

UNRULY SONG

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Part One

On the Sunday of Lisa Robertson's workshop the twenty-two of us crowded into TCR's shared space gradually fell quiet, captivated but confused by a series of trills and melodic whistles. None of us knew what birds we were hearing in the heart of semi-industrial Vancouver, or that it was a recording made by Jean-Philippe Antoine of nightingales in Lisa Robertson's garden in the South of France.

Such birdsong is increasingly rare, even if you live as Lisa does, near Poitiers, a relatively undeveloped part of France where nightingales still sometimes perch on the roof for a month during nesting season and sing all night long. But nightingales were common enough in lyric poetry of the past. Listening to them she thought about the medieval poets inspired by the same sounds, how these birds in her garden collapsed the distance of time.

Robertson told us what led her from the private pleasure of birdsong in her garden to the history of troubadours, especially those who composed and sang in Old Occitan during the 12th and 13th centuries, in the region where she lives now. She spoke of *joglars*, the singers; *trobairitz*, the female troubadours; the vernacular;

the Albigensian Crusade (1209-1229) that in two generations almost obliterated the Cathar culture, of which many troubadours may have been a part (we don't really know). Threaded through her account were ideas from other readings: Dante's defense and study of the Romance vernaculars in "de vulgari eloquentia"; Ivan Illich on the standardization of the vernacular into a more manageable mother tongue that benefited those in power; Benedict Anderson on the invention of national languages; Mariá Rosa Menocal, whose scholarship on medieval society shines a light on a culture we cannot quite capture. In examples of troubadour poetry as translated and re-imagined in Paul Blackburn's life work, *Proensa: An Anthology of Troubadour Poetry* (NY 1978/2016) we found less the "courtly love" as stereotyped in high school literature courses and more earthy descriptions of lust imagined and real, disdained and satisfied. The rubbing together of *trobar* and *amor*, to sing and to love, suggests something more. The beloved might be the excuse for the successful *vers* or *cantos*, the inspiration for the composition and performance, not the point. Love might also refer to something larger than lust or love for an individual, to a community alive with many voices.

There is no straightforward narrative about

this tradition and at least ten origin theories about the troubadours. Some think of them as the avant-garde of their day. Their songs were passed along by performers and professional singers (*joglars*), by those who heard them, and later sometimes written down on scrolls kept in pocket-sized leather pouches that gradually disintegrated from use. In the literary and academic worlds of France this history is well known, but to a transplanted Canadian it was new and fascinating, especially to a poet for whom “the voice is the great Baroque pearl!” (Lisa Robertson, 2017) in “an ugly, gross, indecent time” (Giraut de Bornelh, c.1138-1215, as translated by James H. Donalson).

What remains and inspires is a small but vibrant archive of lively, often bawdy and surprising voices, the best written out of a polyglot culture of movement and intersection, before nation states and the reduction of vernacular strains to the governing tongue, the standardized speech that constrains the unruly. Ironically, even Dante, who chose to write in the vernacular rather than Latin, in choosing one stream of Old Occitan as the one best suited to his poetry, gave weight to its future continuation.

Here is a handful of troubadours we know something about: William IX, Duke of Aquitaine (1071-1127), Eleanor’s grandfather, (also known as Guillaume de Poitiers), sometimes credited as the first troubadour. He probably wasn’t, but had

the status to carry the flag. By the time troubadours were in danger, Eleanor of Aquitaine was reputed to have sheltered many of them. More interesting to me is Arnaut Daniel (active between 1180-1200), the troubadour admired by Dante (who nevertheless sent his Arnaut to Purgatory for his lustful ways) and cited by Ezra Pound 1910 in *The Spirit of Romance*. Marcabru, of uncertain birth (c.1130-1148) employs a starling, one of a number of birds that appear in troubadour lyrics, to deliver and receive the singer’s plea and the lady’s response, and is not afraid to insult as much as entreat the object of his song. Petrarch preferred de Bornelh, who was writing later, when the culture that supported the richness of the tradition may already have been broken. Did he abhor a time when politics had become coarse and gentleness disdained or was he more conservative than Arnaut or Marcabru, squeamish about their irreverence? In any case, it’s hard not to find something there that resonates.

