

THE RHYTHM OF IRONY

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What is rhythm? Rhythm is movement, but not fluid movement, movement with an interruption, a return, a pattern. There is a movement to diction, yet it must encounter an interruption in order for there to be rhythm: rhythm involves contradiction. In *Crise de vers* Mallarmé says that there is "rythme dès que style" (361). Once rhythm and style walk hand in hand, it should come as no surprise that in the construct of irony, a study of the rhythm of its expression prove revelatory.

In poetry, rhythm is traditionally viewed as the manner in which long and short, or accentuated and unaccentuated syllables, combine. However, if we admit that there is "rhythm dès que style," then the traditional definition of rhythm no longer suffices. Rhythm resonates with historical implications because as the structure of literary genres evolves, as poetic structures transform, there emanates a new rhythm. I will trace a means of identifying this almost mysterious resonance.

I start with the traditional means of measuring rhythm in poetry: meter and stanza structure, rhyme scheme, assonance, alliteration, syntax, their patterns of repetition, and the interruptions of said repetitions. In this manner, the initial emphasis and links between specific words, themes, and stanzas are established, thus connecting the poem's meaning to the architecture of its rhythm.

Rhythm represents a sort of Derridean trace. It must be viewed in relation to, in my particular case, the history of French fixed poetic form. I determine if the stanzas are quatrains, distichs, etc., if the verses are homometric, heterometric, or decasyllabic, etc. The rhyme scheme, if there is one, must also be delineated. Rhythm is generated, of course, by the form of the poem; in other words sonnets, sextinas, and rondeaux contain a fixed number of stanzas, verses, and are often accompanied by a traditional and specific rhyme scheme. How then does the poem resemble previous fixed poetic form and most important, how does it reflect and/or interpret them? In this way, a rhythm analysis reveals the "historicity" of a poem, that is to say how a poem reflects upon the history of poetic form, without simply imitating the past. Answers to the above questions respond to that sensation one has when initially focusing on rhythm; one can demystify the "mysterious" resonance to which I previously alluded. In relation to irony, a trope that is of the utmost complexity, I suggest that by studying rhythm, and thus adopting a close reading, it is possible to dislodge subtleties of the economics of ironic expression.

Let me offer an introduction to Jacques Roubaud, whose poem "noyade" will be the subject of my discussion. He is a contemporary poet-mathematician who is a member of Oulipo (Ouvroir de littérature potentielle), a group of authors founded by François LeLionnais and Raymond Queneau. He has written at least ten books of poetry, three novels, two autobiographic "récits," or stories, essays on French versification and on translation, two major studies on troubadorian poetry, and has done rewrites of Graal theater and American Indian tales with Florence Delay. He sits on the "comités de rédaction," or "Editing boards," of journals such as *Action poétique*, *Poésie*, and the *Cahiers de poétique comparée*. He has also been named *Directeur d'études à l'École des Hautes Etudes en sciences sociales* as of the 1991-1992 school year. The poem I have chosen to study is taken from his first major publication entitled \in (Signe d'appartenance).

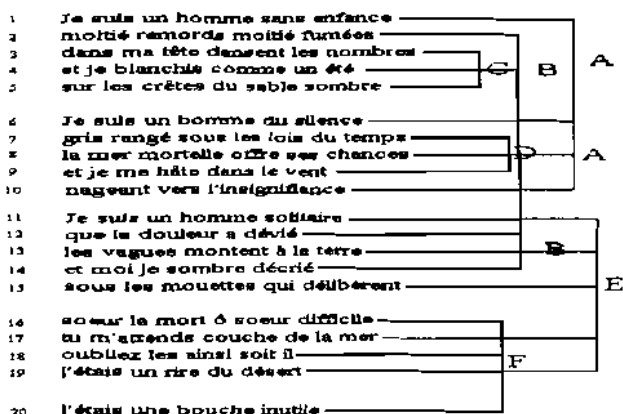
\in , the mathematical symbol of "appartenance" or belonging, was published in 1967. \in works like a "poem-machine" and therefore needs the "mode d'emploi," or "User's manual," that is included. The "User's manual" offers the reader four different ways to read the collection. These different "reading paths" follow two "equations"—we are speaking of a poet-mathematician—one inspired by the sonnet, and the other by the Japanese game of GO. The poems themselves, which are "sonnets, sonnets courts, sonnets interrompus, sonnets en prose, sonnets courts en prose, citations, illustrations, grilles, blancs, noirs, poèmes, poèmes en prose," (7) are numbered and also represent either a black or white "pawn" or "stone" on a Go-ban, or a GO board. Hence, each poem "belongs to" (appartenance) four different sequences of poems.

