

**Valérie Rouzeau**  
*Talking Vrouz*  
Translated by Susan Wicks  
Arc Publications, 2013  
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The mercurial quality of Valérie Rouzeau's language in this astonishingly vibrant and humane work is announced in the quirky title of her second English book, *Talking Vrouz*. Selected by its translator Susan Wicks from the diptych of *Quand je me de (When I am too)* and *Vrouz*—a Rouzeauesque neologism coined for the poet by an actor friend—this dual French-English text which communicates in so many original ways, is bound to prove an invigorating voice in English poetry. Demonstrating her commitment to the work of Rouzeau with whom she so obviously shares what she terms 'a mutuality and affection', Wicks designates herself here as 'poet enthusiast' rather than as mere translator. Of course, formidable skill and diligence have been exercised in mirroring in English the lexical density and vibrancy of the French. While in *Cold Spring* (2010) Rouzeau conversed as child-adult with her deceased father, here, as the eponymous title might suggest, she speaks predominantly with herself. Amidst the surrounding shadows of fate and the corrosions of modern life, Rouzeau uses the intricate coils of her single sentence lyrics, and particularly of the sonnets in what Wicks designates her 'diary sequence', to seek the sense of renewal possible in language. Indeed, its arrangement of unpunctuated sonnets with their special number of lines is the volume's most sustained expression of its use of numerological systems. Although much reduced from the original *Vrouz*, Wicks retains the sequence's cumulative power by means of thematic pairings and little conversations striking up between the sonnets themselves. Beloved by poets for its almost limitless potential for flexibility within constraint, this essentially asymmetrical form is used by Rouzeau to house her particularly organic meditations on how to live.

Just as mournful in tone as her earlier volume was in content, here in its gathering in of the rosebuds—her Ovidean 'parcel of anemones [her] pile of papers'—Rouzeau seems engaged in an incessant and more amorphous grieving. For a woman arrived at mid-life with a heightened awareness 'that now it's getting late', each sonnet becomes 'a big black empty vase of rainwater which hears', the acute linguistic control and listening ear of which aims to metamorphose her Venus-like tears into the fragile stay of lyric. Each poetic act of talking comes in response to the query 'How can I convert myself at twice / Those two-and-twenty years and stardust'. On the one hand, like Prufrock with his coffee spoons, Rouzeau is measuring out her time with each sonnet's minute of 'little sound'. Yet, on the other, like her portrait of 'the express logistic man' for instance who continues to hear 'rock or jazz the

weather lottery the news', Rouzeau uses the precision of each momentary poetic utterance to withstand intimations of mortality, much like Shakespeare's monumental series of buy-backs from 'this inconstant stay'.

But the inward talk of lyric, 'arriving up to my own ear' at the end of one sonnet, is always going to be tenuous, Rouzeau formulates, given the booming 'airportspeak' and noisy 'talking in the void' of our cyber community. Indeed, the incessant discourse of a telecommunication-bound world is brilliantly ironized here by a poetics that strives for some real listening. Ever on the look-out for birds as heralds of lyric, authentic aural testimony can only be garnered from the natural, as opposed to the mechanised, world until she herself, bird-like can sing and 'note it down...chirrup my magic sounds / As long as the world astounds.'

Benighted, presumably, by the world-wide web, the stay-at-home generation studied by *Talking Vrouz* develops not poetic vision but 'stone-dead eyes'. Everything reflected and resounding back from the internet—a 'giant soup-spoon' tool of gratification—is 'the mouth which full of loneliness is mute', Rouzeau's word order invoking here the destructive linguistic properties of the net. In another ironic sonnet about the isolation of meeting an internet 'soulmate without paying afterwards', a brilliant wielding of idiom and mode of address laments our powerless slavery to a fate-filled world of codes and passwords against which the 'one minute butterfly' of the poem's utterance can barely survive.

