their immortal substances towards a blessed life. But, fearing that vice and disorder might over time introduce themselves furtively into this innocent multitude, and that Demons by some disturbance might spread their plague, he decided to search for a desert, where, separating the Ladies from the Men, he gave them in their pleasant captivity the freedom to think only of God, thus sparing them from

the unwelcome dread of creating or suffering from scandals of any sort.

Robert acquires some land

At the far end of the Diocese of Poitiers, he came across some uninhabited land, which hitherto had suffered, more than any other territory in France, from Adam's curse, being fertile only to thorns and scrubs. It had from time immemorial been called *Fontevrault*, and stood barely at a French league from Cande and Montsoreau.

It was there that our invincible conqueror of Souls wished to erect to Holy Love the trophies which so many illustrious victories had won. It was to this solitude that, according to God's heart, this man led Jesus Christ's Brides, so that he might speak to their hearts, and where the huge caves, which nature had dug out there at the birth of the world, incited him to conceal the rich booty that his zeal had earnt in diverse Provinces. For, even though, until then, he had concealed along with himself all his children indifferently in the wounds and heart of the Saviour, this desert which he meant to fertilize with his tears seemed propitious to him so as to hide away absolutely from the eyes of men the new family that he had acquired for God. And he accepted as a gift from Heaven the donation that was made to him legally by its legitimate owners; he saw it as an impregnable fortress, where his young troops could at leisure conduct the exercises of a spiritual militia.

Beginnings

This establishment started with some Huts, which it opposed simply against all the aggressions of the air, & with a Chapel, which fervour built even more rapidly than magnificence & which was the everyday confidant of their sighs and of their tender devotions. Do not ask with what modesty, respect & ardour God was invoked at once in his new house; nor what profusions of tears & sobs, what gentleness, what ecstasies & what transports were consecrated to the infinite & immense Majesty of this holy place! It will suffice for me to say that at this Arch of God, in the midst of its Camp, all the desires of each

quarter became united, just as lines drawn from a circumference meet at its centre.

That quite miraculous & supernatural Sacrament of the Adorable Eucharist seemed to be the natural home of all their affections. It was there that, before God, they paraded at their pleasure their most intimate feelings. It was there that they caressed singularly the divine Love which hid there, only to surprise their hearts, and which they were insatiably avid to address, to see and to enjoy; tasting no other contentment than in the communication of that delicious Manna. From it, they derived all the necessary fervour to be able to live from the work of their hands & and to avoid idleness as a damnable presumption.

The Ladies' Establishment

It is true that he devised for Ladies a gentler occupation & by requiring them to stay in the Cloister & in continual silence between themselves and with men, he did not want to impose on them any other charge than the pleasant employment of addressing & cajoling their Spouse in an Orison which would be interrupted only by the precise and indispensable tasks that the condition of a mortal life brings with it; meanwhile however the men were applied to the strenuous exercises of an active life. Thus the Spirit of discretion that conducted & fixed all his designs did not desert him. For is it not more just that the tenderer and weaker sex be devoted to singing delightfully day & night and contemplating God's greatness; while the men, being more robust, are occupied by labour?

Fraternally

The Ladies thus being separated, he ordered that the Priests and Laymen live together fraternally without any distinction, except that the Priests should sing the sacred Office & celebrate the Holy Mass; while the Laymen would volunteer themselves heartedly for manual work. All should for a certain time maintain an inviolable silence. Oaths, disputes and contestations were severely banished from the entire congregation. Each satisfied humbly & sweetly the demands he made. They loved one another like brothers & among them there were

was no hatred, aversion, bitter-heartedness, envy, or discord. Their modesty was a delight, either in the Church where you would have taken them for Angels disguised as men; or at their tasks, where you would also have admired their taciturnity & their alacrity; or else in their speech, in which they used only the language of Paradise. They walked with their heads down & their eyes on the ground, except from time to time when they would sigh softly while looking at the Heavens, that happy end of their travails. Furthermore, they did not deign to lower themselves to pointless speech & they never sought the vain consolations that men of the world seek with an effusion of superfluous talk in a circle of people whom idleness makes fall silent.

And thus

Thus were, more or less, the virtues that ROBERT inspired in his DISCIPLES. He received no one except on these conditions, for any man unable to swear that he would observe them precisely would not have been capable of fighting under such a captain. Even after winning them thus for God, and though he was their Superior in many respects, they dared not call him anything but Master, for he could not bear specious titles such as Sire or Abbot. If honorific names filled him with horror, he found the ceremony & pomp that went with them even more unbearable. His extreme humility meant that poverty must needs follow him in his travels, attend his tables and order his garments. For all his life, France saw him dressed in a large sack, walking barefoot in the snow & the mud, with no one able to convince him to wear sandals. He never drank wine, and consumed no viands that might flatter his taste. And it was only with great difficulty that, towards the end of his life, the Lord Bishops, to whom he humbly deferred, succeeded in convincing him to agree to mistreating a little less his body, worn down as he was by abstinence and fatigue, & to ride a horse during his last journeys.

Baldéric,
from the French version of Sébastien Ganot, 1648

Extracts from the copy in the Bibliothèque de France, 8° Ln 27 - 17618

Shades of Fontevraud

Robert of Arbrissel

ardent convert	bare feet	hirsute troop
shared cot	insatiable preacher	quenched ardour
monastic settlement	illumined flesh	
	new martyr	subdued men
	chosen abbess	
	unprecedented	
	humiliation	
	you set the rules	
	“may they never have...”	
	you leave to preach	
	you die far away	
	your body	
	comes back	
	an invisible ghost	
pointless discourses	superfluous words	inspected reading
	continual silence	

Eleanor

gilded myth

dark legend
perpetual motion

dauntless queen

open robe

tightened waist
fixed movement

hugging cut

monastic close

double community
deserved retirement

female authority

did you think
you would stay
close your eyes
hold your book
meditate
forever
motionless?

blank book

eternal silence
silent reading

distant stare

Valérie Beaudouin

Robert of Arbrissel, “sower of the holy word”, insatiable preacher from Brittany, established himself with his company in these uninhabited lands, in the locality of Fontevraud where he founded his monastic settlement. He drew up the rules for this mixed community, in which men and women, rich and poor, lived together. Seeing his death approach, he had Petronilla, a high-ranking, lay converse, elected abbess. Then he left to preach once more, and died far from Fontevraud. Petronilla had his body brought back and he was buried at the foot of the master altar. But not a trace of him remains.

After a hectic life, Eleanor retired to Fontevraud, but she did not take the veil. Did she live by or inside the monastery? At the end of her life, she continued to travel throughout her lands to support her sons Richard Lionheart and then John Lackland. We do not know where she was buried. All that is left of her is a tomb effigy, which has been moved on numerous occasions. She floats in the space of the abbey. Several positions have been considered for these statues. They are now in the nave, but could have been elsewhere. Jean-Pierre Raynaud imagined them suspended in the transept. Here is Eleanor definitively-provisionally in place, her eyes half closed, an open book resting in her hands.

Robert of Arbrissel and Eleanor of Aquitaine are Fontevraud’s ghosts.

The *elementary morality* is a form invented by Raymond Queneau. Many other authors, members of the Oulipo or others, have adopted it, as can be seen in the volume devoted to it¹. This example is a double morality. The elements of symmetry and parallelism that appertain to the elementary morality cover its two faces. Each morality is organised according to the sequence: *legend, appearance, place, interlude, reading or writing*.

The “adjective-noun” groups come from:

Flori, J., 2004. *Aliénor d’Aquitaine. La reine insoumise*, Paris: Payot & Rivages.

Erlande-Brandenburg, A., 2004. *Le gisant d’Aliénor d’Aquitaine*. 303- Arts, recherches et créations, Hors série, pp.175–179.

Aurell, M. & Armangaud, J.-P., *Entretien avec Jacques Le Goff*. 303 - Arts, recherches et créations, Hors série, pp.20–25.

Baldéric, 1648. *La vie du bienheureux Robert d’Arbrissel*,

Dalarun, J., 2008. *Aux sources de Fontevraud*. 303 - Arts, recherches et créations, 67, pp.8–13.

Dalarun, J., Giodanengo, G., Le Huérou, A., Longère, J., Poirel, D. and Venarde, B.L., 2006. *Les Deux Vies de Robert d’Arbrissel, fondateur de Fontevraud. Légendes, écrits et témoignages*, Turnhout: Brepols Publishers.

