

Lucy O'Meara

University of Kent

Jacques Jouet, Jacques Roubaud and the Ethnographic Metro Poem

Résumé

Dans “Approches de quoi” (1973), Georges Perec a conseillé un remaniement des projets littéraires et anthropologiques selon lequel notre attention ne se porterait plus exclusivement vers l’exotique et l’insolite, mais plutôt vers notre vie quotidienne. L’appel de Perec se fait toujours entendre. La vie urbaine, contemporaine se situe au cœur de “l’ethnographie proche” de Marc Augé: dès lors, l’altérité se rencontre au fil des journées les plus ordinaires, et notamment lors des trajets en métro. Augé a étudié les rituels du voyageur de métro dans *Un ethnologue dans le métro* (1985) et *Le Métro revisité* (2008).

Ce repatriement de l’exotisme a son homologue littéraire chez les Oulipiens. L’analyse que fait cet article des *Poèmes de métro* (2000) de Jacques Jouet décèle l’importance sociologique, anthropologique et historique de ces poèmes documentaires. Également fascinant dans cette optique est *Tokyo infra-ordinaire* (2005), dans lequel Jacques Roubaud adopte la contrainte de Jouet, composant ainsi un ‘poème de métro’ en prose plurilingue. Chez Roubaud le refus de l’exotisme qu’articulent Augé et Jouet est transposé au Japon: l’évocation roubaldienne de Tokyo démentit de manière forte la tradition française du japonisme et son orientalisme. Répondant directement à Perec, Roubaud délaisse “le Japon ancien, impressionnant, que voient les touristes”, pour se concentrer plutôt sur le Japon “quotidien, infra-ordinaire”.

Comme le démontre cet article, l’œuvre d’Augé, de Jouet et de Roubaud, fortes de dialogues critiques avec le grain de la vie contemporaine urbaine, confirment la richesse des rencontres littéraires et ethnographiques avec l’autre—surtout l’autre au sein du même qu’est notre vie quotidienne.

Abstract

In “Approches de quoi” (1973), Georges Perec suggested a reconception of literary and anthropological enquiry, whereby we would stop focusing all our attention on the exotic and unusual, and instead study aspects of our everyday lives. Perec’s appeal continues to meet with ample response. In the “proximate ethnography” of writers such as Marc Augé and Jean-Didier Urbain, urban life becomes the new locus of study as alterity is encountered in quotidian interactions. Metro travel is a particularly salient example of this. Augé has analysed the rituals of metro-travelling in *Un ethnologue dans le métro* (1985) and *Le Métro revisité* (2008).

This ethnographic focus on a quotidian repatriation of exoticism is mirrored in recent Oulipian literature. My analysis of Jacques Jouet’s *Poèmes de métro* (2000) assesses their value as an account of contemporary urban reality: these poems demonstrate the sociological, anthropological and historical resonance of the notation of the everyday. The article also examines Jacques Roubaud’s *Tokyo infra-ordinaire* (2005), which radically adapts Jouet’s metro poem “constraint,” leading to a multi-lingual prose poem. The refusal of the exotic articulated by Augé and Jouet is here transposed to a place entirely foreign to Roubaud. His evocation of Tokyo explicitly rejects the tradition of French literary *japonisme* with its orientalist evocations of Japan. In a direct response to Perec’s appeal, Roubaud abandons “ancient, impressive, touristic Japan” in favour of “daily, infra-ordinary Japan.”

Augé’s, Jouet’s and Roubaud’s work, as analysed in this article, demonstrate the richness of contemporary French ethnographic and literary engagements with cultural difference and the nature of modern urban experience.

Mot clés: Oulipo, Jacques Jouet, Jacques Roubaud, Georges Perec, Marc Augé, ethnographie, poèmes de métro.

