

Michel Giroud

Robert Filliou, Secret Poet of *Duende*: Wandering with Broken Staffs

Already as a child in Sauve, in the Cévennes, Robert Filliou must have realised how unusual and surprising this town in the middle of the department of Gard is, sitting at the crossroads of religious wars with its protestant temple, catholic church and atheist republican town hall! In a notebook he enters the acronym RF: *République Française/Robert Filliou*. Pierre Tilman made no mistake when he titled his luminous biography *Robert Filliou Nationalité poète (Robert Filliou, Nationality: Poet)*¹ and it is no coincidence that Filliou – who really was a poet in every sense – would later, in the 1960s, invent his own Republic.

Already in Sauve, throughout his childhood and adolescence, he noted the permanent presence of ‘café geniuses’ and captured their long and passionate discussions on the art of *pétanque* (of the Marseille variety, no doubt, since it’s further east the long, or Lyon, variety rules). And those who crave for more can treat themselves to rare treatises on this game: the art of play, the art of playing, of aiming, of shooting, of marking a point. (See, there’s also a precise and enjoyable sixteenth-century work on the art of the poetical point, by Pierre Lartigue!) The art of play, life as play, word play, nursery rhymes, the fables of Florian (the famous fabulist from Sauve) and those of La Fontaine. Huizinga’s *homo ludens*.²

In Sauve, Filliou would have immersed himself in the cosmic extravagance of nature, for which the area is renowned: the heaps of stone, the prehistoric underground river, the naturally forking trees from which the famous *fourches de Sauve* are made. (There’s now a museum dedicated to them.) He would also have recalled the notorious bloodbaths of the ancient religious wars (the *Musée du Désert*, chronicling the prohibition of Protestantism in France in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, is not far away), which were sometimes also nurtured by the Goddess of Reason (the Revolution and her ‘beautiful’ and ‘humane’ guillotine are on display at the *Musée de la Révolution* at Vizille, in the department of Isère).

So it’s not strange that he, by the contingency and coincidence of his roaming in California in search of a nomadic father (like father, like son), would end up – via the University of California in Los Angeles – as a kind of missionary for economic reconstruction in South Korea, in Seoul, and that he would also spend time in Japan and discover another spiritual world, that of Chan Buddhism and Zen. The time spent in Asia in the early 1950s helps him to find his secret, forgotten voice. He eventually resigns from the beautiful progressive mission and starts his grand tour across the Middle East and Egypt, lured and nourished by Sufism, Oum Kalsoum and Arab-Andalusian music. This brings him to Spain for a while, to Andalusia, where he discovers Flamenco and the *cante jondo* or *cante gitano*. He is fascinated; he even learns to sing it.

Had Filliou read García Lorca at the time? It’s difficult to live in Andalusia, breathe Flamenco and not know the Andalusian poet who shot by wretched, jealous Franquistas. In 1933 Lorca published a series of lectures titled *Teoría y juego del duende (Theory and Play of the Duende)*³ and in 1921 he wrote *Poema del cante jondo (Poem of the Gypsy Song)*. Filliou also had to know the composer Manuel de Falla, who, together with his young assistant pianist Federico García Lorca, founded the first festival of *cante jondo* in 1922 to help save this thousand-year-old Mediterranean, Middle-Eastern and Oriental tradition. He attended festivals in the late 1950s where he must have heard Juan Talega (1891–1971), Pepe de la

¹ Pierre Tilman, *Robert Filliou, Nationalité poète*. Dijon: Les Presses du réel, 2006.

² Johan Huizinga, *Homo ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture* (1938). London/Boston/Henley: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1949.

³ Translated by A S Kline, available at <http://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Spanish/LorcaDuende.htm>

Matrona (1887–1980), La Paquera de Jerez (1934–2004), La Niña de los Peines (1890–1969), Rafael Romero (1910–1991), Antonio Mairena (1909–1983). All of Filliou is there: the subtle, discrete vagabond, the nomad, doubly immersed in Andalusia and in Buddhism and Tao. That's what *duende* is: the live, lively, living spirit, always *elsewhere*, zigzagging anywhere, with simple people from down below, *el pueblo* (the people of the village), knowing and savouring life. Robert Filliou, the magnificent plebeian, the proud heir of the Red Caps of Brittany (in the twelfth century) who revolted against the injustice of those in power, the Filliou of the Biennial of Art and Peace, which we would found together with Beuys, a Dutch friend [Louwrien Wijers] and the Dalai Lama in the 1980s, before retreating into a Tibetan spiritual centre until his death in 1987.