¹ JOUET, J., MARTIN, P. AND MONCOND’HUY, D., 2007. *La morale élémentaire. Aventures d’une forme poétique, Queneau, Oulipo, etc.* La Licorne., Poitiers : Presses universitaires de Rennes.

Word-for-word version of Psalm 51, Hebrew Bible

to choirmaster
psalm
of David
when will go
home
Nathan have pity for me
the Prophet God
when from tenderness
he went from the greatness
to with your pity with abundance
Bath- forget wash me
sheba my revolt from my faults
from my crimes
purify me for
myself my revolt
I know
and my crime against you
before me you alone
always I have sinned
evil
in your eyes
I have done so that
you may be just
in your words
straight
in your judgments here
in wrong
I was born
and in sin
conceived me here
my mother the truth
you desire
inside
and in hiding you take away
my sin
wisdom with hyssop
know and I am purified

Psalm 51, King James Version, 1611

1. (To the chief Musician, A Psalm of David, when Nathan the prophet came unto him, after he had gone in to Bathsheba.) Have mercy upon me, O God, according to thy lovingkindness: according unto the multitude of thy tender mercies blot out my transgressions.
2. Wash me throughly from mine iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin.
3. For I acknowledge my transgressions: and my sin is ever before me.
4. Against thee, thee only, have I sinned, and done this evil in thy sight: that thou mightest be justified when thou speakest, and be clear when thou judgest.
5. Behold, I was shapen in iniquity; and in sin did my mother conceive me.
6. Behold, thou desirest truth in the inward parts: and in the hidden part thou shalt make me to know wisdom.
7. Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean: wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow.
8. Make me to hear joy and gladness; that the bones which thou hast broken may rejoice.
9. Hide thy face from my sins, and blot out all mine iniquities.
10. Create in me a clean heart, O God; and renew a right spirit within me.
11. Cast me not away from thy presence; and take not thy holy spirit from me.
12. Restore unto me the joy of thy salvation; and uphold me with thy free spirit.

13. Then will I teach transgressors thy ways; and sinners shall be converted unto thee.

14. Deliver me from bloodguiltiness, O God, thou God of my salvation: and my tongue shall sing aloud of thy righteousness.

15. O Lord, open thou my lips; and my mouth shall shew forth thy praise.

16. For thou desirest not sacrifice; else would I give it: thou delightest not in burnt offering.

17. The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit: a broken and a contrite heart, O God, thou wilt not despise.

18. Do good in thy good pleasure unto Zion: build thou the walls of Jerusalem.

19. Then shalt thou be pleased with the sacrifices of righteousness, with burnt offering and whole burnt offering: then shall they offer bullocks upon thine altar.

Psalm LI : Miserere mei, Deus
Mary Sidney (The Psalmes of David, 1599)

O Lord, whose grace no limits comprehend,
 Sweet Lord, whose mercies stand from measure free;
To me that grace, to me that mercy send,
 And wipe, O Lord, my sins from sinful me;
 O cleanse, O wash my foule iniquity;
Cleanse still my spots, still wash away my stainings,
Till stains and spot in me leave no remainings.

For I, alas, acknowledging, do know
 My filthy fault, my faulty filthiness,
To my soul's eye incessantly doth show;
 Which done to thee, to thee I do confess,
 Just Judge, true witness; that for righteousness
Thy doom may pass, against my fault awarded,
Thy evidence for truth may be regarded.

My mother, lo! when I began to be,
 Conceiving me, with me did sin conceive;
And, as with living heat she cherish'd me,
 Corruption did like cherishing receive;
 But lo, they love to purest good doth cleave,
And inward truth, which, hardly else discerned,
My truant soul in thy hid school hath learned.

Then (as thyself to lepers hast assign'd)
 With hyssop, Lord, with hyssop purge me so,
And, that shall cleanse the leproy of my mind;
 Make over me thy mercy's streams to flow,
 So shall my whiteness scorn the whitest snow;

To ear and heart send sounds and thoughts of gladness,
That bruised bones may leave away their sadness.

Thy ill-pleas'd eye from my misdeeds avert;
 Cancel the registers my sins contain;
Create in me a clean, pure, spotless heart;
 Inspire a spirit where love of right may reign,
 And cast me not from thee; take not again
Thy breathing grace; again thy comfort send me,
And let the guard of thy free Spirit attend me.

So I to them a guiding hand will be,
 Whose faulty feet have wandered from thy way,
And, turn'd from sin, will make return to thee,
 Whom, turn'd from thee, sin erst had turn'd astray.
 O God, God of my health, O do away
My bloody crime: so shall my tongue be raised
To praise thy truth, enough cannot be praised.

Unlock my lips, shut up with sinful shame,
 Then shall my mouth, O Lord, thy honour sing;
For bleeding fuel for thy altars flame,
 To gain thy grace what boots it me to bring?
 Burnt offerings are to thee pleasant thing;
The sacrifice that God will holde respected
Is the heart-broken soul, the spirit dejected.

Lastly, O Lord, how so I stand, or fall,
 Leave not thy loved Sion to embrace;
But with thy favour build up Salem's wall,
 Corruption did like cherishing receive;
 Then shalt thou turn a well-accepted face
To sacred fires, with offer'd gifts perfumed,
Till even whole calves on altars be consumed.

Mary Sidney

Eleanor

Eleanor in the Avant-Garde

It is hard to avoid commonplaces when it comes to talking of the exceptional woman who was Eleanor of Aquitaine, a major figure of a century, the twelfth, during which she occupied almost constantly the centre of the historical stage: by turns the wife of Louis VII of France and of Henry II of England, and so queen twice over, first of France then of England, the mother of three children, but also a woman passionately attached to her freedom, a crusading warrior, incestuous lover, plotter, rebel, captive, widow, cloistered laywoman, to cite but a few²... Each era has had its own clichés about her, which either confirm or contradict each other, and it would be quite hard for anyone who so tried, to reduce the distance between the legendary and the historical Eleanors. It would thus seem better, so far as possible, to free ourselves from such refrains, or at least not to allow ourselves to be paralysed by them. And instead take as our starting point one of the least frequented or debated aspects of her multifaceted personality and of the heritage that she left behind her. This will allow us perhaps to shed new light on a point that has long remained in darkness: the meaning to be given to the book that can still today be seen in the hands of the tomb effigy which depicts the queen, in the very Abbey of Fontevraud where she decided to retire at the end of her life. But to do so, it will be necessary to go back a little further in time.

To begin, the following statement will give rise to little controversy: among the recognised merits of our heroine, there always figures prominently her interest, indeed passion, for literature and, more generally, what would now be called culture. This passion

² Georges Duby, *Dames du XIIème siècle*, tome I : Héloïse, Aliénor, Iseut et quelques autres, Paris, Gallimard, 1995 ; Ralph V. Turner, *Aliénor d'Aquitaine*, Fayard, 2011

was quite considerably favoured by her circumstances, with their roots in the brilliant family past of this future twofold queen. The court of the Dukes of Aquitaine, where she received a particularly rich and varied education (hunting and riding, but also music and Latin), was renowned throughout the century as an especially refined centre of culture³. It so happened that Eleanor was the granddaughter of William IX, who, as part of an august line, devoted himself to poetry and is considered to be the first troubadour. She was the daughter of the successor to William IX, William X, who united around himself a circle of troubadours such as Eble II of Ventadorn, Cercamon, Marcabru, or Jaufre Rudel. It can easily be understood that, faithful to such brilliant predecessors⁴, she decided to take up the flame and to follow a similar path: she, too, would have it at heart to maintain a literary court, welcoming, among others, her daughter Marie of Champagne, the protector of Chrétien de Troyes and Gautier d'Arras⁵.

Let us now try to approach more closely some of the characters that may have had a direct influence on Eleanor's mind, and contributed to inspiring her behaviour. We can focus at once on a remarkable sequence of three, who were closely linked together by all sorts of bonds.