Georges Perec's "Approches de quoi?", originally published in 1973, is an appeal for the quotidian.¹ All we are ever told about, Perec writes, are momentous events: scandals, civil unrest, eruptions, fires – violence and drama, human or natural. Newspapers and the media generally concern themselves with an *eventfulness* that does not correspond to the stuff of our everyday, humdrum lives: "Les journaux parlent de tout," he writes, "sauf du journalier." Where is the grain of life itself, wonders Perec? We never interrogate "le banal, le quotidien, l'évident, le commun, l'ordinaire, l'infra-ordinaire, le bruit de fond, l'habituel" (Perec 10–11). What we should do now is to focus our attention on the "background noise" within our daily lives, in order to stop sleepwalking through it, and instead engage critically with our conditions of living, with the objects in our houses, with the habits we have formed. "Questionnez vos petites cuillers," writes Perec (13). Look at what is in your pockets, describe your street. Be surprised. What seems trivial, unmethodical and fragmented is decisively worth looking at, and may in fact be far more valuable than those bodies of knowledge we have previously conceived of as being the vehicles of ponderous truths. It is time to look closer to home: "Peut-être s'agit-il de fonder enfin notre propre anthropologie: celle qui parlera de nous, qui ira chercher en nous ce que nous avons si longtemps pillé chez les autres. Non plus l'exotique, mais l'endotique" (Perec 11–12).

Perec's call for a study of the everyday habits and objects of our lives is familiar, and very often quoted. Retrospectively, this manifesto-like statement of what Perec himself is already accomplishing in his own fiction appears as an important herald of the subsequent turn to the quotidian in French literature and theory, though Perec's views are also anchored in previous work on everyday practices and objects, notably the theories of Henri Lefebvre in *Critique de la vie quotidienne*, and Roland Barthes's analyses of French and Japanese cultural artefacts in *Mythologies* and *L'Empire des signes* respectively.² Perec's "Approches de quoi" appears in some respects prophetic of the turn towards the individual and the local that came about in French theory in the late 1970s and early 1980s. During this period of *gauchiste* disenchantment with the previously hegemonic narrative of Marxism, theorists such as Jean-François Lyotard began outlining their distrust of overarching, globalising narratives of progress – a distrust trenchantly articulated thirty years previously in Adorno and Horkheimer's *Dialektik der Aufklärung*.³ In *Instructions païennes* (1977), Lyotard ridicules the "suffocating" aspects of the "récit canonique" of Marxism, and champions instead the "milliers de petites histoires" which, told by individuals, are eroding the myths associated with socialism in the USSR and China.⁴ This rejection of "grands récits" is at the heart of Lyotard's subsequent definition of the notion of postmodernity.⁵ Contemporaneously, theorists such as Michel Foucault and Roland Barthes, previously associated with the systematising impulses of structuralism, wrote increasingly about individual quiddity. Foucault's late teaching at the Collège de France is concerned with the subject and with "l'écriture de soi," and Barthes's final book, *La Chambre claire* (1980), a cry of grief assuaged by the examination of old photographs, is concerned at base with the repudiation of generalising theories of photography in favour of the articulation of an inassimilable, individual aesthetic response.⁶ Published in the same year, Michel de Certeau's study of the everyday, *L'Invention du quotidien*, celebrates the inventiveness and the "ruses" that we deploy in our daily negotiations with and within a

consumerist society.⁷ Certeau's "arts de faire" correspond to the "interrogations" of the banal that Perec wishes us to perform (Perec 12–13).

Additionally, Perec's call for the quotidian met with precise response within the field of ethnography: from the late 1970s, there is a noticeable shift within French anthropology, as contemporary, domestic life increasingly becomes the object of study. In a post-war period characterised by increasing air travel and more widespread electronic communication (enabled by the use of satellites), the globe shrinks, and distinctions between the familiar and the "exotic" become more difficult to uphold. Therefore, species of spaces closer to home become worthy of the ethnographer's gaze, and of a new subdiscipline called "ethnologie du proche."⁸ Jean-Didier Urbain, a second-generation proximate ethnographer, makes explicit after the fact the debt that the growth of this subdiscipline owes to Perec: he uses a quotation from "Approches de quoi?" as an epigraph to his 2003 text, *Ethnologue, mais pas trop*.⁹ Urbain's book, published thirty years after Perec's manifesto, sets itself up as yet another call for recognising the importance of the study of the everyday and, concomitantly, for rejecting the "mystique de l'Ailleurs" (68) which nourishes the ethnography of the non-proximate. Urbain's strategic use of Oulipian texts – by Perec, Calvino and Queneau – throughout his text implicitly articulates a certain argument regarding Oulipo: at times, Oulipian work on the everyday can trump ethnography itself, by virtue of its careful focus, in work such as Perec's, on the ordinary itself, and what is strange, lovely or important in it. This article will examine works by two Oulipians, Jacques Roubaud and Jacques Jouet, which perform to dazzling effect, in the specific context of public transport, a literary proximate ethnography.

