
H-France Salon

Volume 14, Issue 21, #11

Postface
Inventing the Vocative

Philippe Guerre

Translated by Jean Anderson

Rilke opens the last poem in his *Sonnets to Orpheus* with an invitation to perceive the noble and simple feeling of existence through an awareness of the breath: "Quiet friend who has come so far / feel how your breathing makes more space around you."¹ Here he urges someone who is close and at the same time distant, to bring together the regenerating awareness of cosmic vastness and their close personal physicality. Every breath reveals constellations, at the same time as it gives more space to the universe within our lungs and our psyche (this term meaning both soul and breath): it is an exchange with the world.

I refer to these lines for several reasons. What can be experienced in silence moment by moment can also be felt while reading and writing, and in reading what and while one writes. Flora Aurima Devatine's work returns again and again to this idea of the breath in writing. Take the example from the end of the first text in *Tergiversations et Rêveries de l'Écriture Orale, Te Pahu a Hono'ura* [Meanderings and Daydreams of Oral Writing, Te Pahu a Hono'ura]: "Writing which, in common with running a marathon / Requires breath!"² An exclamation such as this underlines the fact that writing does not happen in a context of social glory and the analogy with the longest race in fact indicates not that one should write by the kilometre but that there is a requirement for endurance and passing the test of suspense and silence, working through doubt, making a physical effort in writing that has a spiritualising effect, the "athleticism"³ involved in the creation of a work and of the thinking behind it that remains unwritten. In like fashion, Saint-John Perse joins with the power of the winds, which are nothing less than another breath with a non-corporeal body, and sees them as manifesting "in our greatest athletes', poets' verses."⁴ We can only see of the winds and of our breath, what they awaken.

¹ Rainer Maria Rilke, "Let This Darkness Be a Belltower", from *Sonnets to Orpheus*, II, 29, trans. Joanna Macy and Anita Barrows (adapted by JA). <https://onbeing.org/poetry/let-this-darkness-be-a-bell-tower/>, consulted 18 August 2022.

² "L'écriture ayant, en commun avec le marathon, / l'exigence de souffle!", Flora Aurima Devatine, *Tergiversations et Rêveries de l'Écriture Orale, Te Pahu a Hono'ura*, Pirae, Au Vent des îles, 1998, p. 22. Referred to henceforth as *TRE*. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations in the body of the text are by JA.

³ "athlétisme": Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *What is Philosophy?* trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Graham Burchall, New York, Columbia University, 1994, p. 172.

⁴ "sur nos plus grands versets d'athlètes, de poètes": Saint-John Perse, *Vents*, Paris, nrf Gallimard, 1945, p.163.

Aurima Devatine's texts reveal writing as an activity, one that is not evident, that is imperious, mysterious and surprising, rather than as a social habit and something that is taken for granted. Aragon, in a paradoxical and revealing way, gave to his retrospective work the title *Je n'ai jamais appris à écrire* [I Never Learned to Write].

In addition, Aurima Devatine's writing enlarges space by opening up Polynesia as she bears it within her and to all readers who do not come from there. The appearance of Tahitian intertwined with French is an experience of the "concrete universal", to borrow Hegel's concept, according to which the universal is realised in the concreteness and the sinuousness of History, in contrast to the abstract universal where a vague word is brandished in an empty sky. The universal is realised in History but also in the way people speak. It is necessary to come back to the right word, in the dual sense of justice and appropriateness. Aurima Devatine speaks freely about her natural surroundings, using the terms that speak to her. For many trees, plants, and flowers Tahitian is essential, as the presence of an accompanying glossary reveals. There is no need to call upon the Latin names, still a useful method of classification, which clearly inspires respect but does not speak the truth about all plant life from everyone's point of view.

With regard to the term "intertwining", it is important to note the essential presence of stitching, braiding and weaving in Aurima Devatine's writings considered here.⁵ No one weaves for themselves alone, there is always a hospitable welcome visible on the horizon. Text does after all come from the Latin *texere*, to weave. To say, for example, "I have beaten out braids into contrary verses"⁶ reminds us of the patient work of hand and voice bringing together warp and weft so that in the end they are indistinguishable from each other.⁷ This weaver-like attentiveness can even be seen in "Dedication" ["Dédicace"],⁸ a heartfelt text expressing gratitude "To the whole braid", "To the long braiding of humanity"⁹ which, in its wide diversity, provided enduring breath and energy. Aurima Devatine closes *Tergiversations* by honouring those who have inspired her. This text is not there by chance. Marcus Aurelius too, *mutatis*

⁵ *Passim*, but see in particular her *Au vent de la piroguière – Tīfaifai*, Paris, Bruno Doucey, 2016, pp. 49, 55, 120.

⁶ *ibid.*, p. 126.