The first place goes incontestably to the attractive and extremely modern figure of William IX, a colourful character who presented himself in his poetic writings as a Janus, or "dual browed": some of his texts are boastfully libertine, wilfully vulgar and cynical, while others are sincere and delicate, very close to what would later be the great lyrical works of the "trobar" (the art of singing love). To explain such apparently contradictory inspirations, chronology is generally resorted to: the former poems are supposed to have been written in early youth, while the latter belong to his maturity, or even old age. But his most original and most famous poem, considered by many to be one of the finest successes of Occitan lyric, is: *Farai un vers de*

³ Michel Stanesco, "La cour médiévale comme institution littéraire" in *L'écrivain et ses institutions*, published by Roger Marchal

⁴ It is known that such sponsorship sometimes ran down through several generations of the same bloodline. Rita Lejeune, "Rôle littéraire d'Aliénor d'Aquitaine et de sa famille", *Cahiers de civilisation médiévale*, 1, 1958, 319-337

⁵ Barking and Philippe de Thaon have devoted works to her.

*dreit nien*⁶. A. Jeanroy may have thought it to be a mere trifle⁷, but its importance in our eyes comes from a distinct trait: it is here that appears for the first time in the poetry of the troubadours a certain fascination for *nien* (nothingness). This could in part, as J. Roubaud has suggested, have come from negative theology, “which fascinated the avant-garde thinkers of the eleventh century”⁸. And it is not hard to imagine that the sophisticated atmosphere of the court of Poitiers would have been a fertile territory for this type of preoccupation and speculation. But a further characteristic appears in the poem, which has perhaps not been sufficiently highlighted before: an emphasis on concerns about transmission, which takes up the entirety of the last stanza⁹.

Then comes Eble II of Ventadorn, called *lo Cantador* (the Singer): another great lord who was also a great poet. He was a viscount, very close to William IX whose vassal he was, and with whom, according to Geoffroy du Breuil, he rivalled in “courtesy”¹⁰. Unfortunately, his work has not come down to us¹¹, allusions to his person, his art or his influence on the troubadours of the Limousin and Périgord, are common among some of his contemporaries such as, among others, Marcabru, who spoke of the “troop of lord Eble”, or Bernart Marti, who addressed him a *canço*.

The third in this series is Bernart de Ventadorn¹², whose birth

⁶ Which may be translated as: “I’ll make a poem of just nothing”. Concerning this poem, see J. Roubaud, *La fleur inverse, Essai sur l’art formel des troubadours*, Ramsay, 1986, 32.

⁷ A. Jeanroy, *La poésie lyrique des troubadours*, Privat-Didier, 1934, vol II, p. 6.

⁸ J. Roubaud, *op. cit.* 37. ‘Thought about *nihil* makes it appear as, essentially, the locus of every contradiction’.

⁹ Which can be translated as: *I’ve made a song of none knows who / And now I shall send it to one / Who’ll send it to another still / In the Poitou / So that I shall be sent from his case / The counter-key!*

¹⁰ This was a question of improvised dinners, at which the two men rivalled in their sophistication (a medieval form of the potlatch).

¹¹ Maria Dumitrescu, “Èble II de Ventadorn et Guillaume IX d’Aquitaine” In: *Cahiers de civilisation médiévale*. 11e année (n°43), Juillet-septembre 1968. pp. 379-412. The author tries to show that some of the manuscript poems attributed to William IX could be by Eble II.

¹² Marguerite-Marie Ippolito, *Bernard de Ventadour: troubadour limousin du XIIe siècle : prince de l’amour et de la poésie romane*, L’Harmattan, 2001.

may certainly have been far less prestigious than the first two¹³, but who was for a long time tied to Eble II, who initiated him into the *trobar*¹⁴. His name and a part of his oeuvre are closely attached to Eleanor, who welcomed him into her circle for a time. Many songs of love, of a highly sublimated kind, rid of all things of the flesh, made and still make his reputation. Here, we shall mention only the most famous and beautiful of them, the “canso of the lark” (*Can vei la lauzeta mover...*), in the final lines of which nothingness appears as “the dark contrary of love, inseparable from it¹⁵”.

Thus we have, with these three generations of poets who form a sort of chain, the family background and the literary context in which Eleanor was immersed. It was the direct or indirect frequentation of their works which, it would seem, led her to become aware of a troubling reality, whose true importance she was apparently the first to measure: the fact that, in the troubadours’ poetry, there was a genuine obsession with “nothing”, a “sickness of nothingness”, as J. Roubaud calls it in his enlightening analysis of “melancholic Eros”¹⁶. A new and remarkable illustration of this sickness was to appear a few decades later, in about 1230, with the “tenson of nothingness” by Aimeric of Peguilhan and Albertet de Sestaro, which stands as a genuine extension of the texts referred to above, and to which it alludes¹⁷.

It should be noticed that her awareness of this sickness, which might have made others become withdrawn, passive or even quite simply melancholic, did not stop Eleanor from leading an extraordinarily active and adventurous life, as we know. The explanation for this apparent contradiction is not hard to imagine: as for William IX, it was doubtlessly a question of chronology. It is

¹³ He is said to have been born into a family attached to the castle of Ventadorn, of a father who was a man-at-arms and a mother who worked in the bakery house. But these indications should perhaps not be taken literally.

¹⁴ But he later stated that he would no longer be “de l’escola N’Eblo”.

¹⁵ J. Roubaud, *La fleur inverse, Essai sur l’art formel des troubadours*, Ramsay, 1986, 94.

¹⁶ J. Roubaud, *Ibid.*, 94-95.

¹⁷ J. Roubaud, *Ibid.*, 23 underlines the importance of this tenson by making it the starting point of his book (“The tenson of nothingness and the dilemma of the trobar”).

highly probable that this discovery occurred late in her life, and it only haunted the queen's mind towards the end. Whatever the case, we are now better equipped to deal with the problem that concerns us here: to understand the steps that Eleanor, who was, like her grandfather, quite clearly concerned about transmitting something for future generations to think over, and so assure her continued presence on the earth, decided to take before her death. Let us now recall the set-up she imagined: there would be, alongside a series of tomb effigies depicting various members of her family, her own statue, showing in a stylised purity the beautiful face of a still-young woman, wearing a crown, and holding in both hands, below her breast, an open book¹⁸.

What is the meaning of this choice?

Of course, a book is an eminently symbolic, even metaphorical object. At the end of the twelfth century, it would have been linked, almost automatically, with religion¹⁹. This is why it has been suggested that Eleanor's book might have been a pious one, a psalter for example. This hypothesis is based on an undeniable observation: during the entire Middle Ages, depictions of "women reading" were always religious. But, in the case that concerns us here, do we have a depiction of "a woman reading"? Nothing could be less certain, even though it has become customary to assert that this is the first representation of a woman reader in the western world²⁰. In reality, on taking a closer look, we can see that Eleanor is not reading. As with all tomb effigies, her eyes are closed. What her eyes are staring at, behind her lids, is heaven rather than her book. She seems to be less preoccupied by reading than by a sort of peaceful, serene meditation. It is clear that the book in question does not refer to any particular type of content (religious or otherwise), and is there to recall, or rather to symbolise, the ties Eleanor had throughout her life, through her family's traditions as well as in her personal choices, with the

¹⁸ As a reminder, Eleanor's statue has now been placed in the nave of the abbey, beside Henry II Plantagenet, her second husband, Richard Cœur de Lion, their son, and Isabella of Angoulême, the wife of John Lackland, Eleanor's last son.

¹⁹ In another context, this might recall the Jewish legend about a cemetery with tombs covered with books to allow the deceased to continue their reading.

²⁰ A representation that was to have a certain success in the following centuries, see Fritz Nies, "La femme-femme et la lecture, un tour d'horizon iconographique" *Romantisme*, 1985, 15, 47, 97-106.

world of letters, and which she is now continuing to cultivate through eternity, beyond the grave.

There is a further excellent reason for us to affirm, without fear of contradiction, that not only is Eleanor not reading, but she would be incapable of doing so, for the book she is holding contains no visible text. And, unless we imagine that it has been treated with an invisible ink that is so tenacious that it has withstood eight centuries without giving up its secrets, then the book is a blank one, or else mute (*liber mutus*²¹).