The anthropologist Marc Augé has remarked that "la mort de l'exotisme est la caractéristique essentielle de notre époque."¹⁰ His own career is marked by a turning away from the exotic towards the "endotique." After two decades of early work devoted to the cultures of Western Africa, Augé embarked, in the 1980s, upon an "ethnologie du proche," examining the contemporary customs and practices of his own metropolitan French culture. Indeed, it has been noted that Augé's most significant and widely-known work dates from this change of focus.¹¹ In the first of his works set "at home," *La Traversée du Luxembourg*, Augé uses the methods he had previously applied during fieldwork in the Ivory Coast to the activities of Parisians at leisure on one particular day in July 1984.¹² Augé describes his day, telling us about the radio programme he wakes up to, his medical appointment, and the activities of Parisians at leisure on a summer day in the Luxembourg gardens. Coincidentally, this location is only a stone's throw away from Perec's location in *Tentative d'épuisement d'un lieu parisien* (1974), written over the course of a few days spent by Perec sitting outside a café in Place Saint Sulpice.¹³ Public transport plays a major role here in Perec's *Tentative*, as the list-like text is constantly punctuated by the passing buses and their route numbers: "un quatre-vingt sept vide, un soixante-dix plein, un quatre-vingt sept vide." Augé's *Traversée* too incorporates musings about the Paris metro system. In an age that Augé believes to be "post-exotic," urban public transport becomes an important locus of alterity, as Michael Sheringham has pointed out: "As the diverse populace of the metro shows at a glance, generational, class, sexual, cultural, and even physical difference can work just as much as agents of differentiation (or affinity) as ethnicity" (Sheringham 309). Travelling on the metro means permits the experience of

otherness while remaining in one's home city. The metro network has the added advantage, for the ethnographer, of constituting a defined location, with its own implicit rules and behaviours.

Thus two years after the rather experimental *Traversée*, Augé produced a confident and essayistic study of the Paris metro system, *Un ethnologue dans le métro* (1986).¹⁴ The text combines personal memory and standard ethnographic classification of the "rituals" of metro travel. Augé examines the manner in which the map of the Paris metro with all its resonances, its quotidien-ification of French history in the names of its stations, becomes a repository of involuntary memory for those who have lived or worked in Paris for any length of time: "autant de stations, autant de situations our de personnages reconnus, retenus, magnifiés: la rame se faufile dans notre histoire à vitesse accélérée" (33). He also discusses the "couloirs de correspondance" and their dynamism, as the people who pass through these corridors *change* "[Chacun] conjugu[e] à sa manière le verbe changer" (101). In these corridors, the travellers change from one line to another, from one role to another, from work to home, from commerce to romance, and so on. The metro, writes Augé, is a "carrefour de destinées humaines" (102), a system in which conformity is necessary, but in which nonetheless a vast array of individual behaviours and appearances can be seen: his points here echo those of Certeau in *L'Invention du quotidien*. In his conclusion, Augé writes that it is in the straitjacket of routine, parodied in the catchphrase "Métro, boulot, dodo," that we see inventiveness itself:

Métro, boulot, dodo: [...] Les contraintes qui lui correspondent sont celles de la vie sociale. [...] L'intéressant est [...] de comprendre comment le sens de la vie individuelle naît des contraintes globales qui sont celles de toute vie sociale. [...] On peut toujours changer de ligne et de quai, et [...] si l'on n'échappe pas au réseau, il permet pourtant quelques beaux détours (115-17).

One's individual experience is thrown into relief by one's consciousness, in the metro, of others.

Augé's use here of the term "contrainte" may remind us of Oulipo, not least as he mentions Perec several times in the text. Indeed, the richest parts of Augé's text are those where he expands upon the *romanesque* nature of the metro experience, and the literary *potentiality* of the ethnologist's observations in the metro. In this work as in others, such as *Le Sens des autres*, Augé makes it clear that the necessity of engaging with "l'autre proche" is a vital task that should not be undertaken only by ethnologists.¹⁵ Literature is, implicitly, at the horizon of Augé's ethnology: interestingly, he chooses to write about the ethnologist's study of the metro in the conditional tense. What the ethnologist *would* see, then, in all his observation of the passengers, of their routes through the "couloirs de correspondances", would be material for "mille faits divers recensés, cent poèmes possibles, dix romans à venir" (102).