⁷ Flora Aurima Devatine notes: Within the contemporary Tahitian context, there is no spinning, no weaving of fibres and threads to create a fabric. We start with the fibres and threads from the bark of a plant which is beaten using a process and a technique that respects the fibres and threads of the bark, to obtain by this beating of the bark the desired plant-based cloth or fabric, from which are sewn clothes or blankets... these are craft products today. Nevertheless, at a lecture on mourners' costumes given on Friday November 22nd at the James Norman Hall Museum in Arue, three British Museum representatives, including conservator Julie Adams, responsible for mourners' costumes, along with a scientist who is currently studying the DNA of tapa, its fabric and colours, showed the reverse of the sleeves lined with feathers. It was possible therefore to clearly see the woven warp and weft of extremely well-preserved, very fine spun and woven cording, positioned horizontally and vertically, with which the feathers had been fastened. Emails by Flora Aurima Devatine to Estelle-Castro-Koshy, 20 and 23 November 2019.

⁸ *TRE*, pp. 212-213.

⁹ Emphasis in the original.

mutandis, opens his *Meditations*¹⁰ with a whole chapter mentioning all the people who made it possible for him to access his writing self and compose the *Meditations*. Clearly, then, it would be a great mistake for us to ignore these texts in the belief that they are not the major focus: in fact they reveal the truth and the dignity of authorship, which is not a singularity but the result of multiple influences. Other conceptions of weaving resonate with those of Aurima Devatine: from Plato's political paradigm in *The Statesman* (Plato thinks of the task of government through the paradigm of weaving in order to explain how to organise a human community respectful of diversity), or the Odyssey's Penelope (who waits for Ulysses and puts off her suitors by undoing at night what she has woven during the day), to "The Silkworkers' Song" by Aristide Bruant or Heinrich Heine's poem "The Silesian Weavers", referring to the strikes and rebellions of weavers from Silesia. And yet, all of this can be woven together: "We are from many places, we are from everywhere!"¹¹

Our footsteps are always embedded in something else. And in addition, as the poem "Te Maruao" says of day and night, in which so-called opposites encounter each other in the grace of slight chiasmi that blossom into endosmosis, the enduring grace of the ephemeral thanks to the vision of shadowy waves bringing to life another nycthemeral rhythm. In the same way, letters glow their blackness and reach out their hands to reversibility with the brightness of white. A harmonious exchange of properties. It is possible to write out loud, to speak in a low voice, without tide or backflow, to say with one's gaze that lines shine finely. Star-scatter of sentences on the pages. Lingering of the whispered.

What do we know of the real of the spoken as of the written word? Quine showed in his major work, *Word and Object*, the fundamental lack of precision of every usage of a word, the radical indeterminacy of translation; he placed real man at the foundations of every theory of language. In Aurima Devatine's work, man is revealed in the act of speaking. Her linguistic ingenuity, such as in a thoughtful poem that images the diversity of words,¹² allows us to completely rethink the springing forth of our words. Just as Edmond Jabès, in *Sill and Sand*, moves onward word by word and holds out a mirror to the whiteness of our pages at the same time as he blackens them: "the word outlives the sign. / The landscape, the ink".¹³

Aurima Devatine's *œuvre* is a vibrant and precise reflection on language and writing, examining them at the moment of their birth. Take for example the phenomenological and poetic description of waves, in which Aurima Devatine's poetry resonates with a concert of oceanic voices. The movement of the waves may serve as a frame for thinking about the recurrence of terms, for example the word "writing", or even the word "words", because waves appear to repeat but in fact innovate. Marine innovation takes place just as much on the shores and the wide ocean spaces of the planet as it does in what is written or spoken about them.

¹⁰ Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations, A New Translation*, Trans. Gregory Hays, New York, The Modern Library, 2002, pp. 3-14.

¹¹ "On est de plusieurs lieux, de tous les lieux!" Flora Aurima Devatine, in *Bulletin du LARSH*, 2, 2005, pp. 29-30, quoted by Jean-Luc Picard in *Maohi Tumu et Hutu Painu - La construction identitaire dans la littérature contemporaine de Polynésie française*, Paris, l'Harmattan, 2018, p. 321.

¹² For example, "Te-fa'a-to'eto'e-tane" – "Le Refroidisseur d'hommes", in *Maruao, H-France Salon Vol 14 Issue 21, #2*, p. 55.

¹³ "le mot survit au signe. / Le paysage à l'encre", Edmond Jabès, *Le Seuil et le sable. Poésies complètes*, Paris, nrf Gallimard, 2003, p. 22, p.p. 287-296.