We must now try to examine this very blankness, or muteness. It seems to us that it cannot be understood unless we agree to see it in relationship with this “obsession with nothingness”, or “nothing sickness”, which we have alluded to above. The queen’s choice of a mute book could then be seen as a means to place herself in the continuity of a path already initiated by her grandfather with his poem of *dreit rien*, and then followed by various troubadours after him. But Eleanor was bold enough to take a further, decisive step. She knew that at the end of this path there could lie only silence, but she was also quite aware of the ancient paradox which states that it is impossible to talk of silence without breaking it at once. This is why she decided to make a material representation of it: the marble book with its blank pages, which her hands are holding, has been precisely designed to form the contours of an absent text, and, by so doing, it succeeds in providing a paradoxical presence for this absence. This is an original move in the West, but distant echoes of it can be found in a scene frequently depicted by Chinese or Japanese artists. It shows two men, apparently sages or scholars, who are seated and seem to be listening to music. But a more attentive examination of the picture reveals that the instrument, which they are lending such an attentive ear to, has a strange particularity: it is a lute entirely lacking in strings, and thus incapable of producing the slightest sound. It can thus be understood that the real hero at the centre of the scene, and which gives it its meaning, is none other than silence. Here a blank

²¹ *Mutus liber* would also be, much later (in 1677), the title of an alchemical text, accompanied by a series of fine illustrations (15 plates) concerning the production of the philosopher’s stone.

book, there a mute instrument; this kinship, reaching beyond ages and civilisations, at least deserved mention.

Once this has been admitted, we can take one step further, and show to what extent Eleanor's daring gesture has borne fruit. For this blank book is far from being the prisoner of a meaning that is forever fixed or closed. In which respect it is, admittedly, quite similar to its printed brother, which is known to change over time so that it periodically inspires new readings and fresh interpretations (which is the sign, according to exegetes down the ages, of a recognisably 'great book').

Firstly, it is vital to underline its extraordinarily premonitory nature: it announces, or rather launches, a mechanism whose effects in the history of French poetry would be seen only many centuries later. We know, since Hölderlin or Rimbaud perhaps, and certainly since Mallarmé's *Crise de vers*, that poets have entered into an era of suspicion. It is now out of the question to trust in words, or feel any entire devotion to them, as used apparently to be the case in the good old days. Poetic discourse has more and more brutally run up against the insufficiencies and traps of language: certain experiences, be they intimate or collective, can no longer be translated into words, as though there now existed certain circumstances in which language had irrevocably reached its limits, and was now forced to beat a retreat. Hence a continual, progressive path towards silence. For how, except by silence, can we deal with this erosion of speech, and its irrepressible tendency to rehash the same thing? An endless list could be made of writers, of poetry and of prose, who have situated themselves resolutely in this problematic area and succumbed to the temptation of glorifying silence. Take Keats with his famous *Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard / Are sweeter*. Or, a little less universally celebrated, there are Virgilio and Homero Exposito, who proclaimed in the closing verses of a song entitled 'Vete de mi': *es mejor el verso aquel / que no podemos recordar*. We might also recall de Vigny: *À voir ce que l'on fut sur terre et ce qu'on laisse / Seul le silence est grand, tout le reste est faiblesse*. Or else Laforgue: *Mon Dieu, que tout fait signe de se taire ! Mon Dieu, qu'on est*

follement solitaire! There are also the lines of Edmond Haraucourt²²: *Les plus beaux vers sont ceux qu'on n'écrira jamais*. And, finally, we should not overlook, when closing arbitrarily this brief list, the undeservedly obscure Mallurset, who so harmoniously mingled the accents of Musset with the spirit of Mallarmé: *Sur le vide papier sont les chants les plus beaux* ('the sweetest songs are on the empty page').

From this approach, which has allowed us to associate Eleanor with one of the main currents of contemporary poetry, we can now pass to another. It will allow us to interpret this blank book as a sort of cenotaph, or monument raised to all the unwritten books, or phantom works that have occupied the minds of their conceivers for so many years, but without ever finally seeing the light of day²³.

But there is still another route to be explored, in which silence is not the consequence of the exhaustion of language or of its absence, but where, on the contrary, it might even be stated that it is the continuation of speech by other means. "The art of silence" then appears to be the indispensable complement to the art of speech²⁴. This is what happens in the poem of zero words, which François Le Lionnais theorised²⁵. The importance of blanks, when they are cunningly distributed in a text, has long been noted: they have the ability to stimulate readers' imaginations, forcing them to draw from their own reserves, so as to establish the missing links. But what happens when this blankness covers everything, when it reigns as master over the page, and is the entire poem itself? Does this not open up for readers a huge field for their imagination and freedom? For, as Kandinsky reminded us: *whiteness acts on our souls like silence, a nothing before everything begins*. But we must be careful here. The poem of zero words, as conceived by Le Lionnais, is not exactly

²² It should not be forgotten that Edmond Haraucourt is also the author of the famous *Partir, c'est mourir un peu*, in which Jacques Prévert was quite right to see a spoonerism for *Martyr, c'est pourrir un peu*.

²³ Jean-Yves Jouannais, *Artistes sans oeuvres, I would prefer not to*, Hazan, 1997, Enrique Vila-Matas, *Bartleby et Compagnie*, Christian Bourgois, 2002.

²⁴ The expression was used as the title of a book by Abbé Dinouart, *L'art de se taire* (1771), Jérôme Million, 1988.

²⁵ "L'antéantépénultième", A Queneau, Bibliothèque oulipienne n°4 ; in *Atlas de littérature potentielle*, p. 19-21.

“nothing”, or a “pure nothingness”: it actually exists, for, just like Saint Anselme’s God, its idea and its reality are inseparable and indissoluble. It is also akin to lightning, sharing its intensity as well as its fugacity: in the same way, it passes without leaving a trace. It would seem that the utility of this concept in the history of literature has not yet been fully evaluated. It holds the key to many enigmas. In particular, it helps us to find a rational explanation for the periods of supposed silence experienced by great poets (Rimbaud and Valéry above all). Can we not, must we not, consider these periods to have been in fact devoted to the composition of poems of zero words?

Here, then, are some of the results to which an analysis of Eleanor’s blank book has little by little led us. The biggest step forward has been the fact that it has put us in possession of a precious conceptual tool, which is the poem of zero words. Thanks to this tool, we can now retrace our steps and propose an hypothesis about the meaning to be given to this book: it is an anthology of poems of zero words. François Le Lionnais once affirmed that “*despite all of its riches, the anthology of poems of zero words would fit easily on a postage stamp*”. It fits even better on a marble page. The next step is to find who was the compiler of this anthology. We would have no hesitation in naming Eble II of Ventadorn, because of the central place he occupied among the poets of his time; furthermore, as we have seen, he stood at the junction between two men who were particularly dear to Eleanor, William IX, his master, and Bernart de Ventadorn, his disciple. In some strange premonition, it would even seem that, by paying him this silent homage, Eleanor had in mind a thought quite similar to the one that Maurice Blanchot was to express so many centuries later: “*The paths and works of the mind that attempt the impossible are the subjects of inexhaustible meditation. We admire the visible fruits of its art, but never cease from thinking of the operations that led to nothing that is visible, and whose every act led to an impenetrably pure absence*”.

Marcel Bénabou

Confidences

Bending over the ear of Eleanor of Aquitaine, William IX, the troubadour, said: “Grow. We’ll sing for you, little one”.

Bending over the ear of Eleanor of Aquitaine, her mother said: “You’re the other Aénor”.

Bending over the ear of Eleanor of Aquitaine, her brother, William the Eagle, said before dying: “You know your Latin, music and literature, now learn to hunt on horseback”.

Bending over the ear of Eleanor of Aquitaine, William, her father, said: “I’ll die a pilgrim”.

Bending over the ear of Eleanor of Aquitaine, King Louis VI, the Fat, said: “You’ll marry my son. Pretend to love him”.

Bending over the ear of Eleanor of Aquitaine, King Louis VII, her husband, said: “Make yourself loved”.

Bending over the ear of Eleanor of Aquitaine, King Louis VII, her husband, said: “Lady, cover yourself”.

Bending over the ear of Eleanor of Aquitaine, Constance of Arles, her confidante, said: “Let’s buy some extravagant dresses and things”.

Bending over the ear of Eleanor of Aquitaine, Marcabru, the troubadour, said: “I shall sing of love for you”.

Bending over the ear of Eleanor of Aquitaine, King Louis VII, her husband, said: “Agreed, I’ll dismiss Suger and submit Lezay to you”.

Bending over the ear of Eleanor of Aquitaine, King Louis VII, her husband, said: “Don’t even imagine it, I can’t dissolve the marriage of old one-eyed Ralph of Vermandois, just to please your sister Petronilla!”

