

## History-Forms: Jacques Jouet's Documentary Poems

### Abstract

This article takes as its point of departure two central tensions in the work of the Oulipo: between dedication to formal experiment and attachment to a documentary poetics; and between a profoundly historical understanding of literary form and a decontextualization of form in the name of “potentiality.” What kind of historical knowledge is produced through the use of literary constraints that have been dislodged from their original context? Jacques Jouet's collection *L'Histoire poèmes* (2010) is emblematic in its staging of the encounter between world history and literary history. Redeploying multiple forms from the prose poem to the pantoum, and drawing on footnoted sources ranging from personal memories to the work of academic historians, Jouet produces a history *in* and *of* poetry, tracing a meandering path from prehistory to the moment of writing. The documentary mode entails what Jouet calls the “imperfecting” of poetic or novelistic form by the vicissitudes of reality; meanwhile the Oulipian pursuit of potential forms gestures toward an utopian space of freedom beyond history.

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Jacques Jouet began to write *L'Histoire poèmes* in an airplane traveling from Roissy to Baton Rouge in April 2006 (Jouet, *L'Histoire poèmes* 404). The collection, published in 2010, consists of 227 poems of varying lengths and forms. Each one deals with a historical event of some kind—whether familiar or unfamiliar, anecdotal or world-historical. These include battles and anti-colonial struggles, the French Revolution, World War II, the Algerian War, May 1968, September 11, and other cataclysms and crises. However, the poet also writes of his own readings, travels, and encounters; for instance, his meeting with inmates at a women's prison in Bapaume, in October 2006, where he gives a talk on the Oulipo (15–16). Jouet draws on an eclectic and idiosyncratic set of sources: canonical works by historians such as Eric Hobsbawm, Raul Hilberg, and Paul Veyne; biographies, literary and cinematic works, newspaper articles, personal testimonies and private conversations, the poet's journeys, memories, conversations, and even his dreams. Almost anything can serve as a historical source: a chance meeting, a childhood memory, a book of poetry....

What kind of historical knowledge is produced by Jouet's poems? Commenting elsewhere on literary history, Jouet observes: “L'histoire d'un art est un des sujets de cet art, explicitement ou implicitement, subliminalement, dans l'œuvre elle-même (Jouet, “Beau métier” 49). Read in this light, the unpunctuated title of *L'Histoire poèmes* (“L'Histoire poèmes et sans la virgule” [Jouet, *Histoire poèmes* 10]) stages an encounter between literary history and world history, totality and fragment, History with a capital H and the multiple singularities of the forms that attempt to both contain and disperse this history. Jouet notes on the back cover of the volume: “La poésie fait donc, ici, de l'Histoire.” As for the history of poetry itself, the volume does not aim to provide a complete account, but borrows from this history “plusieurs de ses formes que la potentialité [...] affirme vivaces.”

### Form and Document

In this hesitation between history as fact and history as a reservoir of reactualizable potential, we

discover one of the paradoxes of Oulipian practice. The Ouvroir de littérature potentielle (Oulipo), of which Jouet is one of the most prolific members, allies a profoundly historical understanding of literary form with a radical decontextualization that allows past structures and procedures to be redeployed in new creations. As has been demonstrated notably by Peter Consenstein and Jean-Jacques Poucel, many Oulipians conceptualize the complex temporality of their poetics in terms of literary *memory*, emphasizing the re-actualization of the past as present experience. This articulation of constraint and memory nevertheless leaves open the question of the specific configuration of *historical* knowledge within Oulipian works, and of the relation of historical sources and narratives to those literary forms that have been removed from their original location and used anew.

A second paradox arises in the group's approach to history: a number of members of the Oulipo combine a dedication to formal experiment with an attachment to a particular kind of documentary practice. Thus Georges Perec's unfinished *Lieux* project of 1969–1975, a programmatic, rule-governed approach to the description of twelve places in Paris (see Perec, *Espèces d'espaces* 108), later became a more open-ended set of writings concerned with grasping what goes unnoticed in everyday life (Perec, *Infra-ordinaire* 11). Jouet's "poèmes de métro," in which each line of poetry is composed between stops on the subway, represent another exemplary case that seem to mark a shift in Oulipian practice from linguistic and mathematical to spatio-temporal constraints. Another example is the rule of writing in the present, without revision, that governs the prose of Jacques Roubaud's '*Le grand incendie de Londres*' cycle (1989–2008). Such practices are sometimes misunderstood. For instance, Scott Esposito dismisses Jouet's "metro poems" as instances of facile conceptual art and contrasts them unfavorably with works by the Canadian poet Christian Bök and the Argentinian writer Cesar Aira (Esposito and Elkin 59). However, such attacks rely on an understanding of the Oulipo either as a group dedicated to conceptual writing or as an avant-garde movement, paying little attention to the terms of the group's project which, as Jouet notes, is as much artisanal as it is conceptual ("With [and Without] Constraints" 7). That is, the concept always goes hand in hand with the concrete.