By the time Augé writes his second study of the metro in 2008, *Le Métro revisité*,¹⁶ these "poèmes possibles" have been written, and continue to be written, by Jacques Jouet and Jacques Roubaud. Jouet's first metro poems were published in *Navet, linge, œil-de-vieux* in 1998, and a full collection of *Poèmes de métro* was published by P.O.L. in 2000.¹⁷ Jouet elaborated and refined the constraint of his metro poem over a number of years. A metro poem is completed during the metro journey itself, line by line, with each line being composed while

the train is between stations, and written down while the train has stopped: “Il ne faut pas transcrire quand la rame est en marche. Il ne faut pas composer quand la rame est arrêtée” (Jouet, *Poèmes*, 7). In 1996, in collaboration with Pierre Rosenstiehl, Jouet undertook a 15 and a half hour journey around the entire network of the Paris metro, in order to produce a comprehensive Paris metro poem. This and many other metro poems are collected in *Poèmes de métro*, a work which, as Jouet has said, bears a relationship to Queneau’s poems of walking the Paris streets, *Courir les rues* (1967), as well as to Jacques Roubaud’s *Mississippi Haibun*, composed while walking by the Mississippi river, and transcribed during halts.¹⁸ The first poem of the volume is a poem defining the constraint itself. In the second poem, Jouet defends the practice of a poetry of proximity and of the quotidian:

À tous ceux qui ne demandent rien à la poésie, pourtant la poésie demande
quelque chose, se demande si, non contente de sa modeste ténacité, elle n’a
pas à franchir, plus volontaire,
les barrières Vauban mentales disposées par la police des moeurs
contemporaines. Il y a des failles par où glisser la lame oxydable du poème de
proximité.
[...]
il n’est pas de réalité avec laquelle le poème ne puisse boxer (Jouet 13–15)

And so he plunges underground, taking us with him and allowing us to experience the metro itself, to smell it, hear it, to see what people are reading, to watch young couples kissing, to give money to a beggar, to feel thirsty. The text lyrically evokes the “paysages” of the metro, with its window reflections, its readers, its entwined hands. Marc Lapprand, in his article on Jouet’s *poèmes de métro*, has discussed the pressing sensation of time that beats through all of this work, as the constraint keeps the poet at work throughout the journey, without fail.¹⁹ This urgency combines with what seems almost a leisurely, endlessly unfurling fascination with the spectacle of the metro as this quotation, which refers to Perec’s *Tentative*, makes clear:

Impossible d’avoir sérieusement le sentiment
de simplement commencer d’épuiser un lieu parisien, comme disait un autre,
puisque parcours et perception ne se livrent à aucune espèce de réduction,
mais décuplent, centuplent et tentacuplent
les noyaux de réel encore germables après qu’on a bouffé le premier bon du fruit.
Tout lieu est un riche lieu, et Drouot disperse les héritages. (69–70)

Jouet’s inexhaustible fascination with the metro accomplishes what Marc Augé very movingly describes in *Un Ethnologue dans le métro* as “le portrait fragile mais vivant, plus réel peut-être que vrai, d’une ‘culture,’ c’est-à-dire de tout ce par quoi chacun se sent à la fois comme les autres et différents d’eux – mais non point si différent que vis-à-vis d’autres autres il ne s’en affirme irrévocablement solidaire” (Augé 113). Jouet, writing his poems in the company of his fellow travellers, feels various facets of this solidarity, writing about the passengers he can see, while musing on their impression of himself:

D'autres [...] me voi[ent]
 balayer du regard, de leur face à mon papier,
 l'air ambiant, comme si je rapportais quelque chose d'eux au bout de ma ligne[.]
 Je ne rapporte pourtant rien d'autre qu'une congénéritude minimum,
 rien d'une indiscretion, rien d'une évaluation. (49)

The *graphomaniacal* intensity of the *poème de métro*, composed *sur place*, is a writing out of what Augé and Urbain tell us that proximate *ethnography* can accomplish.

A proximate ethnography, just like a “poème de proximité,” rejects exoticism. Jouet’s “poèmes de métro” are rooted in the Parisian metro or the *home* metro.²⁰ The question remains whether a proximate ethnography of sorts be seen in a metro poem written very far from home. This is what has been accomplished in Jacques Roubaud’s *Tokyo infra-ordinaire*, published in 2005.²¹ The refusal of the exotic articulated by Augé and Jouet is here, intriguingly, transposed to a place entirely foreign to Roubaud.