I have chosen to study the poem "noyade" because amongst all the above mentioned poetic forms found in \in , it is unique; also, the classical poetic theme of death is central, and finally because the poem posits a "je" which is typically roubaldian.¹ At the same time, the rhyme scheme of "noyade" offers concrete evidence that it can also be read as a manifesto of poetry. As such, the poem's irony relates information concerning the life of this poet, and the poem.

The poem "noyade" is composed of four five verse stanzas, or four "quintils." The final quintil is divided after the fourth verse by a blank space, and I shall later argue that this stanza must also be considered a quintil.² The poem is homometric; each verse is octosyllabic. I will first stress stanza structure, because the stanza's role is commonly understood as the "organisation rythmique d'ordre supérieur au vers" (Molino 12)³, and then concentrate, for the most part, on the poem's rhyme scheme. The score of the rhyme scheme is of my own

hand and not of the poet's.

"noyade" by Jacques Roubaud in *€* (Paris: Gallimard, 1967)



By using the quintil, the poet refers to a past moment in the history of poetic form. According to *Les strophes—étude historique et critique* by Martinon, the quintil was

... peu employée au Moyen âge, assez rare aussi au XVI^e siècle, sauf dans les dernières années, et plus encore au XVII^e (Malherbe l'ignore complètement). Le quintil a été très cultivée au début du XIX^e, notamment par Lamartine. [...] elle est seulement la plus usitée des strophes impaires, parce qu'elle est la plus courte, et par conséquent la plus facile, et que son rythme est aussi plus aisé à saisir que celui des autres. (181)

Roubaud's use of the quintil recalls, renovates, and in a sense, destroys the literary past. Martinon's study indicates that the use of the quintil was most pervasive during the nineteenth century, and it also informs us of the stanza's roots in the Middle Ages. Thus, Roubaud's choice of the quintil, vis-à-vis the first verse of the poem—"je suis un homme sans enfance"—is an initial indicator of irony. Indeed, how can one have no childhood while at the same time evoking an historical predecessor?

Each stanza is also a complete syntactic unit; there is no syntactic enjambment between the stanzas. The use of capital letters at the start of the first three stanzas becomes particularly significant because it underlines each stanza's syntactic unity, and because it is the poem's

only traditional sign of punctuation. The fact that the fourth stanza starts with a small letter is a typographical indication that it maintains a special status. The fact that the stanza structure coincides with the poem's syntax is rhythmically important because it allows the reader to seize upon the poem's semantic units.

Alliteration marks the interior movement of the stanzas. In the case of the consonant [s] there are six occasions of alliteration; verses 1, 5, 6, 11, 16, and 18. It is important to note that the repeated alliteration occurs in the first verse of each stanza, thus fortifying the anaphoric "je suis un homme" clause, and emphasizing the syntactic unity of each quintil. When meter and assonance work together, a rhythmic pattern that is more cohesive, and therefore more convincing, is established. By "convincing" I mean that in lieu of working in opposition to meter, the alliteration works in tandem with the meter to regularize the rhythm, and regularity creates an expectation by the reader. By "expecting" the verses to be of the same length, and the stanzas to be of the same length—the goal of meter according to Benoît de Cornulier—the reader's memory system is put into action. Further, most certainly in the world of contemporary poetry, the coincidence of meter and sonority reflects a traditional use of rhythm, thus reassuring the reader. Alliteration, a subtle component of rhythm, reinforces the stanza structure, and makes the reader aware of the seriousness and forthrightness of the poem's rhythmic movement. The resultant rhythm incites expectation and memory.⁴ These coinciding patterns make for a poem of a simple, fluid, yet, based on the use of the quintil, unusual, and therefore curious, movement.