In an article published in 2009, "Un beau métier," Jouet defines the novel as a genre governed by the documentary spirit; the writer takes his or her distance from an initial document in order to attain a second-order document that exists in the realm of the possible (52–53). Poetry, on the other hand, has as its central value exactness or precision (*exactitude*), which is a matter of form—number, constraint, versification—but also of subject matter: "L'exactitude concerne le nombre, concerne la contrainte et la forme, concerne aussi le risque pris avec l'entreprise lancée en terme de projet, de portraitiste, de paysagiste, d'historien... liste non close" (52). This second aspect of exactness, understood as fidelity to the object, suggests that the documentary can be the site of an affinity between genres; and in a 2012 article on "L'esprit documentaire," Jouet observes that the documentary spirit has indeed invaded his poetic practice. The documentary mode allows the irruption of the concrete, albeit in mediated fashion, into the literary work, entailing what Jouet calls the "imperfectioning" of narrative topoi—and, we might add, of poetic form—by the vicissitudes of reality (85). What we find in Jouet's documentary poetry is not formless automatic writing, nor a form of descriptive recording (as in Georges Perec's writing of the "infra-ordinary"), but rather formal precision that exists in productive tension with exactness of attention to the object at hand. Documentary poetry aims to grasp the real, at the risk of its own dissolution into the prose of the world.

Jouet places this tension, and this risk, at the heart of his poetry. His documentary works

are often based on a practice of daily writing, which constitutes a form of ascetic discipline (see Lapprand, *L'Œuvre ronde* 17-34). In *107 Âmes* (1991), he offers a collection of portrait poems based on brief biographical questionnaires distributed to strangers (requesting the respondent's name, profession, income, family situation, and a memorable event in his or her life). Poetry emerges here from the most impersonal of data, while indicating the irreducible individuality of the person behind the portrait. The 938-page, 3-volume *Navet, linge, œil-de-vieux* (1998) offers a series of quotidian poems written over a period of four years (1 April 1992 to 31 March 1996), many of which are inspired by a meditation on three objects that form a kind of still life: a turnip, a piece of cloth, and an artist's loupe. *Cantates de proximité* (2005), subtitled "Scènes et portraits de groupes," is based on notes taken from Jouet's encounters with groups in France and elsewhere, including students in a collège (Pas-de-Calais), psychiatric inpatients (Benin), workers occupying a closed-down factory (Lille), an acting troop performing Marivaux, and an architects' collective. The aforementioned *Poèmes de métro* are the most well-known example, in which Jouet defines a new genre based on a specific constraint. *L'Histoire poèmes* does not abandon Jouet's previous interest in the everyday, but is striking in its formal diversity and epistemological ambition.

### Sources

*L'Histoire poèmes* is composed of "poèmes documentés," as Jouet notes (31), which are also "poèmes documentaires," in that they incorporate their sources rather than rendering them invisible.<sup>1</sup> Unlike Blaise Cendrars' *Kodak* (1924) or Pierre Mac Orlan's *Poésies documentaires* (1954), Jouet's poems do not provide a visual snapshot of the real or evoke new technologies of recording the real. Rather, they recycle, deconstruct and reconstruct preexisting materials, placing sources and voices in dialogue. Some of the poems draw on a single footnoted source; others have multiple references. Some sources are too numerous to name (a poem on Drancy simply notes that the sources are "innombrables"). Other poems are without source because the poet cannot find one.

