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Vicente Huidobro

Paris, 1925
Ordinary Autumn
& All of Sudden
Automne régulier
& Tout à coup

Translated from French and Spanish
by Tony Frazer

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Automne régulier was originally published in Paris in 1925 by Librairie de France. (Although the cover is dated 1926, other evidence indicates that the book actually appeared in late 1925.)

Tout à coup was originally published in Paris in 1925 by Éditions Sans Pareil.

The French texts here are based on the first editions, and on the versions printed in the critical edition of the author’s Obra poética (Paris: ALLCA XX, 2003). The Spanish versions are based on those printed in the Obra poética. Further textual information may be found in the Notes, starting on p.156.

I am grateful to Timothy Adès for a suggestion which solved a problem in the translation of ‘Le matelote’.

This book has been set in Le Monde Livre, with section titles and poem titles in Requiem Fine.
Vicente Huidobro in 1925

Huidobro had arrived in Europe in late 1916 and promptly made a name for himself in vanguard circles in Paris, mixing with the leaders of the new movement in poetry (Apollinaire, Jacob, Reverdy, Tzara), befriending many of the following wave (Cocteau, Cendrars among the French, Gerardo Diego, Juan Larrea and others in Spain), mixing with the most forward-thinking artists (Picasso, Gris, Picabia, Arp, Delaunay, Lipchitz) and composers (above all, Edgard Varèse who set Huidobro’s words to music). In a bewildering period of 24 months – the calendar years 1917-18 – he published two full collections, *Horizon carré* [Square Horizon, in French] and *Poemas árticos* [Arctic Poems, in Spanish], together with four chapbooks: *Ecuatorial* [Equatorial] and *El espejo de agua* [The Water Mirror] – both in Spanish, the latter being a new edition of a book that had previously appeared in Buenos Aires in 1916 – *Hallali* and *Tour Eiffel* [Hallali and Eiffel Tower], both in French.

In the aftermath of the war, Huidobro calmed down a little, although he remained busy writing, publishing poems in magazines, editing magazines, writing polemics and manifestos and turning his hand to prose and to treatments for silent films. He published a short selected poems in French in 1921, *Saisons choisies* [Selected Seasons], a volume which brought into French some poems that had only previously seen the light of day in Spanish, but which otherwise might be regarded as being a place-holder until the author was ready to bring out something new. The book also included a manifesto, ‘La création pure’ [Pure Creation]. In 1921 he also travelled throughout Europe giving readings and lectures.

1925 was to see the next explosion of activity, reflecting the odd fact that on several occasions during his career, Huidobro was to publish several books at more or less the same time. In 1925, two books of poems in French appeared, *Automne régulier* and *Tout à coup*, along with a volume of manifestos (*Manifestes* – already translated in this series). The following year, when the author was back in his native Chile, there followed a volume of essays and aphorisms, *Vientos contrarios* [Adverse Winds]. This pattern was to repeat itself in 1931, when the masterpieces *Altazor* and *Temblor de cielo* [Skyquake] were published in Madrid, and again in 1941, when two large poetry collections, *El ciudadano del olvido* [The Citizen of Oblivion] and *Ver y palpar* [Seeing and Touching], appeared in Santiago.
In the two French-language volumes collected here, which have generally attracted little attention since their original publication, we see the author's direction of literary travel after that initial explosive period in the final years of the Great War. Unsurprisingly, one of the books (Automne régulier) demonstrates some influence from the Dada group – Huidobro was close to Tristan Tzara, for one, and had been elected one of Dada's “Presidents” – while the other (Tout à coup) has a decided whiff of surrealism and automatic writing about it, notwithstanding Huidobro's imprecations against the latter in his manifestos and his often uneasy public relationship with André Breton.

