

Report on the Marché de la Poésie

June 6-9, 2013

Place St Sulpice, Paris



For 30 years the Marché de la Poésie (Poetry Market) has been an established institution in the Parisian cultural landscape. It combines a book fair with a poetry festival. Guests of honor at this year's festival were writers, poets and speakers from Ireland. Most of the activity of the Marché was restricted to the area inside a large open arena covered with tarpaulins on the Place de Saint-Sulpice. Other events were held at the Irish Cultural Center. There was also a much larger "fringe festival" "La Périphérie" . This continued well into June and was scattered over many surrounding suburbs and towns.

The festival events relating to Ireland included an open poetry reading, in the courtyard of the Irish Cultural Center, by the recently deceased poet Seamus Heaney. The ICC in Paris was established in the 16th and 17th centuries, beginning with the reign of Henry VIII, to harbor refugees during the centuries of persecution of Catholics in England and for the accommodation of students enrolled in Europe's Catholic seminaries .



ICC courtyard at night



Seamus Heaney reading at the ICC, June 13, 2013



The audience in the courtyard, June 13, 2013

For the reading by Seamus Heaney, the courtyard was packed with at least 400 auditors. (Heaney died on August 30, 2013. This may have been his last public reading) . He recited in English, with some of his poems being read in French translations by the organizers of the reading.

Other events at the ICC included the traditional Bloomsday celebration on the evening of June 16; a festival of Irish music closed the fringe festival on June 21st (France's traditional *Festival de la Musique*.)



4 Irish Poets

On the site of the Marché itself there were many readings by contemporary Irish poets. They were held in the great enclosed quadrangle. Among there were several well-known authors: Eavan Boland, John Montague, Eamon Grennan, Eilean Ni Chuilleanain, Biddy Jenkinson, Joseph Woods, Medh McGuckian, and the indescribable Maighread Medbh, powerful and hopeless in turn: so powerful that I immediately invested €10 in one of her books; so hopeless that I cringed green, blue and purple at some of her more embarrassing rapsodies. *Well, hey man! That's the poetry biz !!*

As will shortly be revealed , I quickly became a participant in the Marché.

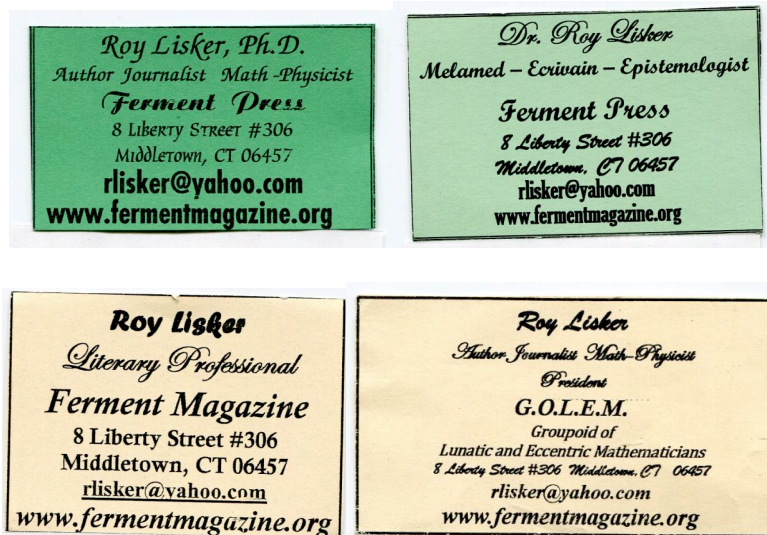


The Marché was housed in a great quadrangle divided by corridors covered with silvergrey-neoplastic tenting. Its 100 stalls harbored over 500 publishers, most of them from small presses from everywhere in France . Big corporations such as Gallimard and Flammarion were also there, a small percentage of the total. A few representatives came from Belgium, Austria, Martinique and Luxembourg. I was surprised to learn that it possesses a local language, Luxembourgeois, and that books are written in it! Surprisingly, given the Irish emphasis, no Irish publishers were present.

One way or another, the institution of the "small press" is going strong in France, as it has done ever since the privately published copies of Voltaire's "Philosophical Letters on the English" were publicly burned in 1734 by the Paris hangman!

My initial purpose in attending the book fair was to pass out the various several versions of my calling card to publishers interested in translating authors writing in English (Describing myself as

an "Anglosaxophone" guaranteed a laugh!). They were invited to examine my texts on Ferment Magazine, and also to keep me in mind if they needed a translator into English for books written in French.