Jouet's citing of sources authorizes the knowledge mediated by the poem, and anchors the poem in the real. The sources can serve as an interpretative key to the more enigmatic poems in the collection, according to a logic of veiling and revelation. Above all, they offer a way of writing poetry with a collective voice. "De toute façon l'invention / est une affaire collective" is Jouet's comment on a book on the discovery of penicillin, and it clearly also refers to poetry. This is clear from the opening poem which alternates between the singular "je chante" and the plural "nous chantons; "ne chantons pas tout seul/et ni même d'une même voix" (9). The result is a plurality of voices and a layering of discourses—historical, literary, and other. In reading "Première orange et quelques autres," for instance, we immediately think of Francis Ponge's "L'Orange." However, as Marc Lapprand notes in his analysis of a different collection of Jouet's poetry, Jouet "ne prend pas du tout le parti des choses" (Lapprand, *L'Œuvre ronde* 28). In "Première orange," Jouet offers us not a phenomenology of the object, but rather human history seen through the life of an orange tree, making the different stories of the orange into a geopolitical fable.

Un oranger était dans le trésor  
du Connétable de Bourbon  
déjà quasi centenaire  
(c'est de l'oranger qu'il est question)

quand François lui fit la chasse  
 (c'est de Bourbon qu'il est question)  
 quand il rallia Charles Quint, le félon. (Jouet, *Histoire poèmes* 155)

The first European orange brings to mind other oranges: in Belfast, where whiskey is injected into oranges by the families of IRA prisoners; in Damascus, where the poet bought Israeli oranges labeled as Jordanian. The fruit is a vehicle for various political meanings, while its possible flavor (“Était-ce une *amara*, l’orange amère?” [155]) suggests the bitterness of human history, characterized by endless war and struggle.

Among the historical events recorded in the collection is the founding of the Oulipo in 1960 (350). Oulipian sociability informs the selection of sources, which include: Marcel Bénabou’s historical study *La Résistance africaine à la romanisation* (1976), for a poem that relates Roman conquest to modern colonization (175); Bernard Cerquiglini’s works on the history of the French language; and François Le Lionnais’ *La peinture à Dora* (66), which recounts Le Lionnais’ survival strategy in a concentration camp. Via Oulipian historians and the relationship of Oulipian writers to history, the story of the literary group intersects with *la grande Histoire*, and friendship colors the poet’s judgments and reactions. Jouet is also concerned with literary history more broadly, with the place of literature in history and with literature’s attempts to confront or contemplate history; key references include *La Chanson de Roland*, Victor Hugo’s *Les Châtiments* and *La Légende des siècles*, Aragon’s *Le Fou d’Elsa* or Perec’s *Je me souviens*. *L’Histoire poèmes* presents both a history in the form of poems, and a fragmentary history of poetry. Crucial to this encounter between poetry and history is the potentiality of poetic forms.

### History-Forms

In *L’Histoire-poèmes* (as earlier in *Navet, linge, œil-de-vieux*), Jouet uses a wide variety of stanza and verse forms: the sonnet, the sestina, the quinina, the ballade, the *terine*, the pantoum, the acrostic, the *morale élémentaire*, the prose poem; free verse and various poetic meters. As a formal homage to his fellow Oulipian Frédéric Forte, he develops the chilling “99 notes préparatoires à la destruction d’Hiroshima et de Kyôto.”<sup>2</sup> Jouet rewrites “La mort du duc de Berry” an ode by Victor Hugo in his royalist days, in the form of the sonnet “Dupuytren traverse la nuit”:

Quand fut assassiné le duc<sup>que</sup> de Berry  
 dauphin contre ouvrier, résultat matche nul?  
 le choc<sup>que</sup> du couteau dedans le ventricule  
 rend vainqueure l’un d’eux, fout l’autre au bistouri. (280)

With this transposition-contraction of Hugo’s poem (metaphorically, the *contracture* associated with the eponymous surgeon Dupuytren), along with the supplementary *e muets*, Jouet plays with the possibilities of the alexandrine and generates an Oulipian in-joke on the “variable-length alexandrine.”<sup>3</sup> The poem also points to the simultaneous conjunction and separation of politics and poetics, evoking both Hugo’s evolution from royalist to socialist, and the development of French poetry from the “le stricte ronron de l’ode de Hugo” to the “ptyx” of Mallarmé’s sonnet.

