

## “Live Like a Poet!”: At Home in the Bateau Lavoir

Rosanna Warren

On April 13, 1904, Pablo Picasso and his friend the Catalan painter Sebastià Junyer Vidal travelled from Barcelona to Paris and installed themselves in Montmartre in the studio just vacated by the Basque ceramicist and sculptor Paco Durrio. Junyer Vidal paid the rent. Called “La Maison du Trappeur” (The Trapper’s House), later renamed Le Bateau Lavoir by its denizens, this ex-piano factory and ex-locksmith shop converted to a congeries of studios in 1889 could be entered on the first floor from the rue Ravignan, but plunged in the rear down three storeys to the rue Garreau. Various Spanish artists had preceded Picasso in the building, including his older friends Ricard Canals and Joaquim Sunyer. In the 1880s it had been a popular haunt for anarchists, Gauguin had visited often, and the poet-dramatic Paul Fort had lived there while directing his Symbolist Théâtre de l’Art across the square. Poet Max Jacob, who visited every day and later lived there for a while, evoked it often. In a lecture in 1937 he remembered: “Picasso returned with what the dealers have called the Blue Period paintings, vaguely imitative of El Greco. He led me to the crown of the Butte Montmartre. We scorned all previous art and all the schools, and in the evenings, to amuse ourselves, we improvised plays, without spectators, which we never wrote down and which concluded in wild bursts of laughter. He lived at 13 rue Ravignan, today called the Place Emile Goudeau, a sort of hangar made of ill-fitting boards, at once cellar and attic, poised on a kind of cliff Montmartre still hardly conceals with its huge new apartment houses. Our neighbors were quasi-laundresses (*de vagues blanchisseuses*) and a fruit and vegetable vendor, and those poor people complained of the noise Picasso’s bitch Frika made at night with her chain.”<sup>i</sup> In a memoir from 1933, Jacob gave even more detail: “A real barn, that studio of Picasso’s, with exposed beams, walls made of ill-fitting boards, an unbelievable floor on which one couldn’t walk without waking the neighbors...The admirable Mme. Coudray, the concierge, knew how to be kind when the rent was due, and how to put up with noise. Ah! Those dear old days of poverty, work, friendship, and joy. Many of the studios were cellars, and the stairs were never swept. Everything was made of wood.”<sup>ii</sup>

Junyer Vidal returned soon to Barcelona, so during Picasso’s first six weeks at the Bateau Lavoir the crowd was reduced to Jacob, a theatrical thief named Manolo, and a Gypsy guitarist, Fabián de Castro, who slept on the floor. Jacob visited every day. The

complex tone of their friendship, tinged with Jacob's adoration, irony, and self-abasement, can be gleaned from this memoir the poet composed in 1931:

It's 1904, Picasso is already strong but his visitors are still only the picturesque Manolo and a poor little Jew (that's what Vollard called him) who doesn't believe he's a poet. I lived at Barbès. I arrived at 13 rue Ravignan early in the morning. To my own bare bed, and my dark little work table, I preferred this doorway that had pretensions to grandeur a hundred years earlier, and Picasso's narrow door decorated with bits of practical advice. It was at the end of a catwalk corridor, above the invisible cliffs of Montmartre geology, at the end of a cliff of stairs.

I called out his name. Hardly awake, Picasso opened the door. I had arrived across all the stone steps of Montmartre and oceanic Paris seen from on high.<sup>iii</sup>

Yet Jacob was far from craven in his relations with Picasso. André Salmon remembers Jacob in the role of elder friend, initiator, and magus, calling the young painter *mon petit*.<sup>iv</sup> The friendship between Picasso and Jacob in this period left many relics in the drawings they did of themselves and of each other. An ink drawing of Picasso in profile by Jacob is annotated in Picasso's hand, "Retrato hecho por Max Jacob" (Portrait made by Max Jacob). It shows an exaggeratedly large head of dark hair—yet another homage to genius?—an intensely focused eye and thin mustache,<sup>v</sup> a mustache that would soon disappear. Picasso's portrait of Jacob, on café note paper, shows the writer, also in profile, with a high, bald forehead; scruffy hair still adorning the back of his skull; a dark, intelligent gaze further darkened by a pince-nez; a firm, compressed mouth; and strong chin.<sup>vi</sup> This is a portrait of power, not of pathos, and reminds us that the bond between the two men was not simply a matter of subservience on the part of one and dominance by the other. "I was no longer a store clerk," Jacob remembers. "I wrote verses because Picasso thought I had talent and I believed in him more than in myself. As for my prose poems that would be published and appreciated later, I was far from suspecting they would succeed. I also wrote children's stories; I lived in frightful poverty, but I didn't want any more jobs."<sup>vii</sup> Picasso plays the role, in this narrative, of liberating genius. Jacob told the memoirist Robert Guiette, "Picasso had come back from Spain and found Max desperate over the loss of his job. 'What kind of life is that?' Picasso asked. 'Live like the poets!'"<sup>viii</sup> The liberation, the imperative to follow a life of art, extended even to physical appearance. Jacob told Maurice