“For I myself, a man distinguished,
who used to celebrate all valiant men,
am so bewildered
I cannot seek counsel with myself.”

If Robertson’s nightingale experience collapsed the chasm between then and now, the title of her forthcoming chapbook from Krupskaya Books, *Starlings*, suggests she found what have become our Vancouver nuisance birds more evocative as subjects. The starlings I observe in their

murmurations above my East Vancouver home have incorporated too much of our present soundscape to be archives of the past. Something like English speakers, perhaps, ready to borrow and subsume whatever's in reach. According to Wikipedia, that ubiquitous first station on the research trail, starlings "have been known to embed sounds from their surroundings into their own calls, including car alarms and human speech patterns." Even bird language isn't fixed.

Robertson didn't give instructions or writing exercises, but her story that led from nightingales to troubadours and all the research that followed was very much about thinking that leads to writing as well as thinking that *is* writing. She presented herself as a beginner, not an expert on troubadours. Her investigation might be ongoing and discursive, might lead to or be absorbed into a tentative thesis, new poems or essays—she didn't say, but wherever this took her, in whatever form, I look forward to reading it.

Part Two

After the workshop I had my own questions about language, thinking and voice, subjects bigger than one small blog post or even one lifetime can cover comprehensively. A compulsive but perhaps erratic reader who feels she never knows enough, I've often asked myself whether I can think on paper without having read everything. This might seem

like a very stupid question. How else can I write except as a way to begin to know or to articulate what I have discovered? But my university education trained me to produce written material and to look for mistakes in Standard English, to criticize more than to think, which is not the same as being trained as a critical thinker. Since then I've been an easily distracted autodidact.

It's the child's place, and the thinker's place, to begin. The child isn't expected to know anything beforehand, but to call myself a thinker is to accrue expectations that I know, not just what everyone knows, but something special. Nevertheless, despite my inadequate education in science and philosophy and so much more, I spend a lot of time trying to see what is in front of me, even when I can't.

What I see is the continuing accumulation and unraveling of my knowledge: begin, collect, formulate, think of something else, change mind, collect more information/ideas, reformulate, carry on...no end. I experience moments of consolidation, sparks of energy using words transformed into poem-like things that remake ideas into active being, sometimes woken as sound. Or sentences that follow one by one and seem to, briefly, make order in the world. That order is provisional. I think; therefore, I destroy thought, because the unraveling of a thought seems inevitable. Writer, philosopher, or woman in her dressing gown—anyone in the process of thinking knows the excruciating plod of

ideas that won't jell and how time speeds up when ideas make new sense.

In "Speech and Knowledge," one of the essays Lisa Robertson asked us to read, Giorgio Agamben begins his essay (published by the New School *Graduate Faculty Philosophy Journal* 31:1 in 1980) with a reference to *Las Leys d'Amors* (*The Lays of Love*). These rules of poetry were written down in Provençal in the early 14th century, about a hundred years after many of the troubadours of the classic period were mown down by Christian crusaders intent on destroying variant cultures. For the title of "doctor of gay science" (Nietzsche's *The Gay Science* came four centuries later), seven troubadours of Toulouse competed yearly to present the best speech. Lots has been written about what *gay* and *science* meant in this context, with more or less agreement that "gay" means love, in this case of language or grammar, and "science" referred to knowledge and the application of learning. For troubadours it was always knowledge spoken out.

At moments as I wrote this I thought I was *on a roll*, although it wasn't one smooth wrap up like a blind on a spring against the forces of gravity, but more circular, like being in the centre of a soft space with barely defined edges, drawing ideas toward me and moving with them so I could speak what I was experiencing. A tenuous space, but exciting, this intense coalescing of ideas, revelations forming clusters of words into meaning. (It's an experience that

writers and philosophers before me have conflated with the sexual, or at least with ecstatic energy.) To write down the half-formed thoughts in the swirl I had to focus all my research and borrowed ideas into my own way of making ideas, had to feel my way as I found my language for them. And was I unconsciously choosing the received standard language or my own vernacular — whatever that is — or a combination?