Consider Paul Valéry in "Le Cimetière marin" ["The Graveyard by the Sea"], writing a mimetic repetition of the term: "the sea, the sea, forever renewed!"¹⁴ The wonderful sameness in that repetition. Robert Desnos in "Le Fard des argonautes" ["The Colour of the Argonauts"] also affirms this sameness, in a liberating sigh, but indicates at the same time the universal quality of sharing: "Ah, the junk is Chinese and Greek the trireme / But the wave is the same in the East and the North."¹⁵ But it is possible to follow other glowing pathways and not imagine, like Kafka's Poseidon¹⁶ who as a zealous civil servant, calculates laboriously and administratively, the trajectory of every wave in the world – something which prevents him from actually seeing any one of them, given that the great size of the sea cannot be circumscribed. The waves are not the same: there are differences in colouring and sound.

Heredia, finely sculpting a sonnet about a Parnassian diamond dealer,¹⁷ expresses place and movement quite differently from "A récifs frangeants" ["The Fringing Reefs"]. With Aurima Devatine, instead of a seascape, we have a new version of a fixed-form poem: hers is made up of three symmetrical verses of three lines each striking in the use of a repeated symplote ("sur" and "mer") in order to evoke and invoke, as the exclamation point at the end of each tercet stresses, the mobility of everything. Then there follow, in an accelerated rhythm, four adverbials of manner, a total of twelve, suggesting the degree to which the waves diversify and spread their effects in multiple directions, like a panic or an exaltation. To express this, the poet inhabits a number of seething neologisms, worthy of finding a place in dictionaries alongside those already accepted: "à l'envi" [as wished, at will], "à vau-l'eau" [as water goes, going downhill], "à brûle-pourpoint" [jerk-burning, suddenly], "à tire-d'aile" [with a wing-beat, swiftly and energetically]. In an epic lexicographical gesture, let us adopt "à soufflez-crevasses" ["crevice-sweep"], "à jaillissez-écumes" ["spray-leap"], "à cours-pagure" ["hermit-hustle"], "à plonge-dauphin" ["dolphin-dive"]. Besides this semantic enrichment, we can see that a text like this allows us to grasp the ocean's infinity. Here is the constitution of an finely-honed apperception¹⁸ of the diverse which allows us to verify, not by way of example but for the sea itself, Leibniz's thesis concerning "small perceptions" or "unconscious perceptions", which the philosopher illustrates in fact by "the example of the roar or the noise of the sea", which "form I know not what, these tastes, these images of the sense-qualities, clear in the mass, but confused in the parts, these impressions which surrounding bodies make upon us, which involve the infinite, this connection which each being has with all the rest of the universe."¹⁹ In short, all the salt of life. The merit of such a poem is precisely that it makes us

¹⁴ "la mer, la mer toujours recommencée !", Paul Valéry, *Poésies*, Paris, nrf Gallimard, 2004, p. 100.

¹⁵ "Ah! La jonque est chinoise et grecque la trirème / Mais la vague est la même à l'orient comme au nord", Robert Desnos, *Corps et biens*, Paris, nrf, 2011, p. 22.

¹⁶ "Poseidon" (1920), in Franz Kafka, *Ein Landarzt und andere Prosa*, Stuttgart, Reklam, 1995.

¹⁷ Jose-Maria de Heredia, "Le Récif de corail" in *Les Trophées*, Paris, A. Lemerre, 1893. The final tercet, which evokes the passing of a fish in a sparkling array of precious stones, magnifies by furtive solidification the magical disturbance of reflections caused by the furtive passing: "Et brusquement, d'un coup de sa nageoire en feu, / il fait, par le cristal morne, immobile et bleu, / Courir un frisson d'or, de nacre et d'émeraude" (p. 130). [And suddenly, with a swirl of its fiery fin, / It sends through the gloomy blue crystal stillness, / A shiver of gold, of pearl, of emerald.]

¹⁸ Awareness of self and of the world with increasing understanding.

¹⁹ Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, *New Essays Concerning Human Understanding*, trans. Alfred Gideon Langley, Chicago, Open Court Publishing, 1916, p. 48.

feel "that there are at every moment an infinite number of perceptions in us, but without apperception and reflection,"²⁰ and that it succeeds in expressing with clarity the confused assemblage of the waves mixing their prestige into a present eternity.²¹

Flora Aurima Devatine's poetry is vibrant with calls to the reader. It gives rise to the invention of the vocative, whose absence in French Rousseau decried in a note in his *Essay on the Origin of Language* since it prevented distinguishing in writing "between a man one mentions and a man one addresses".²²

Philippe Guerre

H-France Salon

ISSN 2150-4873

Copyright © 2022 by the H-France, all rights reserved.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 47.

²¹ See the only three verbs in the poem, "hastens", "rolls around", "spreads out".

²² Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Essay on the Origin of Languages, which Treats of Melody and Musical Imitation*, trans. John H. Moran, New York, Frederick Ungar Publishing, 1966, p. 22.