Huidobro did not like to be thought of as a follower, which is no doubt one reason why he kept starting new magazines and issuing polemics against his perceived enemies and competitors. The fact is, of course, that Huidobro had swallowed vanguard Paris whole after his arrival. His work changed dramatically in character, and one can see the obvious influences of Apollinaire and Reverdy upon his early Parisian work. He became something of a touchstone in Madrid, where the poets were unfamiliar with the latest Parisian developments, and Huidobro thus acted as a conduit between forward-looking Paris and (by comparison) rather backward Spain and Latin America. It is a fact that he would have hated to have said about him, but his poetry only starts to look really different in the mid-1920s, by which time the various influences had been fully digested. (This is not to belittle the poetry in the earlier books, which I greatly admire, but simply a recognition of certain fundamental truths...) These two French books demonstrate possible ways forward, but in the end represent roads not taken, and are in turn nothing like Altazor or Temblor de cielo, nor anything like some of the superb poems in the two 1941 collections, most of the contents of which were written between the mid-1920s and the mid-1930s.

So what is going on in the two books reprinted here? Well, first of all, literary Cubism – le dernier cri in 1918 – has subsided, and the much-vaunted Creationism (effectively Huidobro's own personal movement, despite his claims for its broader “membership”) has also fallen by the wayside, although some critics have held that Altazor itself is a Creationist poem, perhaps because the author seems to have started it in 1918, and the book itself places its origin date in 1919. In any event, the label still gets bandied about, as if the label is more important than the poems that carry it. I don't believe that it is. Huidobro was good at self-publicity, at marketing, and many of
the things that he did, and said, were to gain attention for himself; Creationism is best regarded as a marketing ploy, and the results of it, in poetic form, are strikingly similar to contemporary work by French poets such as Huidobro’s erstwhile friend Reverdy. And there’s nothing wrong with that; it reflects what was in the air, so to speak.

The first thing to strike the reader of Automne régulier, at least one who is familiar with the earlier works in either French or Spanish, is the sudden reappearance, after several years, of rhyme. The rhymes are however decidedly odd, and show the clear influence of Dada, whose adherents relished nonsense rhymes. Those readers who have no French will have to take this on trust, as I have mostly avoided rhymes in the translations except where they turn up naturally. The syntax of the English versions generally follows that of the French, where I can manage it without sounding too arch, and the occasionally peculiar line-endings should give one enough of an idea of the absurdities generated by the French rhyme schemes. Take the title poem, for instance:

Laissons la place aux matelots [Let’s make way for the sailors Viens regarder dans mes îlots Come and look in my islets ]

The meanings here are less important than the oddity of rhyming matelots and îlots. Not to mention the glorious couplet in the final piece, ‘Poème’:

Je te dis que tu es belle Comme une chambre d’hôtel

[Literally: I tell you you’re beautiful As a hotel room ]

or, as translated here:

I tell you you’re a belle Like a room in this hotel.

There are some holdovers from the experimental work of 1917-18, in so far as the poet still often employs spatial schemes on the page (known as field composition in more recent times), although there is less resort to words floating free, and capitalisation of words, approaches that owed much to poets such as Apollinaire, but also
to those Cubist paintings that employed floating pieces of text, or newspaper cut-outs. However, lines have generally become longer, although probably more so in the poems from the latter part of the date-range applied to the book (1918-1922). The poems start to be thicker, more padded out, than those in the period we might describe as the earlier high vanguard phase of Huidobro’s writing. My theory is that one method of composition here was to come up with a couple of initial lines, or perhaps just the rhymes themselves, and then generate the rest of the poem from these starting fragments, although there is no way I can prove this. Thus, the interesting thing for me is the text that arises from what appears to be the Dadaist chance operation represented by the rhymes.

_Tout à coup_ is a rather different book. Unlike its twin, none of the contents had previously been published. While _Automne_ comes over as playful in a typically Dadaist way, something else is going on in this volume, and the texts are also all left-adjusted, lacking any attempts at a more exotic mise-en-page. Having railed in his manifestos against the “parlour-game” of automatic writing, here in line one of the first poem, we see: _Les deux ou trois charmes des escaliers du hasard sont incontestables_ (The two or three charms of the stairways of chance are indisputable), the French _hasard_ echoing through from Spanish _azar_ (chance, or luck, which, in Spanish – if pronounced in the Chilean manner – is an almost exact homophone of the French word). And, of course, the book’s title may well be a clue, an allusion perhaps to the rapidity of the collection’s composition.