Martin du Gard in 1920, “It’s Picasso who changed my life...It was he who told me, ‘Shave off your beard.’ He who told me, ‘Take off your pince-nez, wear a monocle. Don’t be time-puncher. Live like a poet.’”<sup>ix</sup>

Jacob not only “lived like” a poet in 1904. He was writing groundbreaking poems. When he wrote Tristan Tzara in 1916 that it was only in 1905 that he had “become” a poet, he must have been referring to his first serious publication, the five poems in *Les Lettres modernes* in May 1905. But by now Jacob had been writing for years. “Écrit en 1904,” which would appear in print for the first time only in 1921 in *Le Laboratoire central*, shows him already in command of sophisticated maneuvers which we recognize in hindsight as Modernist: a mobile geography, mobile and plural pronouns and centers of consciousness, discontinuities in tone and register, non-sequiturs, abrupt juxtapositions of reference and address, a dissonant prosody. “Écrit en 1904” is a fine example of an art of controlled discontinuity.

If I recall, the place of Pilate’s tomb  
Was in Vienna, or else in Draguignan  
Abd-el-Kader’s sons snapped photos there  
To hang up as ex-votos in fresh air  
Goddesses spun their silk from ocean foam  
And fished for golden coinage in the ponds  
Washerwomen beat the hours to pass the time  
And the Loire revealed its soul at every bend...  
...The sky contracts two atmospheres to one stair  
...So patriarchs could prophesy from there  
White sailors dressed in Oceanic blue  
Offered Pilate’s glove to lordly Baal  
And telepathy in telegrams seeping through  
Inspired in all the cult of Pilate’s soul  
The politicians and the men of Theodose  
Had also taken of Pilate a mighty dose  
Pantheons paralyzed for a hundred years  
Are stirred by lightning and by blood besmeared.<sup>x</sup>

“Écrit en 1904” not only veers wildly in time and space, from Draguignan to Vienna, from Biblical Jerusalem to the chic new American cocktails in Paris; it imagines the city of Paris itself in motion, like a barge moving up the river. Male and female identities blend: “Moi j’ai les plus beaux bras, toi les plus beaux tétons/A nous deux nous ferions une femme parfaite” (I have the handsomest arms, you the handsomest tits/Together we’d make a perfect woman). What keeps this centrifugal poem coherent is the abstraction of poetic form: the kitsch alexandrines and rhyming couplets of the opening and closing passages provide the grid that allows the poem’s psychic vagrancies. “Écrit en 1904” comments comically on its own deformation of inherited form. On the one hand, “Double-six! À moi la pause!” (Double sixes! My turn to pause!) refers to a throw of the dice, an image taken from Mallarmé’s radical work *Un coup de dés* (A Throw of the Dice) which Jacob would recall in the title of his collection of prose poems in 1917, *Le Cornet à dés* (The Dice Cup). But it also describes, saucily, the classical, twelve-syllable alexandrine, complete with the central caesura: “À moi la pause!” In “Écrit en 1904,” the dismantling of a single center of consciousness, the social satire, the jangling of high diction with slang, the hallucinatory geographies, the puns (“Amer” means both “bitter” and “American”), all set the stage for an interpenetration of natural and supernatural realms, and the liberation of the soul from the social self. The poem maintains a comic relation to Christianity—it depicts, after all, a world devoted to Pilate—but Jesus does appear as an opening between realities, a force which compels a change of route (“Jésus barre la route entre les boulingrins”; Jesus obstructs the path between the bowling greens), and the poem concludes in a vision of sacrifice, worldly glory exploding in lightning and blood. Whether or not that blood might redeem is a question this poem leaves open.