With similar irony, Jouet recycles the medieval *chant royal* as the “Chant royal (et républicain)” in two political poems that focus on the struggle of the people against power. The

first of these deals with the “reverse strikes” that took place in Italy in the 1950s, in which workers engaged in unpaid and unauthorized public works projects (242). The second, “Chant royal (et républicain) des farines,” connects food riots in France in 1792 to the persistence of world hunger in 2008. The *envoi* addressed to the prince or to the elected representative becomes both an accusation and an appeal:

Prince ou représentant républicain  
de haute histoire ou bien contemporain  
si tu n’entends pas, c’est que tu débloques.  
Le future insurgé, herculéen  
méritera de toute et *notre* époque. (269)

Wrested from its original historical context and remobilized, the form of the *chant royal* becomes part of a reflection on continuity and repetition within history, hunger and power then and now.

Jouet favors poetic forms based on sonic repetition, whether of rhyme schemes, rhyming words, or entire lines as in the “Pantoum de l’homme débutant debout.” This long poem, which bridges the two main sections of the book, deals with the origins of the human species:

puisque ça avait été aussi lent, il y faut un pantoum  
et en vers interminables qui s’étireront jusqu’à seize  
ce sont des affaires de corps qui commencent au placenta  
sous la peau duquel se forge un ensemble d’outils de pensée

et en vers interminables qui s’étireront jusqu’à seize  
syllabes avec sa règle bien connue de couplet-refrain  
sous la peau duquel se forge un ensemble d’outils de pensée  
dont la main matérielle est l’emblème avec son pouce opposable (186)

The extended sixteen-syllable line and the use of repetition evoke the long process of evolution, based on repetition and variation of biological structures. Jouet’s characteristic metaphorization of form (Motte 51) occurs throughout this volume, as the form of the individual poem conveys both the singularity of the historical event and “le tragique de la répétition” (Jouet, *Histoire poèmes* 308). History repeats itself, as tragedy or as farce.

The volume as a whole is structured as a return from the present to prehistory, followed by a return to the present of writing (*Retour*, then *Aller*), with, at the book’s center, interrupting the pantoum on the origin of human beings, a long and multi-sourced interlude on the plurality of languages. The work is thus characteristically circular and centrifugal—*une œuvre ronde*, to borrow Jouet’s expression (taken up by Marc Lapprand for his study of the author). Like Jouet’s other works, *L’Histoire poèmes* is a book that gestures toward exhaustiveness (Motte) but is also, inevitably and explicitly, governed by fragmentation, incompleteness, and imperfection. The work is both modest and ambitious. In the final poem of the volume, Jouet mentions other possible titles—*L’Archive poème* or *La Lecture poème*—but notes that these possibilities do not do justice to the necessity of confronting History (404). History is then set against the multiplicity of poems, with the letter “s” of the plural, which is also the last line of the last poem, standing as a mark of doubt and fragility. Yet the plurality of poetry also represents an attack on the

monolithic power of History, as if the humble making of poems could take a stand against the force of events. Of course, human making is also a part of history, and Jouet's is a resolutely human version of history—in contrast, say with Queneau's poem *Petite cosmogonie portative* (1950), mentioned by Jouet, which reduces the place of human beings in the history of the universe to 2 lines (Queneau, *Œuvres complètes* 232; Jouet, *Histoire poèmes* 404).

In this context, the dehistoricizing move that redeploys old poetic forms can be understood as part of the utopian dimension of Jouet's work, an affirmation of human agency and the power to reshape forms. The laughter of the poet-historian, by turns sardonic and melancholic, stands in opposition to the atrocities of history (Jouet, *Histoire poèmes* 403). Jouet anchors his poems in historical fact yet gestures beyond the limits of history, affirming the liberating power of a shared human project that rejects all constraints.

Nous sommes appelés pour défendre notre patrie  
surtout mentale, patrie de liberté hors frontières  
patrie seulement de la connaissance, le reste est risible. (Jouet, *Histoire poèmes* 9)

Through the collective pursuit of knowledge and through the reactivation of forms, poets restore potentiality to the past.

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<sup>1</sup> In “L’esprit documentaire,” Jouet takes up Hans Magnus Enzensberger’s distinction between the “documenté” and the “documentaire”: Zola’s novels are based on documents, but Enzensberger composes novels with transplanted documents that provide the material with which he composes (85).

<sup>2</sup> “Ces notes ne sont pas autre chose qu’un poème puisque ‘la forme dite des notes préparatoires est une forme poétique’ (Frédéric Forte)” (Jouet, *Histoire poèmes* 41).

<sup>3</sup> In the Oulipo meeting of 14 December 1962, Jean Queval proposed the following example of “l’alexandrin de longueur variable”: “le train traverse la nuit” (Bens 181).