The poems have more syntax than was the case with Huidobro’s earlier work; the progress of the language is mostly predictable, but the word choices are positively disruptive within that syntax, as one would expect from surrealist procedures; added to this are some wild rhymes of the kind we see in _Automne régulier_. The poems make little sense in any conventional way but they are certainly enjoyable to read, even if they do represent something of an experimental dead-end. It’s curious that, on the one hand, the author was railing against Surrealism in his manifestos while on the other apparently using some of its mechanisms as a way of moving his own work forward. The prose-poetry of _Temblor de cielo_ (Skyquake, written 1929, published 1931) shows clearly how Surrealist notions had seeped into the author’s bones, as do many of the more composed poems from the same era, which were only to be collected in 1941.

I confess that I initially under-rated both of these books and, while I still feel that they represent an artistic blind alley, they
remain fascinating documents worthy of attention today when one is trying to get a handle on the work of this protean talent. The two books deserve better than to be forgotten – neither have had much attention in France since their appearance and they have likewise been mostly ignored by students of the Latin-American avant-garde. There have been some Spanish translations over the years and the works were of course reprinted in the three collected editions of Huidobro’s work (two Chilean editions of the Complete Works, in 1954 and 1966, and one Poetic Works in 2003), and also in the bilingual Obras poéticas en francés (Poetic Works in French, edited by Waldo Rojas, Santiago: Editorial Universitaria, 1999).

It should be noted that both first editions were poorly typeset, although it is perfectly clear how the poems should be lineated. I have corrected here such typographical errors as exist in the original books, and have compared the first editions with the critical texts published in the 2003 Obra poética. While mostly impeccable as regards the Spanish texts, the latter is however never totally secure when dealing with French, and I have had to exercise my own judgement on occasion. Anyone who wishes to see the first editions can download free versions in PDF form from the Biblioteca Nacional de Chile. Further details on the texts and my editorial approach, may be found in the Notes at the end of this volume, starting on p. 156.

Tony Frazer
April 2020

¹ One example may suffice here to indicate the kind of problems one can encounter. The title of the poem ‘La Matelote’ (see p. 60) was printed in the first edition as ‘La Matelotte’, and Huidobro – not to mention his occasionally erratic typesetters – often made this kind of spelling error when writing in French. This spelling was recognised as incorrect by Waldo Rojas (Obras poéticas en francés, 1999), but he went on to assume that ‘matelotte’/‘matelote’ actually meant “female sailor”, by extrapolation from “matelot”, and thus translated it into Spanish as ‘La marinera’. By contrast, I assume, together with Cedomil Goic (Obra poética, 2003), that what was actually intended was ‘matelote’, “hornpipe” in English, a sailor’s dance. In a text where reality is hard to find, however, such multiple meanings could well be part of the game.
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AUTOMNE RÉGULIER

(1918-1922)

« Le monde attend toujours son Poète »
Emerson
ORDINARY AUTUMN

(1918-1922)

“...the world seems always waiting for its poet...”