Bending over the ear of Eleanor of Aquitaine, Petronilla of Aquitaine, her sister, said: “Thanks sister dear, I’m delighted with my old one-eyed husband”.

Bending over the ear of Eleanor of Aquitaine, King Louis VII, her husband, said: “You’ve taken things too far; the Pope has put my kingdom under his interdict. You’re coming with me on crusade”.

Bending over the ear of Eleanor of Aquitaine, Jaufre Rudel, the troubadour, said: “I agree to go with you to the Orient, but I have high hopes for a reward”.

Bending over the ear of Eleanor of Aquitaine, her uncle Raymond of Poitiers, Prince of Antioche, said: “I love you, dear niece”.

Bending over the ear of Eleanor of Aquitaine, Suger said: “Plead consanguinity!”

Bending over the ear of Eleanor of Aquitaine, Hélinand of Froidmont said: “A whore more than a queen!”

Bending over the ear of Eleanor of Aquitaine, the young and vigorous Geoffrey Plantagenet said: “My dear old wife, my conquest, you are my vastest territory”.

Bending over the ear of Eleanor of Aquitaine, Theobald of Bec, Archbishop of Canterbury, said: “Do as best you can, Majesty”.

Bending over the ear of Eleanor of Aquitaine, Richard Cœur-de-Lion said: “Mother”.

Bending over the ear of Eleanor of Aquitaine, Andreas Capellanus said: “Madam, I’ve finished drafting the rules for your court of love. When you so desire”.

Bending over the ear of Eleanor of Aquitaine, Arnaut Guilhem de Marsan, knight and troubadour, said: “Thank you”.

Bending over the ear of Eleanor of Aquitaine, Bernart de Ventadorn, the Normand, said: “Dear Duchess of Normandy”.

Bending over the ear of Eleanor of Aquitaine, the King of Scotland, William I, said: “Let’s knock down the King!”

Bending over the ear of Eleanor of Aquitaine, Berangaria of Navarre, said: “Must I really cross the Alps and Italy in your company to marry your son?”

Bending over the ear of Eleanor of Aquitaine, John Lackland said: “Thank you, mother, for bringing Blanche of Castile here”.

Bending over the ear of Eleanor of Aquitaine, her son John said: “Mother, you are free. Return in peace to Fontevraud”.

Bending over the ear of Eleanor of Aquitaine, the Abbot of Fontevraud said: “Your soul has been saved. Hold this book in your hands”.

Paul Fournel

These confidences allude to key moments in Eleanor’s life, relating events in her personal story as they can be found in historical sources. They should be imagined as being whispered, silently and intimately, into her statue’s ear.

Eleanor's Book, *sestina*

Dead, supine, Eleanor
Holds in her recumbent hands a book
Which I see open before my eyes
Pressing on two fingers of each hand
But though it all seems set to be read
On the book's pages there is nothing

Not a single word is there, nothing
On the pages of the book of Eleanor,
What a strange proposition to be read
Are these blank pages of a book
Which the dead reader holds in her hands
But which offer emptiness to her eyes

I look closely at her eyes
And it seems to me that they see nothing
Under the violence of centuries her hand
Has lost its right thumb, Eleanor
Perpetually holds up her book,
Her gaze elsewhere, what can be read?

But meant to be read,
Will grey pages of dust, before our eyes
Fill up with signs? A book
Which an angel could from nothing
Fill with light for Eleanor
And guide, as it writes, her hand

You imagine her hand
Ready to 'turn' the pages, there to be read
Prayers, psalms that Eleanor
Wanted always to offer to our eyes
Where there would be the poem of 'nothing'
Or 'dreit nien' gathered in this book

May each invent a book
To be devoted in thought to these hands
May he think on the lesson of nothing,
Of terminable death, which can then be read
Silently in the expectant eyes
Of now recumbent Eleanor

Jacques Roubaud

This poem was composed after a visit to the Abbey in August 2013. It is a meditation in front of the Eleanor's effigy, with her closed eyes and open, empty book. It invites the reader to invent a possible book, and meditate on nothingness. It follows the form of the sestina.

The book that Eleanor reads which we are reading

One. The book that Eleanor reads which we are reading is not a book that Eleanor read.

Two. History, our history of her century, her imagined history does not intersect with a book from her century imagining ours.

Three. Nine centuries of wars and their weapons, cannons, scimitars, swords, gas, atoms
nine centuries of books, the Bible, Koran, Capital or others still,
make our histories similar.

Four. What words to choose to write in this book that Eleanor reads that you will read? Which one comes first?

What sources (and historical sources are meant here, reliable sources perhaps, imprecise no doubt)

to use to cover the blank slate which is this smooth, unwritten book?

How to avoid besmirching it with the blood of some shed by others during so many wars?

Five. *Arma virumque cano*, men who sing, either historians or poets, are not neutral.

Will the book that Eleanor reads that you will read be a book of women and wars, because she, Eleanor, was one of the armed pilgrims against a Land that all called Holy?

Wouldn't love suit better, in virtue of an *Amorem cano mullebremque sexum*? But who did she love, her husbands? Others? *No sai*.

Her book open on two blank pages (what blank means here is so void, so full of nothing),

two empty pages, a book of nothing,

a false page, a fine page, none has preserved the choice of a single word. Neither of love nor of youth. Of nothing, *de dreit nien*.

Six. In this nothing there may be a landscape around recumbent Eleanor, the countryside and a stream, beyond labours and loves, the washerwoman kneeling on a stone beating her laundry with a gesture made all the more beautiful because she knows that the boy behind the willow, because there were willows, of course, is gazing at her, *arma, verga, en cambra intra*, and the potpourri of words from that time that the two of them exchange, and none has engraved, for we know that the stone of the book is blank, until the young man was taken away by the war and forgotten at once amongst the crowd of the anonymous who, like his lover dead in childbirth and himself slain below the indifferent ramparts, have no history.

Seven. All sorts of poems, which is saying something, singing of all sorts of love have been conserved in fine books with gilded and coloured illuminations. Of kings, husbands, sons, of troubadours or combatants, of troubadours and combatants, history is full under the stone of her closed eyes she gazes at those she loved, for there is little doubt that she loved them, those who went away to war, those who put populations that were called uncivilised as yet to the sword, those who in their turn underwent the swords of others, or, under her white eyelids, she repeats nothing to herself, words of nothing, or does she imagine, too, for we can even imagine her imagining, the landscape in the distance of distant love?

Eight. In books, which are really saying something too, the works of those who, up before matins, copied, coloured, gilded, made books

so as to perpetuate, in the shock of lances and the flashing of swords,
the glorious history of handsome knights, *chavaliers e
chavaus armatz*
and doughty deeds, war machines, assaults on fortifications and
street fighting, rape and pillage,
abandoned vegetable plots, blackened trees, for it is right to
celebrate such newly created landscapes
and coin words so that misfortunes can be talked of elegantly,
turning away, in a sense, our gaze from the sentences, so as not to
see the corpses, the wounds, the stumps replacing hands
and the misery of the survivors, for how to make the necessary
gestures to, as they say, earn enough for a life, when you have
only one hand left?
They copied with love, then they dried the ink before going to
vespers.

Nine. And now these manuscripts are precious historical documents.

We read between the lines in this landscape of illuminations,
we discreetly gaze between the trees, haystacks, dropped initials,
to alight on the exoticism of the gestures of everyday life for, in those
days, the gestures were different, it could even be affirmed,
with little risk of error, that all the gestures were different,
except those of love, of course, and those that lead up to it, but here
we are thinking naturally of gestures such as smiling.

Were philosophers already claiming that everything that is to
happen has already happened?

Words, all the same, cannot lightly be transported from now to then
Eleanor took part in the second crusade, it is said, but this
euphemism for holy war did not yet exist, so that she went on a
crusade without knowing it.

Is a lack of appropriate terms the cause of the nothing on the empty
pages of the book that Eleanor reads?

Ten. In the book that Eleanor reads that you are reading (and which
is not the one that she read) now comes a succession of
lists and firstly a list of monuments, the abbeys, cathedrals,
basilicas and other primatial churches started during her

lifetime, those of Angers, Bourges, Chartres, Langres, Meaux, Paris, Poitiers, Saint-Denis, Saint-Malo, Sens, Strasbourg, and the very vault under which recumbent Eleanor gazes towards the altar, the east, distant Jerusalem, and a little further Mecca and, so far away that she never heard of them, the temples of Angkor Wat, which others built with just the same love as the builders of gothic churches, whose words the book that Eleanor reads that you are reading tries to enumerate, ambulatory, fascicule pillar, flying buttress, Gothic arch, radiant rose-window, stained glass, triforium, vault.