The coincidence of syntactic and strophic unity that divides the poem into distinct parts is opposed by a rhyme scheme (aF bM cF bM cF// aF dM aF dM aF// eF bM eF bM eF// fF eM fM eM/ fF//) that ties the poem together, as indicated by my diagram.⁵ Although the last word of verse one, stanza one, does not rhyme with any other verse in the stanza, it does rhyme with the first, third and fifth verses of stanza two, thus uniting the first and second stanzas. This system of rhyming, isolating a rhyme in the first stanza and then presenting its echo in a following stanza, is a technique of troubadour poetry called the "rime estramp."⁶ Notice how rhymes a, b, and e, as indicated in the diagram, work to unite or link different stanza together. The present portrait of the poem's rhythm reveals the contradiction which I initially indicated: the rhymes link the stanzas, whereas the stanza structure, syntax, and assonance separates them. Here is another glance at the structural "irony" of the poem. The syntax highlights the declarative nature of the poetic discourse, whereas

the rhyme scheme, in a "tongue in cheek" fashion, unites the stanzas of the poem.

The use of the "rime estramp" in the first verse of this poem clearly makes reference to troubadorian poetry, of which Roubaud is an important scholar. In *La Fleur inverse* Roubaud declares his allegiance to troubadorian poetry; he states that "La poésie la plus contemporaine, pour survivre, doit se défendre de l'effacement, de l'oubli, de la dérision par le choix d'un archaïsme: l'archaïsme du trobar est le mien" (17). In this same book he stresses rhyme as an essential and original aspect of the troubadour's craft:

... les trobadours ont inventé que le chant d'amour serait plus qu'une union indissoluble de mots et de sons disant l'amour, le révélant, en son essence et en ses effets sur l'homme et sur la femme; ils ont donné un support, un lieu et une marque à ce lien, à cet *entrelacement*: c'est la rime. . . il ne suffit pas de dire que la poésie des trobadours est une poésie rimée. La rime est plus pour eux qu'une marque de fin de vers. [. . .] c'est la disposition des rimes, leurs timbres, le jeu de leurs sonorités, la décomposition, mise en valeur, heurt et recombinaison des mots [. . .] qui fait de chaque canso une création unique . . . Les trobadours font de la rime l'élément moteur d'une *forme*, et de cette forme, la canso, "chanson", une manifestation et un manifeste à la fois de l'amour et de la poésie. (10-11)

Let us assume that rhyme, in troubadorian poetry, represents, as Roubaud intimates, the "support", "place" and "sign" of an "intertwining" (*entrelacement*) of "love", "song (*chant*)" and "language," and that the result of this intertwining is poetry.⁷ Given that the rhyme scheme of "noyade" is "intertwining," and that the rhyme scheme combined with the use of the quintil renders the form of "noyade" unique, I could logically conclude, based on Roubaud's interpretation of troubadorian rhyme, that "noyade" represents not only a "manifestation" of poetry, but also a "manifesto." Herein lies a concrete bond between an essential element of poetic rhythm and a contemporary manifesto of poetry. An ironic posture has been struck in that contemporary poetry utilizes innovative troubadorian rhyming, an element of poetic language largely unused for many decades, as a source of its rebirth.⁸

The "rime estramp," which, states Roubaud, "renforce le lien entre les mots ainsi isolés dans le poème" (*Les Troubadours* 35), starts

with the word "*enfance*" and then finds its echos in the words "*silence*", "*chances*" and "*insignifiance*" of verses 6, 8 and 10 of the second stanza. The final [ã] vowel of verses 7 and 9, contained in the words "*temps*" and "*vent*," are also "intertwined" into this rhyme scheme because it is contained within all the ultimate words of the second stanza; the distinction between the two rhyme schemes is the feminine ending of the first set of rhymes, where the final [s] consonant is pronounced. Thus, the effect of the "rime estramp" colors the entire second stanza. The word "*enfance*," as we have previously stated, has ironic undertones. The words "*enfance*" and "*silence*" are connected through rhyme, and in the same manner enter into a relationship with the words "*chances*" and "*insignifiance*." What do the aforementioned rhythmic associations detail? By studying the poem's rhythm, I discover that the poem's rhythm and meaning are thoroughly intertwined. In effect, I am able to shed light on the poem's overall meaning.

The rhyme between "*chances*" and "*enfance*" of verse one, keenly underscores the poet's fear of meaninglessness, his dependence upon rhythm for meaning, continuity, and existence, and finally the poem's irony. It must be stated forcibly that this poem is far from a product of chance. The formal components of the poem, its rhythmic support system, forestall, and render ironic, the pitfall of "*silence*" and "*insignifiance*," viewed as threats to the poet's voice. Both of these pitfalls, "*silence*" and "*insignifiance*," stem from forces that gain prominence through alliteration: "*les lois du temps*," and the "*mer Mortelle*." The predominant integers, four stanzas containing five octosyllabic verses, that structure the poem's rhythm—v.3 "*dans ma tête dansent les nombres*"—defend the poet-mathematician against meaninglessness, and the nothingness of silence, for numbers themselves have meaning and recount a tale. By intertwining numbers and composing a rhyme scheme that fortifies the poem's rhythm, avoiding *chance*, poetic meaning is guaranteed.