EMERSON
AUTOMNE RÉGULIER

La lune tourne en vain
Dans ma main
La nuit et le jour
Se sont rencontrés
Et l’angle ouvert mieux qu’une bouche
Avale mes pensées

La lune moulin à vent
Tourne tourne tourne en vain
Le paysage au fond des âges
Et l’étang dans sa cage

En vain tu cherches
Arbre d’automne
Il n’y a plus d’oiseaux
En regardant sur les vallées
On voit partout des sons de cloches fanés
Le jour est plein mes mains aussi

A l’autre bout s’en sont allés
Les pas sans bruit

C’EST L’AUTOMNE DES CLOCHERS

Je ne sais plus de blonde ou brune
Laissons la place aux matelots
Viens regarder dans mes îlots
La nature morte du clair de lune
Avec l’assiette au bord de l’eau
Et la rose s’effeuillant sur l’oiseau qui chante
À minuit quarante
ORDINARY AUTUMN

The moon turns in vain
In my hand
Night and day
Have met one another
And the open angle wider than a mouth
Swallows my thoughts

The windmill moon
Turns turns turns in vain
The landscape throughout the ages
And the pond in its cage

In vain you search
Autumn tree
There are no more birds
There are no more birds
When looking out over the dales
We see everywhere the sounds of withered bells
The day is full my hands too

At the other end steps
Receded without a sound

IT IS THE AUTUMN OF THE BELFRIES

I no longer recognise blonde or brunette
Let’s make way for the sailors
Come and look in my islets
The still life of moonlight
With the plate at the water’s edge
And the rose shedding petals onto the bird singing
At forty minutes after midnight
Oublie-moi
   Petit astre caché
C’est l’heure où j’embaume ma forêt

Oublie-moi

Pilote sans navire et sans loi

Au fond de mes yeux
Chantera toujours le poète noyé
Forget about me
   Little hidden star
It's time for me to anoint my forest

Forget about me
Pilot with no ship and no law

In the depths of my eyes
The drowned poet will always be singing
HIVER À BOIRE

L’hiver est arrivé à l’appel de quelqu’un
Et les regards émigrent vers les chaleurs connues
Ce soir le vent traîne ses écharpes de vent
Tissez mes oiseaux chéris un toit de chants sur les avenues

Entendez-vous pétiller l’arc-en-ciel mouillé
Sous le poids des oiseaux il s’est plié

L’amertume a peur des intempéries
Mais il nous reste un peu de cendre du couchant
Hirondelles de ma poitrine comme vous faites mal
Secouant toujours ce silence végétal

Séductions d’antichambre en degré d’eau-de-vie
Éloignons de suite la voiture des neiges
Je bois lentement tes regards aux justes calories

Le salon se gonfle de la vapeur des bouches
De la lampe pendent les regards gelés
Et il y a des mouches
Sur les soupirs pétrifiés

Les yeux sont pleins d’un liquide voyageur
Et chaque œil a un parfum spécial
Le silence est une plante qui pousse à l’intérieur
Si le cœur garde son chauffage égal

Dehors approche la voiture des neiges
Portant son thermomètre d’outre-tombe
Et je m’endors au bruit du piano lunaire
Quand on tord les nuages et la pluie tombe
WINTER FOR DRINKING

Winter has arrived at someone’s call
And eyes migrate towards known sources of warmth
Tonight the wind is dragging its wind scarves
You my beloved birds weave a roof of songs along the avenues

Do you hear the damp rainbow fizzling
It’s bent under the weight of birds

Bitterness has a fear of bad weather
But we still have a few ashes left over from sunset
You swallows in my chest how painful you are
Always shaking that herbal silence

Seductions in the antechamber by strength of brandy
Let’s move the car out of the snow right now
Slowly I drink in your glances efficient in calories

The living room swells with steam from mouths
From the lamp hang frozen glances
And there are flies
On petrified sighs

The eyes are filled with a homing liquid
And each eye has its own special scent
Silence is a plant that grows inside
If the heart keeps its heating steady

Outside the car approaches out of the snow
Wearing its thermometer from beyond the tomb
And I fall asleep at the sound of the lunar piano
When clouds are twisted and rain falls in the gloom
Tombe
Neige au goût d’univers
Tombe
Neige qui sent la haute mer

Tombe
Neige parfaite des violons
Tombe
La neige sur les papillons

Tombe
Neige en flocons d’odeurs
La neige en tube inconsistent

Tombe
Neige au pas de fleur
Il neige de la neige sur tous les coins du temps

Semence de sons de cloches
Sur les naufrages plus lointains
Réchauffez vos soupirs dans les poches
Car le ciel peigne ses nuages anciens
Suivant les gestes de nos mains