Tokyo infra-ordinaire adopts very loosely Jouet’s constraint, which, as we have seen, is itself partly indebted to previous work by Roubaud, the *Mississippi Haibun*. Roubaud spent six weeks in Tokyo in 1996, walking and taking trains all around the centre of the city, taking notes for another *haibun*: this one is to be “le miroir, la correction, [...] l’expiation de l’échec de mon *Mississippi haibun* d’autrefois” (Roubaud, *Tokyo*, 33). The *haibun* is a Japanese literary genre anchored in everyday experience and combining prose with *haiku* and *tanka* – brief, incisive landscape poems. Perhaps the most important *haibun* is Matsuo Bashō’s 17th century *Narrow Road to the Interior* (*Oku no hosomichi*).²² This work is based on a long journey around the wild territories of northern Japan undertaken by Bashō and his assistant in the 1690s. Bashō was determined not to exoticise these areas, or reify them into stereotype: his heteroglossic style in evoking these regions was, at the time, revolutionary, combining a large range of textual references, and using popular vernacular language in its evocation of areas of the country entirely unknown to his metropolitan audience in Edo (Tokyo).²³ Similarly, Roubaud’s *Tokyo haibun* is kaleidoscopic: printed, like other work by Roubaud,²⁴ in many colours, the work involves a dizzying collage of languages (French, English, Japanese), genres (*haibun*, *haikus*, *tankas*, sonnets, “tridents”) and assorted pieces of text (advertising hoardings, a catalogue for hi-tech toilets, quotations from Japanese authors and from Jouet’s *Poèmes de métro*). The effect is one of strangeness and dynamism, of delight in the quotidian, and of a refusal of generalisation.

In order to write this *haibun*, this “morceau prosaïque” (Roubaud 33), Roubaud decides to base the poem around the route of the Yamanote line, a circular commuter line in central Tokyo. He can thus write a metro poem, in accordance with Jouet’s constraint, the rules governing which are quoted in full within the text (36). However, Jouet’s rules are not observed: “J’ai énormément de mal à respecter la contrainte définie par Jacques Jouet parce que je suis énormément serré, et que je m’efforce de saisir ce que dit la voix qui annonce la station suivante afin de pas manquer la mienne” (15). Instead, Roubaud writes much of the work in parks, not on the trains themselves. There are many other alterations and loosening of the constraint (not least that the text is subsequently reworked, whereas Jouet’s metro poems abolish all drafting processes). The important point is that Roubaud is determined that the

resulting work will treat a particular version of Japan: not the aestheticised, rose-tinted Orient purveyed by Western travel agents, but rather a mundane, contemporary Japan:

C'est un Japon très particulier, ce n'est pas du tout le Japon ancien, pas du tout le Japon impressionnant, que voient les touristes ou qu'imaginent les hommes d'affaires; c'est le Japon quotidien, ou le Japon infra-ordinaire comme disait mon ami Georges Perec.²⁵

Roubaud thus concentrates on the “endotique.” Like his predecessor, Bashō, he seeks an innovative approach to an unfamiliar location, and one which does not recreate the over-determined tropes of previous writing about this location. In Roubaud’s case, the tropes to be avoided are those of previous *japoniste* writing about Japan, which frequently tends to be aestheticcentric and exoticist in tone: Pierre Loti is the most obvious culprit.²⁶ There have been troubling and reductive aspects to the French literary relationship with Japanese sources of inspiration. *Japoniste* settings tend to be rarefied, pre-modern and usually non-urban. Indeed, even contemporary writing about Japan sometimes evinces a desire to bracket out the aspects of Japan which do not fit with an aestheticcentric reverence for Japanese otherness: an example of this occurs in a recent scholarly article on Bashō:

As soon as I walk into the woods through the torii gate, Togeï’s treeless road with its jumble of telephone and power lines, channeled creeks, vending machines (with Boss Coffee, Vitamin Water, beer, and cigarettes), and the other signs of 1999 Japan disappear from my consciousness. I descend to the Haraigawa, River of Purification, by way of a centuries-old staircase flanked by towering cryptomeria trees.²⁷

Roubaud, however, makes of the vending machines and power lines the matter of his work: such is the imperative of the “infra-ordinary,” and of “[la lecture] des rues’ – une recommandation de mon maître Raymond Queneau” (16). Thus, throughout, incidental sights such the drinks available in a café, “tas de petites écolières à cape rose,” “HLM en construction enveloppé à la Christo,” “Sdf japanese style” (77, 37), and so on, are listed. At the structural level, the use of the rail network as a skeleton upon which to hang the work ensures a plunging into the quotidian which will perforce eschew *japoniste* clichés. Roubaud decides this before embarking upon the trip to Tokyo: the poem will open in Shinjuku station, the world’s busiest train station, and the point at which the traveller to Tokyo is first confronted with the teeming centre of this metropolis:

La gare de Shinjuku (Tokyo) est grande. Elle accommoderait sans peine une douzaine de gare du Nord (Paris). Les lignes de métro passent en dessous; les lignes ferroviaires dessus. Les deux entrées principales sont la West Entrance et la East Entrance. Il m’a fallu plusieurs tentatives pour arriver à passer de l’une à l’autre sans m’égarer plusieurs fois (7).