On the sculpted lecterns, polished by use, the books that Eleanor does not read but had perhaps read, *canso* by William of Poitiers, that's really saying something, by Jaufre Rudel who loved from afar, by Arnaut who sang of an *ongla* and *oncle*, stand next to those she could not have read,

on media such as clay, epubs, e-readers, flexible screens, Kindles, liquid crystals, paper, papyrus, parchment, pdf, rigid screens, tablets, velum (a list masking the silent wars waged for the supremacy of electronic ink or a particular tablet).

To produce the books that Eleanor read, they had to scratch away older texts, entire philosophical treatises disappeared under palimpsests,

whereas our everyday life is content with a *delete* and *trash* to rid ourselves of the unwelcome (without *backup*).

Such a cultural landscape would surprise, if she opened her stone eyelids, Eleanor.

For how will those who would write the history of the book that Eleanor reads that you are reading do so?

Eleven. My gaze searches out between the clouds the patches of blue sky, of a blue as bright as it must have been, and between the pages of dictionaries the words she herself might have used, "troubadour" yes, but not "crusade", during the wars in Palestine in the century of Eleanor, knights wore no insignia, were not crusaders, and the cross was not fighting against the crescent – pure anachronisms –

just like the fork, and even the use of the point of the knife to place a piece of meat in your mouth.

From the landscape I delete the holiday homes to recover the men and women who busied themselves in the weeded fields and vegetable plots

whom I can only imagine and I know that historians shudder at the very idea of imaginative descriptions but what else can I do?

The hardest thing is to recreate the sounds: such as the music of the troubadours, the sound of birdsong has vanished.

I would like to imagine too Eleanor discussing with the philosophers of her day, a correspondence with Maimonides in Cordoba, but the text I'm writing is a different one, as I said it's the book that she reads, in which I'm trying to understand how to see the world

and the peasants around her, with their lives and their loves, their troubles

and the stone-cutters who built the monument that shelters her, with a great deal of fervour and even more of pain and misery, how to find all that on a stone – where there is nothing.

Twelve. And there are those here who ask which words this nothing has supplanted,

those who compare numbers, twelfth or twenty-first century, counting down

those who comment on the landscape bristling with aërials, pylons and wind-farms, the factories' chimneys on the river

those whose strident telephones sound out in the nave

those who read the book that Eleanor reads

those who on other screens admire the heightened reality of monuments

those who have never fallen in love and are moved standing in front of the tomb effigies

those who look at the graves of kings while philosophising about their place in the universe

those who are gripped by the weight of history

those who everyday, when cleaning the church, dust down the queen and the kings

those who are attentive around them, around her, to more rumours
of wars
those and her with us, Eleanor who, her eyes closed, gazes at the
world in its last days, all that is left is whiteness

Monuments, words, numbers, landscape, sounds, books,
gaze, love, philosophy, history, everyday life and war,

lined up by Michèle Audin

with a few words from Virgil (with the help of Marcel Bénabou),
Bertrand de Born, Arnaut Daniel,
William of Poitiers,
José Saramago

in November 2013

Michèle Audin

The book that Eleanor reads which we are reading is what Jacques Roubaud has called a 'Josephina'. The text is built up around twelve themes, which (in the order they enter the text) are: book, history, war, words, love, landscape, gaze, (everyday) life, philosophy, monuments, sounds and numbers. The "stanzas" contain one, two, three, etc. up to twelve "lines", each centred around one of these themes.

Thus, the first one contains one line, around the word "book". The second contains two, around "book" and "history", and so on. The order in which they appear in the various stanzas is governed by a fixed permutation.

Alienorsut / Eleanor Knew

Aliénor sut

atours satinés
et trônes rutilants
rois et reines, aïeuls
le lion roi ensuite

Aliénor sut

luttés et tueries
les têtes étoilées
le ruisseau tari
et la terre rasée

Aliénor sut

les autels ornés
l'aster et la rose
le rituel latin
soutanes et tonsures

Aliénor sut

le sentier la route
les roseaux les aulnes
les astres la lune
la laie et la loutre

Aliénor sut

les arts les arias
les notes et les tons
la ré sol si la
leurs altérations

*

Eleanor knew

satin gowns
and gleaming thrones
kings and queens, elders
then the king lion

Eleanor knew

combats and slaughters
starry heads
a dried-up stream
and razed earth

Eleanor knew

ornate altars
the aster and the rose
Latin ritual
cassocks and tonsures

Eleanor knew

the path the road
the reeds the alders
the stars the moon
the sow and the otter

Eleanor knew

arts and arias
notes and tones
la re sol si la
their alterations

*

Lente la nuit s'étire
trônes, autels, ruinés
souriante et usée
là où tout s'est tu

Slowly the night stretches
thrones, altars, ruined
smiling and worn
there where all falls silent

Aliénor reste
sereine seule reine
Aliénor lit
Aliénor sut.

Eleanor stays
serene alone queen
Eleanor reads
Eleanor knew.

Michèle Audin

Aliénor sut is a “beautiful in-law”, i.e. a text using only the letters in *alienorsut*, which are some of the most commonly used letters in French. Using thematically grouped lists of words (power, war, the church, the country, music), they attempt to imagine Eleanor and the places and life that she experienced. The English translation acts as a crib, without any attempt to reproduce the form.

Effigy poems

Paul Fournel has devised a form that marries the layout of the effigy statues in the Abbey of Fontevraud.

Here a line of eight syllables
Here a line of eight syllables
Here a line of eight syllables
Here two Here two
Here two Here two
Here two Here two
Here two Here two
Here a line of eight syllables
Here a line of eight syllables
Here a line of eight syllables
Here two Here two
Here two Here two
Here two Here two
Here two Here two
Here a line of eight syllables
Here a line of eight syllables
Here a line of eight syllables

The four poems below adhere to this form, while the last of them presents a variation on it.

Effigies 1

Here lies Henry Plantagenet
Here lies Richard Cœur de Lion
Here eyes Aquitaine's Eleanor
Ele anor
Richard Henry
Ele anor
Henry Richard
It's forever that Eleanor
Will read the blank book of her life
Engraved there by eyes on the stone
A book of stone
A page of white
Reading reading
A book of life
While these two men are sleeping still
And Isabella grows stiffer
Eleanor stone will ever read

Paul Fournel

Effigies 2

Eleanor is far from docile
They say her dress is too skimpy
And she is blamed for loving men
Free-willed Crazy
Wealthy Dizzy
Joyful Idle
Pretty Rigid
The Queen keeps buying jewellery
The Queen demands more finery
She dares to expose her ankle
Crazy Free-willed
Dizzy Wealthy
Idle Joyful
Rigid Pretty
The Queen wants her own troubadours
Jaufre Rudel goes on a crusade
Marcabru displeases the court

Paul Fournel

Effigies

Eleanor child wife mother queen
what woman are you, Eleanor?
Your desires ignored, and your loves
your soul your heart
your flesh your hands
your breasts your joy
your song your pains
Your tastes, wine or sweets, caresses,
to write, read, to listen then see
or to sing, Eleanor, yourself?
your eyes your laugh
your blood your dreams
your vows your fears
your cries your tears
A love canso, a war poem,
What book do you read, Eleanor?
It's your secret, the page is blank

Michèle Audin

For Eleanor

Eleanor's gaze is conceding
This book its right to its silence
On her eyes the angel will lay
Full eyes Void eyes
Far eyes Close eyes
Bright eyes Dark eyes
The wing that foresees the Beauty
Of repentance. To Kings, to Queens
The psalms are above all addressed
Bright heart Dark heart
Pure heart Blurred heart
Heavy Light heart
As in a Royal Penitence
For the failings of a long life
Before all Eternity's length

Jacques Roubaud

Blanc Book

He has just walked down the stairway
He has crossed the threshold, he sees
The distant book there in the light
The Visitor
And will his stare come now to rest
On 'just nothing'?