Illich's ideas about the vernacular — that standardized language facilitated governance — are probably historically accurate, but what about the vernacular or the common language today, especially in this country, where few people are illiterate? In my world is there really a common language so distinct from written or official language that it can be called a vernacular, and if so how do my choices affect it? Or am I so trained in the standard language that I'm cut off from it? I'm not talking about colloquial usage or my particular quirks, what linguists might call my idiolect, or various English dialects common in other regions that can shift the mainstream. Is my vernacular something smaller than the language used in *The Globe and Mail* or the *NY Times* or *The Capilano Review* but something larger than my idiolect and the language of the Internet? Or is it the other way around, now that newspapers aren't copyedited much and their readership diminished, and written opinions of every sort are ubiquitous in all the formats available on our cellphones? If the vernacular is our standard, more or less,

who are its most powerful users now?

I know that usage changes language and sometimes I like the way this happens and sometimes I don't. I have my embedded preferences, not necessarily rational. As an editor I have often found myself conservative on some issues, although wary of my own prescriptive stance, and radical about others, fundamentally a descriptivist and rebel. As a writer I want to push against that conservatism, but sometimes depend on it. English also readily absorbs words from other languages. But what is *foreign*? Sometimes what seems at first to be most outside the norm is not a word or phrase from German or Korean, say, but a common English word used differently or what sounds like a mistake in grammar but is now used freely. I might resist or choose to consider its new value. We are constantly negotiating the frame, with no guarantee of our influence. It's hard to predict which words and meanings will catch on and which will lose their air. Eventually, what begins as foreign can become vernacular can become standard sometimes becomes archaic sometimes becomes ghost language. Words or meanings no longer current or used differently or mostly forgotten, having lived as speech at one time, still haunt us in the way that our ancestors haunt us—even when we know nothing about etymology or who begat who, that history is part of who we are and what we say. I'm thinking about my voice in this, how I can be braver, and how I can be more conscious of the language choices

I hear as well as my responses.

Agamben quotes the ancient grammarians on their distinction between written and “confused” language. One is “the voice that can write,” that can ‘comprehend,’ that can ‘bring together the letters.’ The confused voice is the unwritable voice of the animals... namely that part of the human voice that cannot be written, like the whistle, the smile, the hiccup.” When I watch a YouTube video of a starling imitating human speech, I wonder if the joke's on us. The starling brings together the letters, although we don't know what it comprehends. Somewhere researchers must be trying to figure out how that ability to mimic human speech is useful within the bird's own community.

Nightingales fill the atmosphere around them with variations on over 1,000 syllables that their higher brain centre, much more than in other birds, is developed to produce. Starlings can imitate human language with perfect intonation and diction, and use whatever is in their present to augment their own vocabulary of sounds. We don't fully understand what kind of mind is at work there, although scientists now tell us that we can't be as smug as we used to be about the superiority of human brains and our ability to speak, say, English. A research study on songbirds “gives us a unique insight into how brain development may contribute to human linguistic capabilities,” according to Prof Tamas Szekely of the University

of Bath (<https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2014/may/04/nightingale-best-birdsong-brain-research>).

Maybe this old hierarchy of speech and language, or even of sound making and sound meaning, no longer holds up. We can recognize them as sometimes separate skills linked as a circular or Möbius kind of thing. Sometimes speech comes first, sometimes what's written down. "Hmmm," I say, making a confused sound.

While there is no easy correlation between bird language (song/communication) and human language, thinking about one informs my thinking about the other. This cross-fertilization might result in something articulate, might not. One thought almost in formation becomes infected by another thought and starts to change again. And the best way I can describe my own experience of it is to use the visual image of the starling murmuration, a beautifully shifting thing, no stasis, no final form, always being made.

And then there's fear: fear of speaking up, speaking out. What's bird fear? Reaction to predators, finding safety in the movement of the group. Making shapes in the sky, feint and follow, continual shift. It turns out that it's not just male birds who sing (mainly to attract mates), but female as well, in 71% of songbird species. "Females also evolved to sing...but it's more dangerous for them" to do so. Yet, some female birds still sing, even when nesting and at their most vulnerable.