A definition of modernity in poetry that Jacob gave to Marcel Béalu in 1939 describes the principles at work in his poems from 1904: “complexity in form; dominance of interior harmony over meaning; speed in the association of images, ideas, and words; love of words; surprises, willed or not; the appearance of dream or dream itself; invisible rhythms.”<sup>xi</sup> The disjunctive method permitted exploration of his perpetual themes, *humour/amour* (humor and love, a generative pun in French, with humor correcting and protecting love), and his descent into the unconscious where, he came to feel, he led the way for other poets.<sup>xii</sup>

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Cooking was difficult in the studios, so the gang would often rollick down to the Butte to eat at the grubby little restaurant run by le Père Vernin on rue Cavalotti, near the Place de Clichy. Vernin sometimes charitably forgot the bills his artist clients ran up, and they could usually count on a coarse but robust meal there. Actors as well as painters and writers turned up, and Fernande Olivier remembered the young Christiane Mancini memorizing her lines from the play propped up against her carafe of rouge. Gallivanting down the hill for yet another greasy meal at Vernin's, the companions would chant Jacob's ditty:

I'm tired of eating at Vernin's  
But that's where everybody goes  
Because they serve wine in thimblefuls  
And helpings of cream cheese...

When they weren't eating at Vernin's, they stayed closer to the Sacré Coeur and went to Azon, who ran a little bistro called Les Enfants de la Butte. A meal there cost only 90 centimes, and Azon, susceptible to the idea of literary glory, often extended credit to writers, trusting he'd be paid back when their books appeared. He broke with André Salmon, however, when he discovered his client really hadn't written the articles signed Paul Adam, Maurice Maeterlinck, and René Maizery, as he had claimed.<sup>xiii</sup> Some nights—not often, because Picasso usually painted from 10 p.m. until dawn<sup>xiv</sup>—the gang turned up at Le Lapin Agile, where Frédé's wife Berthe served a hearty meal which cost two francs, but which Picasso and his friends could sometimes wangle for less. Dancing, at least, was provided by Jacob, famous for his jigs on the tabletop. Nobody needed to pay admission to a nightclub when Max Jacob could fly into his impersonation of a barefoot female entertainer, his trousers rolled up to expose his hairy legs; his vest tossed aside; his shirtsleeves flapping and his shirt unbuttoned over his thick, crinkly, dark chest hair; his bald head and his pince-nez gleaming as he wriggled, dipped, sashayed, and pointed his toes. Or he would snatch a woman's hat and place it on his head, wrap himself in a shawl, and warble lyrics of sentimental ballads and comic opera, most memorably Hervé's "Langouste atmosphérique" until the room collapsed in laughter.<sup>xv</sup>

Frédé kept a guest book. On one of its pages, one can chart the progress of the evening in Jacob's improvised verses:

9 p.m.  
Finding the rhyme for Frédéric  
There's the "hic"!  
I prefer to wait to be drunk  
Before I write aboard your book.

2 a.m.  
On board! Piano A. Bord.  
Ship's register, bored,  
Paris, the pensive sea will bring  
Right to your door this evening  
O innkeeper of the Misty Quai  
Your sheaf of spray.<sup>xvi</sup>

By this time, Jacob had initiated his walking discipline: in rambles throughout the city, he forced himself, in each interval between lamp posts, to come up with a new image or poetic idea or "relationship to a subject, whether a person, an object, a poster, a billboard, a postcard." If no idea appeared, he halted at the lamp post until something occurred to him and he jotted it down (sometimes on telegraph blanks filched from a post office).<sup>xvii</sup> These exercises contributed to the concentrated form of the poems. "Poème simultané avec superposition simple" (called simply "Poème" in *Le Cornet*) already has full control of pace and tone. It also has Jacob's characteristic disorientation of narrative line, speaker, and personae; his teasing game between truth and falsehood; his ironic relationship to a classical past; and the geometric abstraction imposed by the title.

#### Simultaneous Poem with Simple Superposition

"What do you want of me?" says Mercury.  
"Your smile and your teeth," says Venus.  
"They're false. What do you really want of me?"  
"That rod of yours."  
"I can't be parted from it."  
"So bring it over here, heavenly postman."

You should read this in the original Greek: it's called Idyll. At school a friend of mine, who was always failing his exams, told me, "If you translated one of Daudet's novels into Greek, you'd be pretty clued up when it came to the exam! But I can't work at night. It makes my mother cry!" You should read that in the original Greek as well, gentlemen; it's an idyll too, *eidullos*, a moving little scene. (Translation by Christopher Pilling and David Kennedy)<sup>xviii</sup>

"For me," argues Jacob in a letter of the period, "a work of art must be estranged from its author. I do not mean by the word 'estranged' a synonym for the word 'exteriorized,' as that goes without saying, nor a synonym for the word 'impersonal'; a work estranged from its author is a work which, since it does not reflect him, cannot be substituted for him, if I may say so, as a core of force, but which truly adds to the cosmic patrimony. I don't claim that my prose poems fulfill this ideal, but they lean in that direction, and their author expects soon to succeed in stepping outside himself. From a purely artistic standpoint, works estranged from their author gain in 'perspective,' in 'mystery,' and in 'aerial arabesque.'"<sup>xix</sup> Though there have been objections to the idea of Cubist poetics, the poems' disturbances do present a literary analogy to the disruptions Picasso and Braque would introduce in the depiction of objects in space—three years later<sup>xx</sup>—disruptions and discontinuities that may have shared a birthplace in the jagged passageways of the Bateau Lavoir.

