

# Robert Marteau and the French Blank Alexandrine

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**ABSTRACT:** Thanks to the inspiring *Three Thousand Years of Hebrews Versification: Essays in Comparative Prosody* by Benjamin Harshav (Yale University Press, 2014) and in particular its first chapter, “Basic Aspects of Meter and Rhythm,” it is possible to take a fresh look at the history of French verse and its elusive relations between meter, rhythm, and poetic breath. In this essay I will examine the features of the rhymed alexandrine (the classical type of French verse), the various attempts to go beyond its limits, and the recent creation of a blank alexandrine, which blends rhythmic balance with ample phrasing and syntactic scope.

**T**HE FEATURE OF FRENCH that has exercised the strongest influence on classical verse is the fixed stress on a word’s last voiced vowel. In English, in German, and in Russian, stress can fall on the first, the middle, or the last syllable of a word—for example, *mother*, *contiguous*, *assign* in English (bold type indicates the stressed syllable). In French, by contrast, the stress always falls on the last syllable of a word when its vowel is voiced (*garçon*, *brevet*), this last syllable being unstressed only when its vowel is silent (*repère*, *aigle*).

Although present-day pronunciation tends to elide silent vowels (*voyelles muettes*), they were audible in classical French versification, which defined the verse by the number of syllables it contained, the silent ones included. Thus, the alexandrine, which was the most frequently used type of verse in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, contained either twelve or thirteen syllables (the hyphen indicates the borders between syllables):

Il - pen - se - voir - en - pleurs - dis - si - per - cet - o - ra - ge (thirteen syllables)  
(Racine, *Andromaque*, 5.1.1410)

The most obvious feature of the French classical alexandrine being the number of syllables, it is equally important to notice that according to many specialists in prosody, it didn't require a definite metrical pattern.<sup>1</sup> As we know, a metrical pattern divides a verse into groups of syllables called "feet." In languages where versification is based on stress, each foot includes a stressed syllable and one or two unstressed syllables.

In English, where stress is not fixed, the verse is defined both by the number of syllables it contains and by a stable metric pattern easy to grasp. The length of the iambic pentameter, for instance, amounts to ten or eleven syllables, while the metric pattern involves five feet, each having a potential accent on the second syllable. In the well-known monologue of Hamlet beginning "To be or not to be, that is the question," scanning this verse consists in emphasizing the second syllable of each foot:

To **be** or **not** to **be**, that **is** the **question**.

It is evident, however, that when, instead of scanning, one recites this verse in actual English, the accents are distributed differently. If, for example, the reciter wants to emphasize the word "that," as one often does in oral English, the verse would sound

To **be** or **not** to be, **that** is the **question**.

Scansion, which follows the metric pattern, being different from the recitations that make audible a variety of possible rhythms, the stability of the English verse is provided both by its syllabic length and by its metric pattern, while its liberty, its vivacity, come from the constant gap between the regularity of the metric scansion and the actual, variable, sequences of stresses during recitation.

In classical French versification, by contrast, the only fully stable element was the syllabic length of the verse, while at first sight any metric pattern appeared to be absent. A certain amount of balance in the distribution of stresses was nevertheless perceptible, given that within each hemistich the attentive ear could detect a succession of stresses that was never fully arbitrary but suggested the presence of various foot patterns. To go back to Racine's verse (where | marks the place of the caesura, while / shows the borders between feet)

Il pense voir en pleurs | dissiper cet orage

one easily detects in the first hemistich the stress pattern

Il **pen** / se **voir** / en **pleurs**

that is, three iambs, and in the second hemistich the pattern

di ssi **per** / cet or a / ge

that is, two anapests. Classical French alexandrine, therefore, while being defined by the number of syllables, allowed a certain amount of metric regularity.

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<sup>1</sup> For two excellent studies of French prosody, see Clive Scott, *French Verse-Art: A Study* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982); and Michel Murat, ed., *Le vers français: Histoire, théorie, esthétique* (Paris: Champion, 2000). Benjamin Harshav's *Three Thousand Years of Hebrew Versification: Essays in Comparative Prosody* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2014) is a crucial contribution to the theory of prosody.