Your eyes are closed	Between your hands
You hold the book	So silently
You do not read	The blank book turns
The book is blank	Into verses

A blank page on this grain of stone Potential there on a blank page

Between the kings who look alike
- is it her son or her husband? –
Defying time and motionless
You hold your book
White with the head-spinning possible
Both void and full

Valérie Beaudouin

This poem presents an evolution of the form devised by Paul Fournel. At the head and feet of the effigies, there is a stanza that reproduces the formal structure of the stanzas of William IX's poem of "just nothing" (8-8-8-4-8-4).

What if the book wasn't white at first?

That Eleanor adopted, a statue,
Well before death took
Shown pages could we read through
A psalm? Before the brook
Of ages on marble's weight grew
To smoothe out all from the book,
Oblivion rivalling anew
Clear thoughts their mouths forsook
.....
And none ever shall reply

*That Eleanor adopted, a statue,
her soul? From the two
Well before death took
her soul? From the two
shown pages could we read through
breaking fingers, hazing the view
a psalm? Before the brook
Of ages on marble's weight grew
With dust. In each statue
breaking fingers, hazing the view
Under the years' reaping hook
to smoothe out all from the book*

Jacques Roubaud

This is a poem with two voices; the second one (to the right, in italics) is an echo that gradually distances itself from the first.

Eleanor and the other effigies

A page that will not turn

On a blank page of blank stone
The tale of the life
Of Eleanor of Aquitaine
More queen than a wife

On a white leaf of white rock
The song of the loves
Of Richard the Lionheart
The slayer of doves

On a sheet full of pure light
The map of the lands
Of Henry Plantagenet
Between others' hands

On a parchment sculpted plain
The yarn from the lips
Of Isabella of Angouleme
The launcher of ships

On this page that will not turn
Four lives that share
An unsaid, unspoken, unread
In each other's stare

Ian Monk

The effigies of the Plantagenets are in Fontevraud, but could well have been placed in England, in Canterbury, in Salisbury or elsewhere. The presence of a work written in English recalls the fact that the lands of the kingdom covered England and the West of France.

This poem by Ian Monk evokes the four effigies (one stanza per effigy, then a final one evoking all four).

**The hands of Fontevraud's effigies,
*continuous sestina***

Let's suppose that I was asked,
paid for by rubies on my nails
in just such a poem, called a *sestina*
to bend my thought over the two hands
of the Fontevraud effigies, without furuncle,
that the request is for these thirty-nine steps

(as though lines of verse were the steps
of a staircase constructed as I have been asked)
scratch at meaning, like a furuncle,
so as to interpret from all those nails,
so well groomed and filed at the end of these hands,
the position, the gesture, the *sestina*

with a break in the *sestina*,
• to name the sceptre "baton of steps"
on and under Henry II with both hands
so much did he run (why?) and if I asked,
what in fact I know, defending down to the very nails
the "empire" against the assault of a furuncle,

• to name Richard, that furuncle
"lion's heart and close to lion" (the *sestina*
knows that only too well, at the tip of its nails)
the fingers no longer being able to take steps
nor make the slightest response to what has been asked,
• from Isabella with her beautiful hands

the peaceful joining of hands
on the breast, hiding a furuncle
a symbol linked to what has been asked
(and offered) in marriage, the sestina
leads her twice over to the steps
of the altar, biting its fingers and nails:

love being just hooked on like nails,
• to name about Eleanor what she does with her hands
neither in prayer nor to take any steps
nor for anything else nor for scratching a furuncle
to read, the *Hours*? no, this sestina!
thus did the *trouveur* when he was asked

while baiting with his nails a furuncle
while dealing with his hands a sestina,
in forced steps, constrained as has been asked.

Jacques Jouet

This poem is another sestina. Its form follows precisely that of the first attested sestina: Arnaut Daniel's *ongla et oncle* ('fingernail and uncle'). The use of the end-words *nail* and (*fur*)*uncle* explicitly allude to it.

Henri II Plantagenet

There was, it is said, always beneath him a horse full of life
on this horse he sat immobile and in motion
and such motion meant staying sitting for a very long time.
What did the bearer know of all these places sitting in this land
and what did the land know of all these jests?
Life is just an immense jest, said the pre-moribund

(horse, motion, sitting, land, jest, life)

but before being moribund, serious matters mean marking boundaries,
making boundaries, marking them, an inscription of the country,
from Gascony to England the country wants bridges
the Loire wants bridges, the Channel is quite another matter...
Fougères, Southampton and Poitiers and the Loir and the Loire
Fontenay-le-Comte near Poitiers, without counting Canterbury.

(moribund, boundaries, country, bridges, the Loire, Poitiers)

The kings and almost-kings take a beating without counting the wounds
beating each other up to prove to the world what? That Frederick II
and Bonaparte had predecessors in the Worlds-World,
quite a business, Bonaparte, derisory, dynastic
legitimate my arse, just heritage business, enough,
it's the question of being "enough" for child mortality

(counting, beating, world, Bonaparte, business, enough)

(maternal mortality too) made it a question of having many sons
how tragic! Too many sons will lead to a war between them,
and not enough the risk of having none left after sickness or war.

Genuine sickness, an epidemic, comes from enemy brothers
enemy kindred, in other words a basket full of crabs
the delirious woman, desiring too much, the crab and the volcano

(question, sons, war, sickness, enemy, crab)

the woman who is defamed, exposed, compromised, defamed,
sequestered if needs be, and it does, that's essential, with us exposed
to having to stand up forever for ages, if needs be, the sceptre
on our ultimate container, forever our final portrait
final reconciliation of family enemies
in its very breast, if Christianity is really a family

(woman, exposed, needs be, ever, final, family)

where each article has breasts, designs, hands and hidden entrails
apparently harmless hands after all the carnages
before all the carnages on this side of the Pyrénées
a mistake on both sides, so long as the truth will be
to “believe what you will” rather than have a crusade arrive
the crusade murdering in the end both the *trobar* and an empire

(breasts, hands, carnages, side, will, crusade)

for a kingdom, for one horse full of life instead of another.

Sources : Jacques Roubaud, *Les Troubadours*, anthologie bilingue, Seghers, 1971. – Jean Favier *Les Plantagenêts, Origines et destin d'un empire, XI^e-XIV^e siècles*, Fayard, 2004.

Jacques Jouet

This poem is made up of 6 stanzas of 6 lines. Each stanza is then followed by an “inter-line” that reproduces in succession one word from each line of the preceding stanza. Two examples of this form can be found in his collection *L'Histoire poèmes*. Furthermore, each word that appears in the “inter-lines” is repeated in two successive lines of the stanzas.

King Richard's Lament

No captive knight, whom chains confine,
Can tell his fate and not repine;
Yet with a song he cheers the gloom
That hangs around his living tomb.
Shame to his friends!—the king remains
Two years unransomed and in chains

Now let them know, my brave barons,
English, Normans, and Gascons,
Not a liege-man so poor have I,
That I would not his freedom buy.
I will not reproach their noble line,
But chains and a dungeon still are mine.

The dead,—nor friends nor kin have they!
Nor friends nor kin my ransom pay!
My wrongs afflict me, yet far more
For faithless friends my heart is sore.
O, what a blot upon their name,
If I should perish thus in shame!

Nor is it strange I suffer pain,
When sacred oaths are thus made vain,
And when the king with bloody hands
Spreads war and pillage through my lands.
One only solace now remains,—
I soon shall burst these servile chains.

Ye Troubadours, and friends of mine,
Brave Chail, and noble Pensauvine,
Go, tell my rivals in your song,
This heart hath never done them wrong.
He infamy, not glory, gains,
Who strikes a monarch in his chains.

King Richard,
undated, anonymous translation

This lament is a poem by Richard Lionheart who, imprisoned on coming back from a crusade, senses the lack of enthusiasm among his entourage to free him. In its original, it follows a medieval musical form, the *rotrouenge*.

Where lies the heart of the Coeur-de-Lion?

So where lies the heart of the true Coeur-de-Lion?
He who lamented so woefully
his exile and his imprisonment, without ransom?
He who led a life, so dextrously,
filled with composition and verses to
one love and then another love again?

With one love then another love again,
As courageously as any lion,
his destiny fashioned for him a path to
a king who lamented so woefully
a king led away from life, so dextrously
lived, that he captivated all, without ransom.