Rouzeau probes our capacity for such existential loneliness in the odd portrait dotted about the sequence of self-portraits—notably the 'dishy white-haired guy' at the station that Rouzeau's 'fingertips' pluck out for poetry. Wry wordplay here connects this man's lightweight presence to that induced by the satellite dish that overlooks both Rouzeau's apartment and work. Again her attentiveness to words—alongside her preoccupation with numerology—loads the phrase 'And I am numberless I'm almost nothing as you are'—with the un-negotiable isolation of each of us, often marginalised as the poet is marginalised. Certainly, the volume is underscored by a perception of our current spiritual isolation.

Against the intrusion then of banal airportspeak separating her from the muse, Rouzeau recites an insistent interior monologue-like diction—her 'telegrammese' as Wicks puts it. At its most noisily counteractive, her language wants to

...sound out the *mot juste* the word unjust  
The grave confabulations riddles still unguessed

Or onomatopoeias balderdash to boot  
To crank up palpitation to the max  
Of numbered beats per minute....

Retained as much as the English language allows by Wicks, Rouzeau revivifies at a phonological level with her alliteration, her internal rhymes and her startling collocations all of which—like her spoken voice—prove both sonorous and delicate. Moreover, the unstoppable momentum of grammatical elisions, enjambment and her lines' consoling repetitions, allow for as much lexical ambiguity as possible and make each poem an instrument of invention and re-invention—an act continued through the collaborative act of translation.

Another restorative conversation the volume holds is with the world of letters, the lines and ideas from which magpie-like, Rouzeau plunders and recycles. Alongside her contemporaries, some of the book's main contributors are Shakespeare, Baudelaire, Gérard de Nerval, Coleridge, Plath, Frost, Hughes and Larkin and, paying tribute to the inspiration of Mozart's requiem—itself a composite, posthumous creation—Rouzeau, with her typical irony, depicts her almost anachronistic pencil as a mere successor which 'squeaks / those scanty strokes on paper'. To use another of the volume's recurring metaphors, the poet wants to use her often introspective breath to reignite the rich seam of English and French poetry which seems as frozen over as Plath's grave at Heptonstall was on one visit, or as she fears, might be her own poetic 'feet'.

As Plath remarks in 'Wintering', 'winter is for women' and certainly, *Talking Vrouz* inhabits many bleak places. 'The platform's empty empty empty' as the disconsolate monologue of 'Rehearsal' convinces through its mode of 'Repetition' as the French title of this poem might dictate. Thus to renovate, Rouzeau paints our placeless cyber landscape with an outdoor cosmic one. Here, the powerful icon of the moon—largely imported from French symbolism and Plath—waxes and wanes as the proper place of inspiration, and in opposition to the blank screen saver, the redemptive sky, always perceived with a childlike 'pushchair' wonder, waits to receive poetic petition. Negotiating hard to keep her literal and poetic skylight clear of obstacles such as that threatening satellite dish, one buoyant sonnet manages to catch particularly firm hold of the light. Making its own dynamic turn by means of lexical economy and internal rhyme, and working in perfect counterpoint to the accompanying sonnet where the boy's 'little head reflected in the great big spoon', this poem-child cycles in an epiphany of airy light:

Now silver moons illuminated moons  
Of aluminium with its dream of lightness by the grace  
Of graceful beautiful dynamics.

How marvellous that a volume so post-modernist in its linguistic reinvention—here in its rejuvenation of cliché, and its wordplay—should strive for two goals central the Romantics: the spirit of individualism and spiritual transcendence.

The first section of *Talking Vrouz* mines the provenance of such play with language, colour and sense when as ‘The Traffiker’—the name her father gave her—Rouzeau recounts how she learned to negotiate each ‘lonely deal at the bottom of the garden or my head inside the wardrobe’. Like Autolycus the ballad-pedlar of *The Winter’s Tale*, Rouzeau applies the tactics of selling to the tactics of art: how to tell tales, to be stealthy, to deliberately confuse, to steal. Working to render the physical metaphysical, art is certainly alchemy for Rouzeau—something made tangible in the rich alchemical vein of numerology running throughout the volume. Both ironic and serious by turns, such number-lore is one of the most explicit ways in which the volume pays tribute to Hughes and Plath whose artistically powerful but doomed union is a formidable presence in a book studded through with dates, times, equinoxes and solstices, not to mention disappearing familiars—cats and foxes—and, as signifier of the regenerative and transformative properties of the muse, the talisman of the frog.