Larmes astrologiques sur nos misères
Et sur la tête du patriarche gardien du froid
Le ciel blanchit notre atmosphère
Parmi les paroles glacées à moitié chemin

Maintenant que le patriarche s’est endormi
La neige glisse glisse
De sa barbe polie
Falling
Snow with a universal taste
Falling
Snow with a smell of the open sea

Falling
Snow perfect for violins
Falling
Snow on butterflies

Falling
Snow in scented flakes
Snow in an inconsistent tube

Falling
Snow at a leisurely pace
It snows snow in all corners of time

Seed of pealing bells
On the farthest shipwrecks
Warm up your sighs in your pockets
For the sky combs its ancient clouds
Aping the movements of our hands

Astrological tears on our miseries
And on the patriarch’s head guardian of the cold
The sky whitens our atmosphere
Amongst half-frozen words

Now that the patriarch has fallen asleep
The snow slides slides
Off his polished beard
TOUT À COUP

(1922-1923)

SAMPLER
ALL OF A SUDDEN

(1922-1923)

SAMPLER
Les deux ou trois charmes des escaliers du hasard sont incontestables
Tout est calme derrière les miaulements externes   Là-haut
Montez vers l’avenir précis où les vagues du ciel caressent les sables
Mais il y a quand même dans les surprises de l’eau
Quelques îles semées par les explorateurs qui nous devancent

Une certaine chaleur s’échappe des plis des drapeaux secoués
[par le vent

De mât en mât les mots se balancent
Et un oiseau mange les fruits du levant
The two or three charms of the stairways of chance are indisputable
Everything is quiet behind the mewing outside Up there
Climb towards the very future where the sky’s waves caress the sands
But in the surprises of water there are still
Some islands seeded by explorers who went before us

Some heat escapes from the folds of flags flapping in the wind

From mast to mast the words sway
And a bird eats fruits from the Orient
Sur le miroir une araignée qui rame comme une barque régulière
Vers les chanson du marécage
Elle chatouille les souvenirs à la surface et les gestes derrière
Au milieu du silence la mer naufrage

A l’heure des hirondelles
Dieu que les femmes sont belles
Ta femme à les cheveux blonds neufs
Ses yeux sont des jaunes d’œuf
Les yeux des brunes
Sont des jaunes de lune

Parmi les eaux sans musique
Les regards satellites
Se promènent sous les arbres de l’orbite
On the mirror a spider rowing like an ordinary boat
Towards the songs of the swamp
It tickles memories up to the surface and leaves gestures behind
Amidst the silence the sea is foundering

In the time of swallows
God how beautiful women are
Your wife has newly blonde hair
Her eyes are like egg yolks
The eyes of brunettes
Are moon yellow

Amongst waters with no music
Satellite glances
Stroll under orbiting trees
Je m’éloigne en silence comme un ruban de soie
Promeneur de ruisseaux
Tous les jours je me noie
Au milieu des plantations de prières
Les cathédrales de mes tendresses chantent la nuit sous l’eau
Et ces chants font les îles de la mer

Je suis le promeneur
Le promeneur qui ressemble aux quatre saisons
Le bel oiseau navigateur
 Était comme une horloge entourée de coton
Avant de s’envoler m’a dit ton nom

L’horizon colonial est tout couvert de draperies
Allons dormir sous l’arbre pareil à la pluie
I go off in silence like a silk ribbon
Walking by streams
Every day I drown
Amidst the prayer plantations
The cathedrals of my affections sing by night underwater
And these songs make islands in the sea

I am the walker
The walker resembling the four seasons
The fine sea bird
Was like a clock wrapped in cotton
Before flying away it told me your name

The colonial horizon is all decked with drapery
Let’s go and sleep under the tree that’s just like rain