I also looked around for books I wanted to buy. The prices seemed reasonable enough, although such things are relative: 10 euros in France buys what \$10 will buy in the US (or even less), but the rate of exchange is 4/3 of a dollar to the euro. I've discovered that if I buy a book in French while in France I will read it, but if I buy a book there intending to read it here, it never gets read. This greatly reduces the number of books that I am prepared to buy, particularly those written by poets whose work and even names are unknown to me. Apart from a CD of recitations of poems by Rimbaud, and the book of poems by Maighread Medbh mentioned above, I didn't buy anything.

It rained intermittently in short intense bursts just about every day of the Marché. This certainly hurt sales, though the booksellers had come prepared with tarpaulins to throw over their merchandise.



A raised stage stood in the middle of the quadrangle. Chairs were arranged before it in rows. On the stage itself were a podium holding several microphones, and chairs at the back for readers and speakers. This is where all the official addresses, poetry readings, panels and music took place.

I strolled by the stage around 1 PM on the afternoon of the first day. On the stage sat a trio of musicians, all French, playing traditional Irish music on a bagpipe, penny-whistle and fiddle. There were as yet no chairs on the ground. Their audience included the pedestrians and persons sitting on a few benches on the far side

Their music was powerfully suggestive. The pressure on me to yield to an uncontrollable impulse was irresistible; or it may have been that it was an irresistible impulse that had become uncontrollable. Whatever the cause, I turned to face the crowds and began reciting several Yeats poems from memory. They seemed to enjoy it. As for the musicians, their attitude appeared to me to be something like : "Well, I guess one can't avoid having to put up with that sort of thing!"

After awhile I ran out of Yeats poems; so I continued on to make the rounds of the publishers.



The Headquarters of MAIPO

It was by these devices that the fates carried me to a long table extending over half a dozen open stalls set aside for the representatives for the associations of poetry centers located all over France, the European Federation of *Maisons de la Poésie* (MAIPO). The following list doesn't cover all of them:

Maison de la Poésie d'Amay

Maison de la Poésie de Grasse

Maison de la Poésie de Nantes

Maison de la Poésie de Paris

Maison de la Poésie de Poitiers

Maison de la Poésie de Rennes

Maison de la Poésie de Saint-Quentin-en-Yvelines

Maison de la Poésie de Montpellier-Languedoc

Maison de la Poésie de Rhone-Alpes

Centre Européenne de Poésie d'Avignon

Centre International de Poésie Marseilles...

The list extends further. Such an investment in poetry is unheard of in the United States: what difference has it made (even to Poetry Magazine), that the Poetry Foundation in Chicago was given an endowment of some millions of dollars by some plutocrat whose passion for poetry exceeded her love of cats?

What is surprising about this is that , apart from very large figures such as Victor Hugo, Baudelaire, Rimbaud or Villon, French poetry does not figure prominently in world poetry, as, for example, English or Russian, or Italian does. From the Renaissance until the 19th century the art was killed by excessive formalism and ultra- sophistication (*Read, for example, Jacques Barzun's 1991 An Essay on French Verse: For Readers of English Poetry. New Directions Publishing*) "Too many rules ruin the Art" one might say . The revival of French poetry occurred in the 19th century with the work of Hugo, Baudelaire, Mallarmé and others. Despite this, it appears there are few places where one can go in France and not be in striking distance from a Maison de la Poésie. Directors of these poetry centers were sitting, standing and working behind tables in the ranges of MAIPO stalls. One of them caught my eye. The moment I saw her, I knew my fortunes were made: *Marie Jouannic* .

Marie Jouannic is the director of *the Centre Européenne de Poesie d'Avignon*, located off Avignon's principal thoroughfare, the rue de la Republique, permanent cast in shade and opposite a pizza parlour on the single narrow *rue des Ortolans* .

The poetry center contains a reading room, library, archives, an exhibition room and an inside courtyard for tea and small gatherings. Marie has directed the center for 25 years. The work is very hard, the response of the public and the government insufficient, and she is

always exhausted. Her work is vital to the community of poets in France, and may be compared to that of Jack Foley in the San Francisco Bay area. Her passionate devotion to the cause of poetry has brought her into contact with most major French poets and many from abroad, including the United States.

Marie Jouannic is a tall woman with a commanding presence. Big-boned and strong, a long vertical axis terminates in her oval face. She hails from Normandy with some connection also, I gather, to the Balkans. Hands and face are large, open and frank; in every way her features bespeak generosity. She wears lots of lipstick and has a tendency to wear long, dark dresses.