Led into captivity, where all his ransom
was, for a yea or a nay again,
weighed so sinisterly and never dextrously,
or so outrageously that, as a lion,
he could then sing more than woefully
that destiny, fashioned for him, and its path to

a world remade, then unmade, of verses to
utter loss, of righteousness taken in ransom,
that he could then sing more than woefully,
with a yea then a nay again,
hunter like a lioness, poised like a lion,
aggrieved sinisterly, and so dextrously

was taken away, ah so dextrously,
from this world filled and made of verses to
a hunter like a lioness, praised like a lion,
to utter losses, or uprightness taken in ransom,
that, better poet than he himself, yet again,
none has seized the matter so fully and so woefully;

and none has seized fully indeed and thus woefully,
who took away so dextrously
the best part of himself, yet again
filled with composition and verses to
his exile and imprisonment without ransom:
so where lies the true heart of the Coeur-de-Lion?

Ian Monk

This poem is a *quenoum*, a hybrid form combining the sestina (see the appendix) and the pantoum. It uses the pantoum's repetition of certain elements in lines from one verse to the next, and the closure of the poem by the opening line.

Josephina for Isabella of Angoulême

You, Isabella, when you are 12.
He can see your beauty, and your hectares –
'he' is John Lackland and too bad for the other
one, Hugh of Lusignan: a life
you will not live. Child, queen
5 Plantagenets including a future king.

Your John Lackland for a king
will he give you England, when you are 12
or will you grow dull in a palace? Being queen
O your beauty your hectares
having lovers (they say)... a life
made to measure for you and none other.

Later it will be another
Hugh (the son): 9 children, no king.
lovers they say a life
How old must you be when you are 12?
O your beauty hectares
After this can you be no longer a queen?

Doubtlessly not, you are queen
and mother from one point in your body to another
O your beauty
son children king
You must know all that when you are 12
they say a life

a life

No one can unmake you queen
of Angouleme, of England, when you are 12
mother from one point of your body
son children
O *beauty*

O

life

children

No one *queen*
a point your body
Your statue in the abbey, when you are 12

Frédéric Forte

This poem is a descending Josephina. It is a canso, reproducing the form of the sestina, but including a principle of elimination, so that the verses gradually fade away, with each stanza losing one or more words (or parts of words), but they linger until the sixth and final stanza (more or less erased, like ink being gradually dimmed by sunlight).

Chrétien de Troyes

Extracts from the *Knight of the Cart*

I **The Prologue**

Because my Lady of Champagne
A *roman* wills from me again
I shall commence it willingly
As one who belongs entirely
To her always eager, yet such
As will not praise her overmuch;
Though he who should like to begin
Who would more flattery put in
Might say (and truly, I attest)
That she as a Lady is the best
Surpassing all others today,
As the wind chases smoke away
When blowing in April or May;
No, I am not one who would say
More than reason wills, or that 'Queen
Of all Ladies she must be seen
To stand in splendour so much higher
Than any gemstone can or sapphire.'
No, I would speak of nothing such
And yet the facts are very much
Thus, I should just say: 'for my work
May her commanding so well work
That, for all the effort I impart
Into this very KNIGHT OF THE CART
The book that Chrétien begins,
Its meat and sense the Countess brings,
So freed from any need to think

He will mix nothing with its ink
But his own pain and application,
And thus will start its composition.'

II **Lancelot's 'two steps'**

The Knight, on foot, without a lance,
Toward th' Cart began to advance
And saw a dwarf upon the ground
Who held, like any carter sound,
A lengthy baton in his hand
To this dwarf the Knight did demand:
"Dwarf", said he, "by God, please say
If you have seen along this way
My Lady Queen as she passed by".
Then not with news, but with a lie,
This whoreson dwarf with his false heart
Did say: "Now, if upon this cart
You see before me, you will go
Before tomorrow you shall know
What to the Queen befell this day".
At that, he continued on his way.
Without a single moment's wait.
Two steps just two steps did await
The Knight before he climbed inside.
Misery, woe and all his pride
Forbade such forfeits in dismay!
He though suffered from this delay!
Reason against Love would now bid
Him warning against what he did
It blamed and ordered him to shun
Th' reproach and humiliation
That such an action would impart,
But by the mouth and not the heart
Reason speaks when it has its say,

While Love which in his heart then lay
Called upon him, whispering so
That in the Cart he needs must go:
As Love had willed it, up he leapt
And all his shame he overstepped.

Chrétien de Troyes

The following two texts are a verse translation of two extracts from the *Knight of the Cart* by Chrétien de Troyes. This *roman* written in rhymed octosyllables was composed at the request of Marie of France, Countess of Champagne, Eleanor's daughter, as stated in the prologue.

Appendix: the sestina

The sestina is a poem of 6 stanzas of 6 lines with 6 end-words (One, Two, Three, Four, Five, Six) which reoccur in each stanza, and whose positions vary according to the sestina's particular permutation.

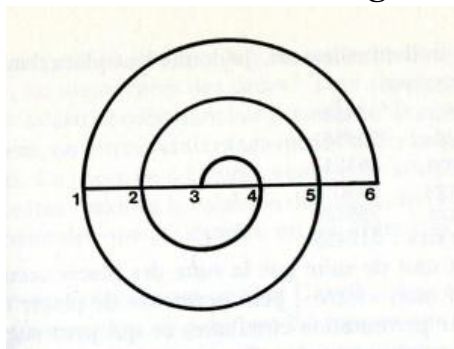
Stanza I: One Two Three Four Five Six

Stanza II: Six One Five Two Four Three

For the end-words of stanza III, the permutation is the same as was used to obtain stanza II. This principle will then provide successively stanzas IV, V and VI.

NB: if a seventh stanza were, written using the same transformation of end-words, then the initial order would reappear: One Two Three Four Five Six.

By following this spiral and starting from 6, the sequence of the end-words for the following stanza can be obtained (6, 1, 5, 2, 4, 3).



The first sestina was by Arnaut Daniel with his canso *Ongla et Oncle*, whose end-words are: *intra / ongla / arma / verga / oncle/ cambra* which are permuted from one stanza to the next, finishing with an *envoi* of three lines, containing once more the six end-words (two per line).

Nail and Uncle by Arnaut Daniel

Lo ferm voler qu'el cor m'**intra**
No.m pot ges bècs escoissendre ni **ongla**
de lauzangier qui pert per mal dir s'**arma**
e car non l'aus batr'ab ram ni ab **verga**
sivals a fra lai on non aurai **oncle**
jauzirai joi en vergier o dinz **cambra**.

Quan mi soven de la **cambra**
on a mon dan sai que nuills hom non **intra**
anz me son tuich plus que fraire ni **oncle**
non ai membre no-m fremisca neis l'**ongla**
aissi uom fai l'enfas denant la **verga**
tal paor ai no-l sia trop de l'**arma**.

Del cors li fos non de l'**arma**
e cossentis m'a celat dinz sa **cambra**
que plus mi nafra-l cor que colps de **verga**
car lo sieus sers lai on ill es non **intra**
totz temps serai ab lieis cum carns et **ongla**
e non creirai chastic d'amic ni d'**oncle**.

Anc la seror de mon **oncle**
non amei plus ni tant per aquest'**arma**
c'aitant vezis com es lo detz de l'**ongla**
s'a liei plagués volgr'esser de sa **cambra**
de mi pot far l'amors qu'inz el cor m'**intra**.
miells a son vol qu'om fortz de frévol **verga**.

Pois flori la seca **verga**
ni d'En Adam mogron nebot ni **oncle**
tant fin'amors com cela qu'el cor m'**intra**
non cuig fos anc en cors ni eis en **arma**
on qu'ill estei fors en platz o dins **cambra**
mos cors no.is part de lieis tant com ten l'**ongla**.

C'aissi s'enpren e s'en on gla
mos cors en lei com l'escorss' en la verga
q'ill m'es de joi tors e palaitz e cambra
e non am tant fraire paren ni oncle
q'en paradís n'aura doble joi m'arma
si ja null hom per ben amar lai intra.

Arnautz tramet sa chansson d' ongl'e d'oncle
agrat de lieis que de sa verg'a a l'arma
son Desirat cui pretz en cambra intra.

The Oulipo, attracted by the formal sophistication of the sestina, has generalised this principle (n-ina) by applying it to numbers other than six, in particular the Queneau numbers, which have the same properties as six, and by exploring other forms of permutation, such as the Josephina (Jacques Roubaud).