The formal constraints integrated into the poem guarantee poetic meaning because they are rooted in the history of poetic form; the constraints unmistakably belong to poetry and in their use modify contemporary poetic history. The rhythm that emanates from the constraints transform "*noyade*" into a manifesto of poetry; the rhythm speaks to the poem's irony as well as the irony of poetry, as it returns to its own history for rejuvenation. Roubaud has rhythmically "intertwined" different epochs of poetry and has avoided "chance." It should not be forgotten that André Breton called "hasard" a "divinity" in the first Surrealist manifesto. To the contrary, along

oulipean lines, Roubaud's rhythmic construct simply does not allow for chance. At the same time that the syntax clearly divides the stanzas, the poem's ironic rhythm sadly voices the fact that poetry, like life, is made up of many parts, always threatened, and always fragile, most certainly when left to stand alone.

Based solely on the rhyme scheme that connects the third and fourth stanzas, the rhyme I designate as rhyme "E," insight can be gained into the poem's central theme, a drowning: "noyade." The words in question, "solitaire," "terre," "délibèrent," "mer," and "désert," are linked by the syllable [€R]. Forces combine to underscore the poet's solitude as he plunges into the sea (v.14 "et moi je sombre . . ."). His sense of solitude is reinforced by images of Nature that depict great expanses ("mer," "terre," and "désert") that exaggerate his sense of worthlessness, and justify his desire to commit suicide. Ironically, the rhyme scheme continues to strengthen the poem's unity just at the moment where the poet's life is about to shatter. In a sense, the poem's rhythm is shattered when a typographical blank fractures the final stanza. In effect, the blank between the fourth and fifth verses plays an important rhythmic role. It modifies the rhythm of the poem in its final breaths, and brings the discussion back to my initial comments concerning €.

First I will relate this stanza to one of Roubaud's autobiographical "récits." A passage in *Le Grand incendie de Londres* appears especially pertinent. Describing the individual method and goals of his forays into the Mediterranean sea, Roubaud makes the following reflections:

Au plus loin de mon parcours, je m'arrête. Je m'arrête un long moment, pas allongé dans l'eau . . . mais debout en elle, tourné vers le rivage, vers la terre assez lointaine, puisque je nage volontiers à un, deux, trois kilomètres même du bord; je la regarde . . .; j'entends la rumeur de la terre, comme jamais on ne peut l'entendre ailleurs qu'en la mer . . . Il n'y a personne; l'air lumineux chuchote, à double voix, de terre et eau. De tels moments, peut-être, donnent le sens de ma nage.

Il y a risque, je le sais. [...] Cependant le risque (peut-être seulement imaginaire) majeur est autre: de partir trop loin, délibérément, de céder à la tentation de ne pas revenir. Sous mes pieds, je regarde l'épaisseur longtemps transparente, la masse familière de la Méditerranée qui me porte, m'accueille, me reçoit. Je pense à la scène finale de

Martin Eden, la seule vision de suicide qui m'ait jamais troublé, attiré, séduit. (138)

The parallels between this passage and the final stanzas of "noyade" are illuminating. It is feasible to assume that in this poem the poet is at least contemplating, or at most, committing suicide. What is most intriguing in the preceding passage pertains to the "double voix" which proffers meaning to the poet during his foray into the ocean. It is the "double voix" that concretizes the irony of the poem, most certainly vis-à-vis the notion of the poet's suicide. In fact, one "voice" disavows the other: the second "voice" is the poem's rhythm.

In the article "Le silence de la mathématique jusqu'au fond de la langue: poésie." Roubaud makes the following assertion concerning meter:

... l'un des paradoxes du mètre (qui est peut-être, plus généralement, celui du vers) est d'affirmer l'existence *séparée* d'une forme et d'un sens, ... la différence avec ce que fait la langue est la suivante: dans le vers ce lien n'est pas dissimulé du tout, mais posé, affiché. (121)

Meter, the formal component *par excellence* of rhythm, is, as Roubaud states in the preceding citation, "posé" and "affiché." The "meaning" of "noyade" is heterogeneous; it lies in the rigorous application of the poet's formal constraints "intertwined" with and through its story. Therefore, a "double voix" is at work here; the rhythm tells one story as another is recounted.