The moment Marie laid eyes on me, she got up from behind the tables and dragged me inside the stalls of the MAIPO headquarters. She sat me down a chair and handed me a plastic cup filled with wine. No longer was I a mere visitor to the Marché de la Poésie: I was an insider!! Marie reached into her pocketbook and examined her calendar to see if there was a date free in early July when I could come down to Avignon and give a reading. It turned out, as she'd suspected, that this period, coinciding with the Avignon Theatre Festival, would engage her in a frenzy of activities (as I later saw for myself when I arrived there on July 8th) with no time left over for scheduling readings. So we merely arranged that when I came to Avignon I would pass by the Poetry Center, and we could sit around and talk over a cup of tea.

I let her know that I'd just come from reciting some poems by William Butler Yeats, accompanied by bagpipes, to a "wrapped" audience (Well: it *was* raining!) .

Marie responded with supportive outrage: "Sure, Roy! Congratulations! Why isn't this being done by a dozen or more people

like yourself!" And in fact, over the next 3 days, I observed only two people doing something similar. One of them was a French actress generating publicity for a play; the other was someone stylistically between a Surrealist and an Oulipoen: he stood on a box in the plaza outside the grounds of the Marché and barked his poetry to the world through a giant cardboard bullhorn.

"Look", Marie said, "I want you to recite here, right in front of MAIPO. Do you see that tree?" A grand tree was standing nearby, minding its own business, in the walkway.

I hadn't brought any texts for recitation with me, and would have to go back to my apartment and collect them.

"Fine; come back later. And make a sign! You have to have a sign so people will understand what you're doing! Come back this afternoon or tomorrow morning. Do you have any CD's or books you want to sell?"

"I do; but don't you need to get a permit to do that?"

"No. You're being sponsored by me, that is to say, by MAIPO, and you can sell anything you want."

Marie Jouannic had become my manager!

As it turned out I couldn't make it back that day, but I showed up promptly at the opening of the Marché at 11:30 the next day. I'd pulled together a sheaf of poems by W.B. Yeats, T.S. Eliot Ezra Pound, together with excerpts from Joyce's *Ulysses* ("The Sirens") that I'd rehearsed for the previous year's Bloomsday celebrations on June 16th. My costuming was also more suitable: white shirt and dark blue trousers, a wildly

bariolated tie and - cream of the jest! - a megaquantal vibrating chalk-orange baseball cap, enough to terrify a vulture at a thousand paces!

I set to work right away, with recitations from Eliot's Four Quartets, some of Pound's Cantos based on his translations from the Iliad, and of course a score of lyrics by the beloved William Butler Yeats, in tribute to Ireland, Irish poetry, and great lyric poets everywhere.

By and large the passing crowds were unable to comprehend spoken English (*this despite the fact that the English language is on the lycée roster of required studies for a decade or so*). Instruction in English, (and other languages) is much better elsewhere in Europe (with the exception of Hungary) and small groups collected around me, filled with people from Norway, Holland, Russia, and of course Ireland and the United Kingdom.

Several decades of hard work, starting in the 80's, have turned me into a good interpreter of poetry in recitation. It was not always so: there was scarcely a mention of any poetry at all in my elementary education.

Marie showed up shortly after noon. We went together to the tables in back of the MAIPO stall and and put together a sign with a black felt pen:

Roy Lisker

Poète de l'État de Connecticut aux États-Unis

Va raconter les poemes des grands poètes

de la langue Anglaise:

W.B. Yeats; T.S. Eliot; Ezra Pound; James Joyce

Marie affixed the sign solidly to the tree-trunk with thumb-tacks. She found me a box on which to mount the piles of CD's and books I'd brought with me to France. Half a dozen CD's were also placed on the MAIPO table along with the other books being sold there.

My recital continued on until 3 o'clock or so until I became exhausted. I left, then returned around 5 to recite for another hour, before joining the audience in front the stage for the readings of the Irish poets. The same pattern was repeated the next day.

I met dozens of people this way, handed out lots of calling cards, and felt, as I do once every few years, that there was some connection between my literary work (although I was only reciting works by other "defrocked professors" such as Joyce, Pound and Eliot) and the society out there, somewhere.

On the final day of the Marché (Sunday June 9th), I changed back into civilian clothes and walked about the stalls, handing out business cards to the publishers who specialize in translations. That evening I bade farewell to Marie, thanked her being my "manager" and promised to meet up with her again in Avignon in July.