We are far-removed from the cherry-blossoms and comely geishas of the *japoniste* tradition here. There is a resolutely prosaic focus on commuter reality, without abstraction or mystification. In the back of Roubaud's mind might be, perhaps, Roland Barthes's *L'Empire des signes*, with its account of Tokyo as a labyrinth with an empty centre: at its heart is the silent, muffled space of the Emperor's palace: thus the "centre ville" is, says Barthes, the "centre vide" (Barthes, *L'Empire*, 50). Roubaud is clearly aware of this Parisian trope of Tokyo as an empty-centred labyrinth. The construction of his *haibun* around the endless loop of the Yamanote Line seems to play on this. Its shape is, as he puts it, "une sorte d'œil, [...] assez abstrait" (23). But he debunks the "centre-ville, centre-vide" conception of Tokyo, filling this "abstract" circle with protean reality. From each station he makes a foray into the surrounding streets, recording the abundance of activity he sees there: joggers, a vegetable market, rushing salarymen, bank employees washing the pavement outside their building, the enormous crowds pouring out of every station on the Yamanote line. The teeming, bustling centre of Tokyo, sprawling colourfully over the pages of Roubaud's poem, is a rebuke to the neat symbolism of *japoniste* ideals.

However, Roubaud does not simply exclaim over the overwhelming busyness of Tokyo either. He uses the trope of the European's amazement at the Tokyo travel network – something frequently articulated in writing about Tokyo – in the same way that he uses the trope of the empty centre. In other words, it is used ludically throughout the poem, but is also subverted. The opening of the work, with its banal description, in black ink, of how huge Shinjuku station is, evokes the flat writing of a travel guide. But this is immediately debunked, with a pell-mell tumble of digressions in multi-coloured inks, into Roubaud's excitement about the studio he is staying in, which is owned by a man who shares a name with Fujiwara Teika, a medieval Japanese poet venerated by Roubaud. We follow Roubaud into the street nearby, where there is an "épicerie toujours ouverte," and into his recollections of Shinjuku station, where he saw "[une] petite fille au cartable sur le dos presque aussi gros qu'elle [qui] téléphone, à sa maman?" (12). This movement from a wilfully bland response to Tokyo's largeness of scale, to the detail of the streets and Roubaud's erudition in Japanese poetry, occurs throughout the entire text. The following quotation evinces Roubaud's desire to sidestep the standard responses to Tokyo's impressive architecture:

la drabness, le terne, le petit;
 il y a aussi les gratte-ciel insensés,
 of course
 le pont qui boucle sur la mer
 le Rainbow Bridge;
 je n'ai pas pu m'empêcher d'y
 aller voir, en dépit du vertige
 préliminaire
 les autoroutes sur des voies
 ferrées, elle-mêmes sur un canal,
 mais tout le monde sait ça
 of course (14)

Roubaud's focus on the infra-ordinary also means that he refuses to employ clichés of Japanese beauty. So if he mentions cherry blossoms, they are the fake cherry blossoms on fake trees in the carpark (9). The simulated flowers are still rich in connotation for Roubaud, however, reminding him of particular medieval Japanese verses written in praise of the cherry blossom. Similarly, Mount Fuji, icon of Japanese beauty, is stubbornly absent from Roubaud's poem, *except* through the intermediary of medieval poetry. He has never seen Mount Fuji, he writes – not even when on the *shinkansen* train between Tokyo and Kyoto. It is hidden in “la pluie ou brume et la pollution crasse” (31). He transcribes, or invents, a conversation on the train:

- avez-vous vu le Fuji?
- non, le Fuji n'est jamais visible; le Fuji n'existe pas; c'est une invention des poètes du *Manyôshû* avec la complicité de la Japan National Tourist Organization
- avez-vous vu le Fuji?
- non
- quel dommage ! (31)