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<sup>i</sup> Max Jacob, "Discours à Nantes," 1937, in Hélène Seckel, *Max Jacob et Picasso* (Paris: Réunion des musées nationaux, 1994), 244.

<sup>ii</sup> Ibid. 13.

<sup>iii</sup> Jacob, "L'Inédit de Max Jacob sur Picasso: Fox," 47–49; and in Seckel 29, 30.

<sup>iv</sup> André Salmon, *Souvenirs sans fin*, I (Paris: Gallimard, 1955), 171.

<sup>v</sup> Seckel 29. See also Seckel 34, note 17.

<sup>vi</sup> Ibid. 30.

<sup>vii</sup> Jacob, "Souvenirs sur Picasso contés par Max Jacob," *Cahiers d'art*, 1927, 2.6: 199–202.

<sup>viii</sup> Robert Guiette, *La Vie de Max Jacob* (Paris: Nizet, 1976), 69.

<sup>ix</sup> Jacob, "Souvenirs sur Picasso," 202.

<sup>x</sup> *La Laboratoire central* (1921). Abd-el-Kader (1818–1883) was a heroic Algerian military leader who held off the French colonial forces for years. Jean-Baptiste Androuet du Cerceau designed the Pont Neuf in 1579. The *tenorita* is a diminutive for *tenora*, a Catalan double-reed wind instrument resembling a clarinet used in Sardana music, and appearing often in Picasso's Cubist still lifes (where it is called a clarinet).

<sup>xi</sup> Louis Emié, *Dialogues avec Max Jacob* (Paris: Corrèa, Buchet et Castel, 1954), 38.

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<sup>xii</sup> Tatiana Greene, “Notice, en préambule aux lettres de Max Jacob à Marguerite Mespoulet,” *Centre de recherches Max Jacob* n. 4, 1981-1982, 40.

<sup>xiii</sup> Salmon, *Manuscrit trouvé dans un chapeau* (Paris: Société littéraire de France, 1919), 84.

<sup>xiv</sup> Fernande Olivier, *Picasso et ses amis* (Paris: Stock, 1933), 61.

<sup>xv</sup> Olivier 1933, 68, 69.

<sup>xvi</sup> Guiette 77.

<sup>xvii</sup> *Ibid.* 144.

<sup>xviii</sup> Jacob, *The Dice Cup*, tr. Christopher Pilling and David Kennedy (London: Atlas Press, 2000), 23.

<sup>xix</sup> François Garnier, *Correspondance de Max Jacob*, vol. I (Paris: Editions de Paris, 1953), 30-31.

<sup>xx</sup> The question of Cubist poetics has been much debated, and the hottest debates go back to 1917. Pierre Reverdy made a strong case against the concept, rehearsing (without naming) what is essentially Lessing’s argument in *The Laocoön* that different media have fundamentally different relations to space and time, and cannot represent one another: “But why wish to call one art by the name which already designates another art? We associate ourselves with a pure tradition of poetry.” (Pierre Reverdy, “Notes et extraits,” *Nord-Sud*, n. 13, March 1918). Max Jacob, on the other hand, saw his poetry in plastic and pictorial terms. Paul Dermée, in his lecture on Jacob in December 1916, compared his poems to Cubist paintings, and in 1927 Jacob stated the case to his mother: “Cubism in painting is the art of composing that painting in its own terms irregardless of what it represents, and to give primary importance to geometric construction, invoking real life only through allusion. Literary Cubism does the same thing in literature, using reality only as a means and not as an end. Example: my *Comet à dés*, and Reverdy’s work.” (Bibliothèque municipale de Quimper. Fonds Max Jacob, ms. 12. Cited in Seckel 211). Michel Décaudin and Etienne-Alain Hubert give an excellent account of the history of the phrase “Literary Cubism” and its attendant controversies in “Petite historique d’une appellation: ‘cubisme littéraire,’” *Europe*, n. 638-639, June-July 1982, 7-25.