The ensuing rhythm, its regularity, sparks one to remember.⁹ The reader "remembers" the troubadours, he/she "remembers" other appearances of the quintet, he/she "remembers" the sonnet, the game of GO, the repetitive meter and rhythm of the preceding stanzas, as well as the other poems of \in . Yet on the other hand, if the suicide truly occurs, then memory is lost. The poet's tale of suicide is rendered unconvincing by the story recounted by the rhythm, which incites the memory of tradition, a luxury of life.

In the "Mode d'emploi," or "User's manual," of \in , Roubaud discussed a "multiplicité de lectures." Discussing \in in other articles, ("Mezura #9") Roubaud declared that \in embraces a "multiplicité d'inachèvements," an "intention d'interruption," and finally a "stratégie de l'incomplétude" (11-12). By not "achieving" or "completing" the final stanza by introducing a "blank" just before the end, the poet creates a rhythmic disruption. Does the typographical

blank indicate that the stanza is no longer a quintil? Does it destroy its unity? I believe not; I believe it posits the voice of meter. The blank incites the reader to verify the other stanzas of the poem. The final verse—*j'étais une bouche inutile*—"sinks away" (v.14 "*et moi je sombre*") from the other verses of the stanza, disenfranchising itself from the poem. Yet the blank also brings attention to the stanzas, structure, and rhyme scheme of the poem, and in so doing it maintains the verse's integrity, and renders its declaration false. The verse sinks away but it belongs just as well because of the pressure of the preceding stanzas; just like the pressure of tradition exerts its force on the entire poem. The final stanza is a quintil, and it remains tied to the other stanzas by way of history and tradition, much like the poet himself. A poem of such formal nature requires the unity of the twentieth verse; the poem's unique code, encoded itself with the past, is stronger than the solitude of the final verse, and thus the pressure exerted by tradition and meter colors the poem's final statement: now, even the "*bouche inutile*" has ironic undertones. The possibility that Roubaud's voice might actually be "*inutile*" is ambiguous, as ambiguous and unascertainable as the noise of a tree falling in the forest, as the sound of "*un rire du désert*" (v.19).

"Noyade" is a manifestation and a manifesto of poetry written by a "je"¹⁰ who is an individual, a poet, and poetry itself. The formality of the poem creates a rhythm which guarantees the resonance of previous rhythmic codes; it guarantees tradition. In this poem rhythm literally saves the poet's life. This is true poetic irony because the codes of the rhythm of language, comprised in the formal (mathematical) aspects of poetry, not only survive corporeal existence, but guarantee it; they guarantee that the movement of an era (Japanese influence on the occidental world?), its rhythm, is duly and unequivocally recorded.

Hopefully, the study of rhythm has brought to the forefront the irony of "noyade." If, as Linda Hutcheon states in her book *Irony's Edge*, irony is the "rubbing together" of "said and plural unsaid" meanings (19), then my rhythm analysis of Roubaud's "noyade" is successful in illuminating the unsaid, and in this case, ironic meaning of the poem. The preceding analysis raises a new set of problems. My interpretation of the poem is as important to the perception of an ironic "edge" as the poet's original intentions: Hutcheon declares that "irony is a "weighted" mode of discourse in the sense that it is asymmetrical, unbalanced in favor of the silent and the unsaid. The tipping of the balance occurs in part through what is implied about the attitude of either the ironist or the interpreter" (37). I have declared

that "noyade" is a manifesto of poetry because the poet has chosen to plunge into poetry's history, rather than into the sea: poetry's history is a poet's life. As interpreters of irony you and I are stuck in its web; we are the gulls who deliberate (v.15) the decried and drowning poet (v.14). Are we the target of Roubaud's irony, we who are decoding and discussing at length a self-declared "*bouche inutile*," or are we included in the joke and therefore permitted to save and continue both his own life, and the life of poetry? The poem's manifesto states clearly that in order for poetry to survive, it must recycle and rejuvenate its past. Through rhythm, Jacques Roubaud has skilled his poetic artistry and, from outside of *The City of Man*, has used irony to jab at us, and ultimately to implicate us in poetry's survival.