The fact remains, however, that in order to guarantee the stability of the verse, the classical French system emphasized less the metric structure (the scansion) of each verse than its inner and outer limits. This function was fulfilled by the caesura that divided the alexandrine into two hemistichs and by the rhyme, more precisely by the regular rhyme (*rime suivie*) that bound verses two by two. The elegance of this solution is undeniable since, as Racine's admirers know well, the rhymed alexandrine could be used equally well in dialogues, striking lines, and purple speeches. Dialogue:

CLÉONE.

Fuyez-le donc, Madame: et puisqu'on vous adore...

HERMIONE.

Ah! Laisse à ma fureur le temps de croître encore

(2.1.417–18)

Striking lines:

PYLADE.

Oubliez votre amour. Elle vient, je la voi.

ORESTE.

Va t'en. Réponds-moi d'elle, et je réponds de moi.

(3.2.803–4)

Purple speech:

ORESTE (describing Pyrrhus's death).

À ces mots, qui du peuple attiraient le suffrage  
 Nos Grecs n'ont répondu que par un cri de rage;  
 L'infidèle s'est vu partout envelopper,  
 Et je n'ai pu trouver la place pour frapper.  
 Chacun se disputait la gloire de l'abattre.

(5.3.1513–17)

It is difficult to imagine a prosody system that better evokes the ideals of beauty, simplicity, and balance. And yet, two aspects of the classical French alexandrine made it less fit for other artistic projects: the constant need to highlight the caesuras and the ends of the verses required a rather-strict syntactic structure, and, equally problematic, the omnipresence of rhymes in the end couldn't but generate a certain amount of monotony.

Later, poetic prose, as developed by the French translations of Ossian by Turgot in 1760 and of Scottish ballads by Diderot in 1761 and continued by Chateaubriand's prose translation of Milton's *Paradise Lost*, attempted to give poetic breath a wider span, but as open as these translations might have been to James Macpherson's sublime surges or to Milton's complex, Ciceronian syntax, in the end they sounded more like prose (beautiful prose) than poetry. In the nineteenth century, Victor Hugo succeeded in relaxing the discipline of the rhymed alexandrine by extending the length of the sentences and by playing with daring enjambments, but since in his poems the regular rhymes were omnipresent, the scope of his innovation remained limited.

In the second half of the nineteenth century, Baudelaire experimented a few times with a freer verse, later to be promoted by Arthur Rimbaud, Gustave Kahn, and Jules Laforgue. By valiantly abandoning both rhyme and the stable syllabic length, the free verse was, however, unable to support both a steady rhythm and a free, inspired poetic breath, as do the English iambic pentameter and the Latin hexameter. At the turn of the twentieth century, Paul Claudel, and then Victor Ségalen, Saint-John Perse, and Edmond Jabès, followed the examples of the biblical psalms, Pindar, and Walt Whitman and adopted a very long, irregular verse, often going beyond twenty syllables. While this form adequately suggested the amplitude and variation of poetic breath, it mostly favored a grandiose style, thus being constantly threatened by a sublime version of monotony.

It is only recently that poets like Guy Gofette and Robert Marteau have explored the possibility of a French blank alexandrine, which benefits both from the rhythmic features of the old alexandrine and from the syntactic freedom made possible by the absence of rhyme. It is notable that this kind of verse had first been successfully used by several French translators of Latin poetry, the best known being Paul Valéry for Virgil's *Bucolics* (1953) and Marc Chouet (1984) and Jean-Pierre Chausserie-Laprée (1993) for the *Aeneid*. One can add in passing, as a tribute to Virgil, that the English blank iambic pentameter was created by Henry Howard, Earl of Surrey, when he sought to find an English correspondent of the Latin hexameter in his partial translation of the *Aeneid* (1537–38), while Christopher Pearse Cranch's complete version of Virgil's epic poem in iambic pentameters (1872) is still read today.

Marteau's first sonnets were included in his volume *Travaux de la terre*.<sup>2</sup> They follow the classical form of fourteen rhymed verses, as do the first two sonnets in his *Liturgie*, as though the poet wanted to show his respect for the older form before switching to the new, blank version. Concerning rhythm, however, these two sonnets display the freedom that would soon prevail in Marteau's several volumes of unrhymed sonnets published after 1992. The beginning of one of these two sonnets, which evokes Claude Monet's painting *The Magpie*, provides a good example:

La pie a marqué la neige, craché l'orange  
 Sur son barreau de robinier, elle se tient  
 Parmi les pommiers noirs. Une lumière étrange,  
 Comme lampe en la mer qui palpite et retient  
 Sa flamme<sup>3</sup>