As she recalls in the previous volume of her scrap-collector father for whom she pictures ‘the sun warming his metals sorted neatly into piles: copper and aluminium, zinc and tin’, amid the alchemy of each poem and its recycled disparate scraps of nouns and image clusters cumulating and jostling around, Rouzeau often alights on sudden beauty in the way that Baudelaire seizes upon the ephemeral. Just as another of the volume’s presences, the Uruguayan-French poet Jules Supervielle, countered the conceptual abstractions of the Surrealists, Rouzeau wants poetry to be alive to the mysteries not of a conceptual cyberspace, but of the palpable world. Whilst in the midst of global deprivation, she turns repeatedly to nature not as some overt political protest but in order to study nature as antidote to mortality; nature in ‘the promise of a forest of forgetting’ is akin for Rouzeau to the space of lyric. In ‘25<sup>th</sup> December’, for instance, a poem that seems to redeem Plath’s bitter lyric ‘Crossing the Water’, Rouzeau proceeds from the firm tread of her objectified depiction of a fallen world as figured by a litany of Plath-like failed Christian emblems, to a Larkinesque tentativeness as she lightens towards ‘early spring, the almost blue / Perhaps the warbler-footprint of delight.’

Despite ‘the ponderous complaint’ of her long-lines of poems, at the same time, Rouzeau uses such long lines then to take ‘time out to stretch and see’ beyond. And yet, her poems seem to move in two directions: as much as they move out skyward, they also move in towards the ‘thinning marble of

memorial'. She both transcends the limitations of space and time through lines that lengthen out 'beyond the frame' of their lexical carriage—something both the sonnet form and the sequence accommodate—and also, in their paring down towards the repose of repeated vocabulary into particularly short lines. Ultimately, *Talking Vrouz* yearns to 'sing you a thin song / From inside my so very dark insides'.

Such sparseness is reached in a heart-breaking love poem-elegy where the speaker wonders 'how to be with you / Again with you to be with you again still be / Somewhere anywhere with you not be.....'. Despite the power of repetition to invoke, in trying to reverse separation, Rouzeau's diction cumulates into a denial with something of the power of Lear's 'never never never never never'. Another elegy, 'The friend who can't hear Purcell any more where is he' employs chiasmus which itself recreates, and thus sounds, the two-directional fugues of the composer, and grammatical elision to both hold and withhold. Due to the placement and repetition of the phrase, 'where is he', the eye and ear might be prone to substitute 'where he is', thus rendering the dead both absent and present.

Either way, the machine of the Rouzeau poem most urgently aspires to the contemplation possible in lyric. Making literal 'hay' out of her 'scrap' material in one sonnet she announces her desire to 'stay here on the straw of an old chair' hoping that 'We'll dream and watch the goldfish swimming round and round / The pot-bound pot of chives bought at the grocer's store'. The juxtaposition of the commonplace goldfish bowl with the more singular pot of chives—invoking perhaps the fragile instrument of creative grieving in Keats's 'Pot of basil'—Rouzeau achieves a particularly resonant, yet quiet, moment.

Notwithstanding the enervating and even suicidal implications of snow that attracted Frost in 'Stopping by Woods...'—the lulling repetitions of which Rouzeau echoes at times—snow becomes Rouzeau's ideal climate, allowing for the 'greatest vacancy' of all. Yet as in another Frost poem, 'A Dust of Snow' seems to give her 'heart / a change of mood', for if this book talks, it also keenly listens—something done most effectively in the condition of snow. Indeed, as Coleridge diagnosed in the 'secret ministry of frost.... Quietly shining to the quiet moon', perfection of sight and sound seems most possible for Rouzeau in a landscape as inimitable to the industrialised city as a snowy one. Paradoxically, in such richly loaded and bountiful work, it is the spare utterance of space and silence that we take away.

*Ruth Ling*