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NOTES

¹ Roubaud often uses the first person singular in an ambiguous manner; the "je" of the poem might be a generic poet, or even poetry itself. For example, in *Trente et un au cube*, the first verse of the first poem reads: "je détiens million de/ syllabes comptées pour toi . . ." In *Autobiographie, chapitre dix*, the poet describes his autobiography: "De tous ces poèmes, composés dans les dix-huit années (1914-1932) qui précédèrent ma naissance, j'ai fait ce livre, chapitre dixième d'une autobiographie: la vie est unique, mais les paroles d'avant la mémoire font ce qu'on en dit." To assume that the "je" of "noyade" refers to a specific Jacques Roubaud is simply dubious.

² In fact, the space between the ultimate and penultimate verses, is of great importance to the rhythm of this poem. For that reason it is at the end of this analysis where this "separation" will receive emphasis.

³ See *Introduction à l'analyse de la poésie*, where the authors state that the stanza is "l'unité formelle récurrente maximale du poème... elle donne au poème une organisation rythmique d'ordre supérieur au vers" (12).

⁴ The notion of "intertwining" is also supported by the coincidence of sonority and meter. "Intertwining" occurs in the pattern in which

the different alliterated consonants materialize; different alliterations appear and disappear in a rhythmic fashion thus creating their own parallel (to meter) and cohesive movement.

⁵ In this system of notation "F" indicates a "feminine" ending and "M" indicates a "masculine" ending.

⁶ In *Les Troubadours*, Roubaud states that "...si en effet une rime se trouve isolée dans la cobla initiale (rime dite *estramp*), elle devra nécessairement recevoir un écho dans les strophes suivantes, puisqu'il n'existe pas de vers sans rime. [...] Le retard à la réponse, surtout sensible à travers une frontière aussi importante que celle de la strophe, crée l'attente de la réponse et renforce le lien entre les mots ainsi isolés dans le poème" (35). In the *Dictionnaire de l'ancienne langue française*, 3e tome, the verb "estramper" means "accommoder, arranger; fig. modérer, calmer" and the past participle means "tempéré" (641).

⁷ In Roubaud's article "Le silence . . ." a theory discussing the relationship between troubadorian love and meter is developed.

⁸ Roubaud first indicates his fondness for the use of irony in "Mezura no. 9," where he states, in relation to ϵ , the title of the collection, that "Le titre finalement choisi manifeste l'ironie de la position lyrique assumée en chaque poème (elle est implicite dans toute l'histoire du sonnet) au moment même où elle s'exprime comme jeu d'une forme fixe, en principe impersonnelle, qui la nie" (12). In *La fleur . . .*, Roubaud studies the role of irony in relation to troubadorian love found in specific "tensions" (43). We would also like to bring to the reader's attention the irony in the "épigramme funéraire" which immediately follows "noyade"; this epigram, translated loosely as "I will not be/ I was/ I am not/ I do not care" is an ironic depiction of death. It is impossible for a dead person to "care." Given the importance of the order of the poems in ϵ , this epigram supports looking upon "noyade" as an ironic statement concerning death.

⁹ See Roubaud's, "Quelques thèses sur la poétique" where he advances the following thesis: "toute littérature est mémoire, et code, d'une langue, et du langage." He then specifies the terms "code" and "mémoire": "nous spécifierons provisoirement sous le terme mémoire ce qui est préservation, détermination sémantique, sous le terme code ce qui est préservation, détermination des lois formelles, à différents niveaux, du langage (sens et phrases, rythme, discours, etc.)" (8-10). I am making an initial reflection on a more involved linguistic theory.

¹⁰ Roubaud's literary endeavors include a series of novels concerning the heroine "Hortense." Here also he innovates in relation to the role of the narrator. As of the second page of his first novel, *La Belle Hortense* the author addresses the problem: "Moi Jacques Roubaud, je ne suis ici que celui qui tient la plume, en l'occurrence un feutre noir "Pilot Razor Point" à pointe fine... et c'est pourquoi je dis nous, ce qui est un pluriel de modestie. Il y a dans ce roman, par ailleurs, autant vous le révéler tout de suite, un Narrateur, qui est un des personnages de l'histoire. Il apparaîtra dès le deuxième chapitre, et dira je, comme les narrateurs le font généralement dans les romans. Mais je vous invite à ne pas le confondre avec moi, qui suis l'Auteur." Thus, Roubaud solves, in his manner, the contemporary problem of authorship by openly confronting, or deconstructing, his narration.

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