This is followed by a sonnet on the non-existence of Fuji, which concludes “je soupçonne que le grand Fuji n'existe pas, ou plus” (32). Roubaud's wry, calm refusal to unveil Fuji is at the heart of this work's response to the Percian imperative of keeping the exotic at bay. Roubaud resists the touristic narrative of Japan, reorienting our gaze towards the aspects of life in this foreign city which most resemble our own itineraries at home. There is, therefore, no erasure of the unpicturesque and commercial aspects of the contemporary city, as Roubaud weaves together the quotidian sights of the city around him, vignettes of his co-passengers on the Yamanote line trains, personal memories, and scholarly meditations on Japanese poetry.

The model of the *poème de métro*, even if it is applied very loosely, as in Roubaud's case, is a method that plunges us into the contemplation of the everyday and demonstrates its fascination. It therefore has, as well as considerable literary interest, a documentary function and also an ethnographic validity. If we have never travelled on the Paris metro, Jouet's *poèmes de métro* will give us an idea of what it is like, and of what life in contemporary Paris is like: we find out about advertising, history, social class, immigration, leisure activities – because, as Augé says, the metro is “un lieu où se concentrent toutes les composantes et toutes les allégories du monde moderne” (Augé, *Ethnologue* 111). And even if we are familiar, all too familiar, with the metro, there is still much to be learned from the sharpened perception that the *poème de métro* can bring about, as we read it, or of course if we were to try to write one ourselves. In the *poème de métro* can be found, in glimpses at least, a reenchantment of the metronomic constraint of “metro, boulot, dodo.” Also, in Roubaud's work, the *poème de métro*, or a version of it, gives us an approach to “l'autre loin” that keeps a deforming exoticism at bay.

Jouet and Roubaud's metro literature performs the *potentiality* that Marc Augé sees in the metro, without suffering from any tension between anthropological method and the

necessarily improvisatory nature of a proximate ethnography. This tension can be seen as a limitation in the work of Jean-Didier Urbain: he applies a reifying template of otherness to his study of nearness, when he claims the need for “une repotentialisation exotique de l’Ici-Maintenant” (Urbain, 74). As Sheringham has pointed out, Urbain thus “maintain[s] a set of attitudes and tactics devised for the study of what was perceived as alien to ‘us’ rather than inventing new modes of attention designed to recognize ‘us’ where we have hitherto failed to do so” (Sheringham, 304). Urbain abstracts himself from what he observes, as Jouet and Roubaud, exhausted, cramped, taking notes in the trains, observing and being observed, do not. Their imperative is to “faire coïncider un moment banal et un acte passionnel, écrire et écrire tous les jours, dans le compartiment, plutôt que du haut de la tour” (Jouet 114). This is an enterprise which must endlessly be renewed in order to retain its fidelity to the ephemeral experiences it describes:

Je cherche à faire entrer le monde dans une bouteille,
exploit de miniaturisation et de dextérité,
et que le monde y continue de ne pas étouffer,
qu’il ne soit pas du tout réduit à plâtre,
dans sa vitrine cassable.
Mais la vitrine qui contient le monde devient en même temps une part du monde,
ce pourquoi tout, toujours, est à recommencer
avec fureur. (Jouet 61).

¹ Georges Perec, “Approches de quoi?” in *l’infra-ordinaire*, Paris, Seuil, 1989, 9–13.

² Henri Lefebvre, *Critique de la vie quotidienne I: introduction*, Paris, L’Arche, 1947; *Critique de la vie quotidienne II: fondements d’une sociologie de la quotidienneté*, Paris, L’Arche, 1961; Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, Paris, Seuil, 1957; *L’Empire des signes*, Geneva, Skira, 1970.

³ Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. by Edmund Jephcott, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2002.

⁴ Jean-François Lyotard, *Instructions païennes*, Paris, Galilée, 1977, 23.

⁵ Lyotard, *La Condition postmoderne: rapport sur le savoir*, Paris, Minuit, 1979.

⁶ Michel Foucault, *L’Herméneutique du sujet: cours au Collège de France 1981–1982*, ed. by Frédéric Gros, Paris, Gallimard/Seuil, 2001; Roland Barthes, *La Chambre claire: note sur la photographie*, Paris, Gallimard/Seuil, 1980.

⁷ Michel de Certeau, *L’Invention du quotidien 1: Arts de faire et 2: Habiter, cuisiner*, ed. by Luce Giard, Paris, Gallimard, 1990.