The golden line⁴ of this intuitive, imaginative, visionary and jocular poet (who makes me think of Rabelais's 'marrow bone', of the substantiated superior spiritual marrow buried in gags), this unclassifiable, inexplicable, inextricable, impenetrable poet, can be traced in his unexpected passage between West and East, Middle-East and America, without forgetting his lively interest in Africa and in particular the rituals of the Dogon, which in 1961–1962 inspired the multidimensional *Poïpoï* project, jointly developed with his friend, the architect and painter Joachim Pfeufer in Paris: a project realised with or without funds and with all those who showed up. It's the abolition of art as an object of contemplation, and above all of the absurd art market and of art's graveyard, namely museums.

Robert Filliou can be considered the first truly global poet: bilingual in English and French, planetary, terrestrial and cosmic, with his mad and nearly permanent laughter in the face of the sordid, deleterious and destructive human illusions. Filliou belongs to a secret line of esoteric thinkers who don't play by the book, much like his 'cousin' Erik Satie, who was also a genius: talentless, intuitive, imaginative, innocent and poor. That's why authorised explainers pay little or no attention to his case! Too hermetic, too dispersed, impossible to control. And the same goes for his friends George Brecht, Ben Patterson or Emmett Williams. Didn't he proclaim: 'Whatever you do, so something else, no matter when, where or with whom'?

From the 1960s onwards, Filliou invents another territory, that of the Genial Republic⁵: a potential territory that can sometimes be realised, through the *Poïpoï* project, *Art's Birthday* or *Fête permanente*, the *Smiling Cedilla*, *Galerie Légitime* or the method of *Teaching and Learning as Performing Arts*. It's the territory of the *Eternal Network*, reaching back to Rabelais (with his vision of the Abbey of Thelema) and to Fourier, the self-taught genius inventor of another world governed by passionate attraction and permanent playfulness in the form of thousands of phalansteries (self-governing cooperative 'niches', in which everyone has the right to receive a universal minimum income; a project formulated in 1805) and author of *Le nouveau monde amoureux* (*The New World of Love*, published by Simone Debout at Anthropos in 1967), whose collected works have been republished by Michel Giroud in his *L'Écart absolu* (*Absolute Failure*) collection for les presses du réel in 2013.

Like Joseph Beuys, George Brecht and a few others, Robert Filliou is a spiritual intermediary, a go-between this world and another, possible, world. Today the cooperative movement for natural and ecological farming and permaculture seems to vindicate his beliefs, because there are no alternatives left. Art is what makes life more interesting than art, but art is also a necessary tool for transforming life into a *fête permanente*, with bare feet on the ground, in the soil, with the earth – and the head among the clouds.

Robert Filliou is fundamentally a link to another life: cooperative, solidary, playful,

⁴ See Michel Giroud, 'Dada et la gnose' ('Dada and Gnosis'), 'la ligne d'or' ('The Golden Line') and 'Robert Filliou', in the catalogue for the exhibition 'Traces du sacré' at Centre Pompidou, 2008.

⁵ See Michel Giroud, 'Du Territoire de la muse à la muse amusée de la République géniale de Robert Filliou', in *La Muse républicaine : artistes et pouvoir 1870–1900*, Musées de Belfort, 2010.

discreet and secret, far from the spectacles of the world and the industrial dictatorial regimes, such as all kinds of tourism. He imagines the possibility of ‘niches’ that would be spiritual meeting points,⁶ with interactive festivals organised like picnics, joyful gatherings where everyone plays live music, in a polyphony of a thousand and one flavours. This would be a permanent interface between ecological cooperatives, alternative enterprises and centres of vocational/transformational training offering liberated and truly humane education. Like Beuys, Illich, Ellul and many others who imagine another way of living, Filliou is ‘threading the paths of utopia’.⁷ It leads to places where the non-power of reciprocal exchange allows us to exit the sinister world of competition and consumption and enter a world of permanent transformation. *Duende* is the necessary state of mind, a global intuition of how we who live today might have a lively, beautiful life together: solitary but solidary, in the expansion of singular niches.⁸

Addendum:

The Mad Nomadic Laughter of Fourier and Filliou: A Manifesto of 1000 Voices/1001 Sources

Two dreamers, two eccentrics, two go-betweens, two economists, two systemically open imaginers: for a world without borders, interactive and playful, based on exchange instead of profit and exploitation, for a harmonious world where all beings could exist, in all their diversity and variety, as a humane community whose criterion would be singularities and their resonance rather than obedience of imposed norms. A world where the individual’s riches would enrich everyone.

Here are two explorers who dream of another world, of other worlds founded on the activities of Permanent Creation, on desire, intuition and imagination. Their dreams smell of Rabelais and his Abbey of Thelema (without doors, windows or clocks, following the law of ‘love, and do as you like’).

Anyway, everyone can critically evaluate the disaster of the profit economy and propose an economy of play, a ‘poetical economy’.

