

The form of a city changes faster, alas, than the human heart

by Jacques Roubaud

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A review by Ric Carfagna

The form of the city... by Jacques Roubaud is a generous collection of poems from 1991-1998. This is the first translation into English; it was originally published in French in 1999. The translation was performed wonderfully by Keith & Rosemarie Waldrop as part of their 'French Literature Series.' Its 247 pages offer a variety of forms and content. There is a covering of the spectrum from sporadic image-apprehensions, written hurriedly in a moment of inspiration, to a more ruminated verse that takes the reader leisurely through the Parisian city streets: the 'obvious' sites of interest and other venues of 'lesser' prominence. All of these perspectives are presented with a visually rich palette. These are poetically impressionistic word-portraits in which the reader discovers a city with as much beauty, diversity and color as those contained within the frames of a Monet, Renoir or Sisley. These poems portray a city both of the present and the past, intertwining the two into a nostalgic, at times melancholic observation of a Paris, now transformed with 'modern conveniences' and touristy thoroughfare. The reader receives a well-balanced perspective to the city, its history and its evolving. This is a collection that spans 1991-1998, and in the words there is a tangibility that one senses, experiencing the passage of time. There is a continuous counterpoise between harmonious elements and dissonant impressions. This keeps the readers intrigued as they follow a curious poetic trajectory, progressing at times as a serpentine route analogous to the city streets themselves. At times the book resembles a Baedeker, instructing us as we journey through a city's present and past; one may never know where they will find themselves at a turn of the page as the book's progresses.

The book is divided into three main sections and these in turn are broken into sub-sections. The final main division also contains a coda-like segment functioning as a ruminative culmination and commentary; this coda illumines the book's curiously bittersweet title. I liken this book structurally to the classical symphony in form, with its presentation of main themes and then variations on that theme. Also a concordant interaction occurs between the sections creating an interweaving unity to the work as a whole. Although there is structural solidarity to the work, it is diverse in the presentation and expounding of its contents. There are many examples of experimentation involving wordplay, found poetry and excursions into the concrete realm of poetic construction. This experimental aspect does not predominate, but it does add another dimension to the work and is an integral constituent of the unified totality. This book is a welcome addition to any lover of poetry!

Ric Carfagna