Just as in his sonnets in blank alexandrines, the earliest ones dating from 1987 and the last ones from 2011, the year of Marteau's death, the verses here follow the classical rules—with the caesura, feet, and stresses well emphasized—only insofar as they converge with Marteau's new, freer way of reciting his poems. The number of syllables is almost always constant, emphasizing the sonnet's stability despite its uninhibited syntax; as for the rhyme, its presence is never felt as necessary, given that the inner balance of the verses comes, as in the later, nonrhymed sonnets, from a variety of rhythmic effects sometimes unexpected, sometimes as regular as those present in the seventeenth-century alexandrine.

<sup>2</sup> Robert Marteau, *Travaux de la terre* (Paris: Seuil, 1963).

<sup>3</sup> Robert Marteau, *Liturgie* (Seyssel: Champ Vallon, 1992), 7.

Concerning Marteau's nonrhymed sonnets, the following example is taken from the volume *Le temps ordinaire*, subtitled *Liturgie V* (2009). This sonnet consists of a single sentence, and its rhythmic and syntactic effects evoke a poetic universe flooded by peace and light, a light both actual and transcendent that fills our world with life and beauty:

L'extraordinaire effet du soleil sur l'eau  
 Où il se brise comme une assiette en mille  
 Morceaux toujours plus éparpillés qui s'abîment  
 En même temps qu'en surface ils se multiplient  
 Comme de la paille incendiée où le vent  
 Rougeoie attisant dans le trou la braise, puis  
 C'est un chantier où l'or en feuillage repeuple  
 Les profondeurs que les dieux endormis habitent,  
 Étonnamment beaux, posés sur des lotus comme  
 On a accoutumé de les voir sur la soie  
 Peinte et comme nous les ont transmis en image  
 Les peuples de la Révélation, de l'Inde  
 À l'Égypte, de l'Atlantide au haut des Andes  
 Jusque aujourd'hui gardiens des temples submergés.

Vendredi 12 mai 2000<sup>4</sup>

Let us pay closer attention to these rhythms. In the first three verses ("L'extraordinaire effet du soleil sur l'eau / Où il se brise comme une assiette en mille / Morceaux toujours plus éparpillés qui s'abîment"), the unexpected succession of stresses, similar to the light's free play, is quite unlike the rhythms of a classical alexandrine. But in the middle of the sonnet (lines 7, 8, and 9), when the reflection of the sun in the mirror of the water makes visible the hidden presence of the gods, the earlier rhythmic vagaries are replaced by more regular alexandrines, whose predictable beat better suits these visions: "C'est un chantier où l'or | en feuillage repeuple / Les profondeurs que les dieux | endormis habitent, / Étonnamment beaux, posés | sur des lotus comme / On a accoutumé | de les voir sur la soie."

The fluid, yet striking rhythms of Marteau's sonnets never offer personal confessions. First-person description of intimate feelings, often considered to represent the specificity of lyric poetry (one wonders why), is absent, not only because many modernist poets have rejected them but also because Marteau wants to make us listen to other things than the mere lamentations of sensitive hearts hurt by love. Thus, many of his sonnets could be labeled "gnomic" insofar as they reflect on the place of human beings in the universe. Here is an example taken from *Le temps ordinaire* (Thursday, July 6, 2000), its theme being human ignorance and confusion. If we, humans, ever succeed in catching a glimpse of reality, the sonnet says, it is only insofar as we are still connected (are we really?) to the sources of cosmic light. The poet, in addition, warns us that this link, which is perhaps only imaginary, far from shedding light on our way, blinds us and hands over many of us to our fellow creatures:

<sup>4</sup> Robert Marteau, *Le temps ordinaire: Liturgie V* (Seyssel: Champ Vallon, 2009), 175.

Suspendus à la gravitation des astres  
 Par moins qu'un fil qu'aurait fictivement tendu  
 Une fée avant l'avènement, nous allons  
 Ne voyant que par la lumière qu'on nous prête,  
 À vrai dire égarés et de l'autre la proie.