"The most vocal [female fairy wrens] are the most likely to have their eggs and chicks eaten" (<http://www.sciencemag.org/news/2016/01/why-some-female-birds-don-t-sing>). Bird researchers still speak in binary terms: male/female. The issues around human language across gender are now recognizably more complex but perhaps still little understood. I'll just borrow from the bird example to say that even if we (any of us) have the capacity for voicing our experience, our ability might atrophy if speaking out is chronically risky.

Starlings, it's said, only have to respond to seven other birds to be in synch with the flock so that the whole group can move almost simultaneously in constantly evolving shapes (<https://www.princeton.edu/news/.../birds-feather-track-seven-neighbors-flock-together>). Perhaps we each need seven people with whom we signal a change or listen for it. Would that be the same seven or just the seven who happen to be closest at any given moment, as one presumes happens in the pillowy pancake shape that makes the best cover for starlings? What's the relationship between the murmuration (chorus of sounds) and the murmuration (the visual shape)? Inside the shape you can't see what you're making, have no time to critique.

You can see how my tone of knowing keeps collapsing. I keep wanting to make pronouncements, some indication I've figured it out, this post, this world. What's the tone of unknowing? Is it fear? Or is

it a letting go? Letting go sounds nicer... aaaaaahhhhh. Fear is the sharp intake, the breath held in, as though the force of life might be safe kept housed within my throat, my lungs, my ribcage, with my diaphragm stuck. (If you read this, my body will be somewhere else, housing its voice. I might need to find my seven others to go on.)

In thinking about all this, moving from the possibility of understanding— little flashes of insight, seeming originality of thought and word clusters, making some provisional meaning—to flat-lining, in despair, then emerging into some kind of sensible I-can-live-another-day state of mind, I thought also about some other aspects of all this that I can't fit neatly into a blog post but might continue to try to understand:

Why should I be frustrated by the fact that every thought I form immediately falls apart and reforms? Is writing what we do to try to stop time? Time, according to many scientists, doesn't exist. There is only change (one source: *Beyond Biocentrism* by Robert Lanza and Bob Berman, Dallas, 2016).

One of the key words for the troubadours was *joie* (or at least that is the word for joy in the Old Occitan vernacular Dante chose to use). For the troubadours performance was paramount, what was written down was the record of what was sung. Now we read the written lyrics and have to

imagine the voice and give it a place in the process that moves between the logical, the intuitive and the performative. The voice is the physical resonance that touches others. Even those without hearing can feel and be moved by sound vibrations. I keep coming back to *joie* rather than joy, perhaps because it is a word from another language I grab to throw *joy* off kilter, to make it include the passion and determination of being alive, even in anguish and despite fear.

In a flight of fancy (forgive me) I picture those seven troubadours (troubairitz, or gender neutral) who competed for the title of doctor of gay science as the seven starlings who heard the car alarm and absorbed that sound into their song and passed it on, each to seven others, and so on.

Aaah, so now, just as I'm hoping to get out of this mess and watch some TV, I have another thought. Last week, on holiday, I spent some time just listening. As my mind settled I heard all the sounds around me as ones of equal value: one Hawaiian honeycreeper answering another, the long swish of tires on wet pavement, waves rearing up and flattening over the sand and back, the rhythm of overhead fans, wind in the palms. A moment of surrender, no judgment. But it seems to me the collective act of making and using language is a constant play between judgment and surrender. The listener can hear all sounds as equal in a moment of mental quiet or John Cage-like attentiveness (birdsong,

car alarms, voices) but is also choosing every nanosecond what words to use, on a conscious and unconscious level. We make our world in the shifting now.

Two thousand years ago “Aristotle claimed that ‘actual knowledge is identical with the object.’” Riccardo Manzotti, in a series of conversations about consciousness (NYRB, 2017), tried to explain almost the same idea to the writer Tim Parks, who asked, “How can my consciousness be both physical and outside my body? How can a subject, I, be identical with a thing? And since my experience changes, but the object clearly doesn’t, how can the two be the same?” I think best to just leave the question for now, while I go offline to try to understand why, if I see a bird or hear a song *I am that bird, I am that song*.

Meanwhile, in Lisa Robertson’s corner of France, she hardly hears nightingales any more as their habitat gets smaller and smaller. Nevertheless, she’s still writing.

We have to sing. Or, we might as well sing.
(I can’t go on. I must go on.)