⁸ Michael Sheringham calls this “proximate ethnography.” See *Everyday Life: Theories and Practices from Surrealism to the Present*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2006, 293–304.

⁹ Jean-Didier Urbain, *Ethnologue, mais pas trop... Ethnologie de proximité, voyages secrets et autres expéditions minuscules*, Paris, Payot, 2003.

¹⁰ Marc Augé, *Le Sens des autres*, Paris, Fayard, 1994, 10.

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- ¹¹ Douglas Smith, “Exploring Supermodernity: Marc Augé in Context(s),” *The Irish Journal of French Studies*, no. 9 (2009): 1–8 (1).
- ¹² Marc Augé, *La Traversée du Luxembourg: ethno-roman d’une journée française considérée sous l’angle des mœurs de la théorie et du bonheur*, Paris, Hachette, 1985.
- ¹³ Georges Perec, *Tentative d’épuisement d’un lieu parisien* in *Cause commune* 1 “Pourrissement des sociétés” (1975): 59–108; also published by Christian Bourgois (Paris: 1983).
- ¹⁴ Marc Augé, *Un ethnologue dans le métro*, Paris, Hachette, 1986.
- ¹⁵ Marc Augé, *Le Sens des autres: actualité de l’anthropologie*, Paris, Fayard, 1998.
- ¹⁶ Marc Augé, *Le Métro revisité*, Paris, Seuil, 2008.
- ¹⁷ Jacques Jouet, *Navet, linge, œil-de-vieux*, Paris, P.O.L., 1998; *Poèmes de métro*, Paris, P.O.L., 2000.
- ¹⁸ Raymond Queneau, *Courir les rues*, Paris, Gallimard, 1967. ‘Mississippi haibun’, written in 1976, forms the first chapter of Roubaud’s *La Bibliothèque de Warburg: Version mixte* (Paris: Seuil, 2002), pp. 7–35. For Jouet’s mention of his debts to these texts, see “With (and Without) Constraints,” trans. by Roxanne Lapidus, *SubStance* 30.3, no. 96 (2001): 4–16 (11–12).
- ¹⁹ Marc Lapprand, “Jacques Jouet, Metro Poet,” *SubStance* 30.3, no. 96 (2001): 17–26.
- ²⁰ Though not exclusively so: he has also written poems in the Köln, Lyon and Montreal metro systems. However, as Lapprand points out, “we almost feel relieved when [...] he comes home to the Parisian metro, his metro” (25).
- ²¹ Jacques Roubaud, *Tokyo infra-ordinaire* (Paris: Inventaire/Invention, 2005). On Roubaud and public transportation see also Jean-Jacques Thomas, « Amstramtram, pic et pic et hypogrammes », *Lendemains*, ‘Jacques Roubaud’ (Franco-German journal, Tubingen : [Stauffenburg Verlag](http://www.stauffenburg-verlag.de)), 109, September 2003, 15-58 and « ‘Du hareng saur au caviar’ ou l’autoportrait bien ordinaire selon G. Perec. » *Georges Perec: Inventivité, postérité* Ed. Yvonne Goga & Mireille Ribière. Belgrade, Casa Cartii, September 2006, 292-310.
- ²² Matsuo Bashō, *The Narrow Road to the Deep North and Other Travel Sketches*, trans. Nobuyuki Yuasa, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1966.
- ²³ On Bashō’s innovative poetics, see Haruo Shirane, *Traces of Dreams: Landscape, Cultural Memory and the Poetry of Bashō*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1998.
- ²⁴ Notably, *La Dissolution*, Paris, Nous, 2008, is printed in several colours.
- ²⁵ Pascaline Mourier-Casile and Dominique Moncond’Huy, “Entretien avec Jacques Roubaud,” *Revue La Licorne* 40 (2006): available at <<http://edel.univ-poitiers.fr/licorne/document3347.php>> (19 June 2010)
- ²⁶ Pierre Loti, *Madame Chrysanthème*, Paris, Flammarion, 2007. For an excellent study of French literary responses to Japan, see Jan Walsh Hokenson, *Japan, France, and East-West Aesthetics: French Literature, 1867–2000*, Madison, NJ, Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2004.
- ²⁷ Thomas Heyd, “Bashō and the Aesthetics of Wandering: Recuperating Space, Recognizing Place, and Following the Ways of the Universe,” *Philosophy East and West* 53.3 (2003): 291-307 (291)