(202)

In the first verses, the poignant image of humans as half-blind puppets attached by a thin thread to the invisible force that moves the stars is conveyed by four alexandrines whose caesuras are difficult to place and whose rhythm has an unusual mobility, the number of syllables perhaps being their only stable feature: “Suspendus à la gravitation des astres,” “Une fée avant l'avènement, nous allons,” “Ne voyant que par la lumière qu'on nous prête.” The fifth verse, however, which states an initial, provisional conclusion, is a true old-fashioned alexandrine, whose two hemistichs, separated by a clearly audible caesura, offer a beautiful sequence of anapests: “À vrai dire égarés | et de l'autre la proie.” As in the sonnet of Friday, May 12, 2000, cited above, the sound pattern of the verse and its meaning support each other, with the irregular stresses evoking the quick movements of the eye—watching over the waters in the sonnet of May 12 and raising to the stars in the sonnet of July 6—while at the end of the sentence the classical alexandrine calmly emphasizes the conclusion.

These blank verses, whose number of syllables is constant while the stress patterns constantly change, allow the poet to fill a single, ample sentence with several precise details and go from one enjambment to the next while describing our condition in a calm, meditative voice: lacking inner coherence, we recklessly obey and follow the preachers of abstractions:

Plus que des animaux: des fragments de mémoire,  
 Des pièces et des morceaux nous constituent: l'idée  
 Comme un parasite empoisonné développe  
 Ses tentacules dans les cerveaux affaiblis  
 Qui prennent le dessus, établissant leur règne.

Separated from the word “l'idée” by the enjambment, the comparison “comme un parasite empoisonné” is all the more striking. The idea, here, far from bringing light, yokes those whose weakened brains, having access to only fragments of memory, are incapable of understanding its import.

The poet's grief reminds us of T. S. Eliot's, who denounced the inner emptiness promoted by mass societies: “We are the hollow men / We are the stuffed men / ... / Shape without form, shade without colour, / Paralysed force, gesture without motion.”<sup>5</sup> Even more explicitly, Robinson Jeffers, the great Californian ecologist-poet, expressed a deep uncertainty concerning our entire species: “And boys, be in nothing so moderate as in love of man / a clever servant, insufferable master.”<sup>6</sup> Not unlike Jeffers, Marteau warns us against the danger of not knowing our true place in nature, but in the French poet's oeuvre, mistrust of humans, far from being a permanent, basic feeling, expresses a short moment of doubt, a quick insight that captures the vanity of our wildest dreams: the absence of wings incites us to fly, skepticism makes us gullible, anxiety replaces thought:

<sup>5</sup> *The Hollow Men* (1925), in *Collected Poems of T. S. Eliot* (New York: Harcourt, 1936), 101.

<sup>6</sup> “Shine, Perishing Republic” (1925), in Robinson Jeffers, *Selected Poems* (New York: Vintage, 1965), 9.

Pour qui voit d'ailleurs, c'est une société  
 D'insectes qui seraient des mécaniciens;  
 Aptères voudraient voler; incroyants seraient  
 Crédules; tourmentés se rêveraient penseurs.

While grasping a momentary truth, this image is neither unique nor definitive: it is enough to turn the kaleidoscope of sonnets in order to find kinder, more tolerant views.

Nor is rhythmic mobility Marteau's only way of writing his sonnets. The poem dated Wednesday, September 29, 1999 (*Temps ordinaire*, 104), celebrates the transparency of the surrounding world and its meaning for those who know how to look and listen:

Un son de cloche. C'est le pays qui assone  
 Avec la sphère dont on voit la paroi bleue  
 Fuir en diffusant également la lumière  
 Que le soleil émet du matin jusqu'au soir [...]

The bell's sound points to a light that, again, comes from beyond:

Soleil qui n'est qu'un masque appliqué sur la face  
 Invisible du divin

and the exhortation that follows,

Écoutez les métaux murir; écoutez-les  
 Dans leur gestation engendrer la musique,

reminds us of the harmony hidden in the heart of the world. No hesitation can be sensed at the level of rhythm: the regular alexandrines follow each other without interruption, emphasizing the unity of the poem, while the absence of rhyme allows poetic elocution to go far beyond the limits of the verse, thus highlighting a more global rhythmic coherence.

To conclude, Marteau's sonnets, be they about birds, trees, and wild flowers, about the great elementary forces of this world (the sea, the rivers, the wind, the sky, the stars), about the monuments and artworks that awake our memory, or, finally, about the secrets of the gods, display a version of blank alexandrine that admirably supports poetic momentum and breath. These sonnets open a new, fresh horizon for French verse. A