The world can be transformed: this is neither daydreaming of an illusory past, nor dreaming of a radical revolution. Fourier had seen the monumental failure of the French Revolution and Filliou noted both the ruin of dictatorial Communism and the cynicism of Capitalism. So we must all build a circuit of exchanges (a fiction) towards (or within) an ETERNAL NETWORK under permanent construction. Filliou and Fourier elaborated a series of principles that are necessary for any attempt to invent this playful domain where art is what makes life more interesting than art.

- The right to be lazy, which Fourier found so useful, and permanent activity, towards the reduction (indeed the abolishment) of coercive labour.
- The right to be scattered. Fourier says that ‘fluttering’ is a fundamental passion. Filliou urges us to ‘do something else’ and calls this *autrisme* (‘else-ism’).

⁶ Robert Filliou, ‘Rencontres art et spiritualité’ (‘Art Meets Spirituality’), concept text for the gathering in Amsterdam in August 1989, in the journal *AD HOC (Artists and the Earth)*, 1988, pp.110–111.

⁷ Isabelle Fremeux, *Les Sentiers de L’utopie (The Paths of Utopia)*. Paris: La découverte, 2012.

⁸ Join the association *Mille voix/1001 sources* (‘1000 Voices/1001 Sources’), founded in 2016 as a continuation of the Genial Republic and the Eternal Network. All is still possible; we have to act with our feet on the ground in the garden of permaculture. Email: 1001voix@free.fr.

- The right to equivalence, i.e. the end of the hierarchy of values and the illusion of equality. Filliou's principle of the well made, the badly made, the not made.
- The principle of *gastrosophie*, in Fourier's words, or how to organise life around a global participative ecology.
- The principle of non-power, in Filliou's words, in all domains, i.e. the invention of the non-school of non-knowledge, which goes back to Fourier's principle of non-directive education.
- The principle of playfulness in all domains, in Fourier's words (echoed by Huizinga in *Homo ludens*) that Filliou translated into the principle of Permanent Creation governed by the Poetical Economy, because all humans are potential geniuses (imagination and innocence) on this territory, and there will be no more competition with defeats and victories but only emulation (Fourier). We play not to win but only to play (the principle of Filliou's dice in *Eins, Un, One*).

These principles cannot be dissociated from each other. They are the keys and tools for Another World, for Other Worlds ruled by plurality, multiplicity, diversity straddling space and time.

2013/2016

Biography

Michel Giroud, oral painter and tailor of every genre (words, letters, writings, gestures, voices, cries, sounds, drawings, diagrams, scores, objects, assemblages, visual devices, videos, podcasts, interactive actions, lecture-performances, interventions...). Historian and theorist of the avant-gardes (Dada, Fluxus and others), author of various essays (Audiberti, Nougaro, Raoul Hausmann, Bryen, Wolf Vostell, Filliou, Dufrene, Artaud...), founding director of *Kanal*, a journal of Tour de France (with various comrades from intermedia and transmedia arts, 1984–1994). He also writes for *Art Presse*, *Art Vivant*, *Info ArTitudes*, *Canal*, *Kanal*, *Inter...* (a member of AICA France since 1975) and has organised and co-organised numerous exhibitions in France. Founding director of the book series *Projectoires* (*Projectories*, 1973–1981, for the Champ Libre publishing house), *L'Oeil absolu* (*Absolute Eye*, 1974–1977, for the Le Chêne publishing house), *Trajectoires* (*Trajectories*, 1977–1981, for the Jean-Michel Place publishing house) and *L'Ecart absolu* (*Absolute Failure*, since 1999, for the presses du réel publishing house in Dijon). Entrepreneur in every genre: founder of festivals (*Mille voies/1000 voix*, Poitiers, since 1997), of the Nomadic University (since 1990), of ephemeral journals and artists' books (*KaO*, *Non Stop News*, *Mille voies/1000 voix...*), founder of the Musée des Muses AMusées (MMAM, 2000, in Alpina).

Co-organiser of the exhibition 'Comment va ta vache' ('How Is Your Cow'), November 2000 – January 2001 at MAC Lyon and editor of the first issue of the *Mille voix/1001 bulletin*, published for the occasion and subtitled *Le journal de la Cédille et de l'Ecart absolu* (Journal of the Cedilla and of Absolute Failure).

Publisher of Sylvie Jouval's catalogue raisonné of Filliou's multiples (*Robert Filliou : éditions et multiples*. Dijon: les presses du réel, 2003) and of Pierre Tilman's Filliou biography (*Robert Filliou nationalité poète*. Dijon: les presses du réel, 2007).

Michel Giroud has taken part in numerous gatherings around Art's Birthday and Robert Filliou.

[Translated from the French by Anders Kreuger.]