Pierre Albert-Birot
translated by Barbara Wright

POESIE 31
31 POCKET POEMS
This edition is dedicated to PAB and Arlette.

Special thanks to Arlette Albert-Birot for her generous assistance in this first translation into English of Trente et un Poèmes de poche, Paris, Editions SIC, 1917.

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First Edition

Obscure Publications
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Black River Falls, Wisconsin 54615

“Watch Out for Obscure Publications”
31

POCKET POEMS

Pierre Albert-Birot

TRANSLATED BY BARBARA WRIGHT

Obscure Publications 2003
Pure chance led to the London *Times Literary Supplement* asking me to review the 1964 Gallimard edition of Pierre Albert-Birot’s *Grabinoulor*. Panic! I held the TLS in awed respect, I thought I had never heard of PAB, and as for *Grabinoulor*...? I raced off to the British Library, and my panic grew. The library possessed none of his books - or maybe one or two - and the catalogue indicated that almost nothing was in print. *Grabinoulor* was like no other book I had seen. And it had no punctuation. (The last of these 31 poems explains why.) It was obvious that I was going to need some background knowledge to fuel my important (to me) début in the TLS, but where was I going to get it?

But Pure Chance, happily, was still rooting for me. I had a French friend, Claude, who was reputed to be able to find any French book that ever existed. Naively, I wrote off and casually asked him to find me *Trente et un Poèmes de poche*. I had discovered that this was Albert-Birot’s first book of poetry, but I was overlooking the fact that it dated from 1917, and had been published by PAB himself - in an edition of 135 copies. I didn’t realize that I was asking for the impossible. Nevertheless, within a few days Claude had come up with a copy. Pure Chance - known to me ever since as The Great Goddess Chance - had fixed things so that, at precisely that moment, PAB and his wife Arlette had been
even harder up than usual and had had to send a few books to a sale held by the Paris PEN Club.

I didn’t realize, either, that I couldn’t have chosen a better introduction to Albert-Birot’s œuvre than the seminal 31 Pocket Poems. Apollinaire’s POEM PREFACE PROPHECY which introduces them is exactly what it claims to be — and it correctly prophesies what the PAB of 1917 was to become in the fifty further years he had to live. But my Great Goddess had by no means finished showering her blessings on me. In 1964 Albert-Birot, who had been an almost totally neglected recluse for over twenty years was, with his much, much younger wife Arlette, living what he called the fourth period of his life. Arlette was starting her career as a lycée professor — and it just so happened that one of her colleagues was Claude’s wife, Eliane.

I would never have had the courage to approach M. Albert-Birot on my own, but now all I had to do in my quest for background knowledge was to ask Eliane to talk to Arlette. And hey presto! — just before Christmas 1964 I found myself invited to the rue des Saints-Pères and allowed to work in PAB’s library for two whole days. That was long enough for me to get some idea of just what kind of a polymath this shy, modest man was. And also quite long enough for me to realize that in spite of the huge difference in their ages, PAB and Arlette were the happiest couple I had ever met, and that PAB was the happiest, most vital, most friendly and fascinating old man who could ever have existed.

“Old man” is chronologically accurate, although it was impossible to see PAB as such. He had always been coy about his age because circumstances had made him a late developer, and by the time he founded his ground-breaking avant-garde review SIC, in January 1916, he was getting on
for forty, whereas his contributors were largely very young unknown writers and artists, some of whom he was publishing for the first time. Between January 1916 and December 1919 SIC presented, among many others: Apollinaire, Aragon, Breton, Cendrars, Cocteau, Max Jacob, Picasso, Raymond Radiguet, Reverdy, Philippe Soupault, Survage, Tzara, Zadkine... Everybody.

No one who knew the Albert-Birot of his first period - 1876 to about 1915 - would have been able to predict the prodigious achievements of his second period - 1916 to 1931. He had had a fairly happy early childhood in Angoulême until he was 14, when his father first lost his money and then walked out on his mother, and he had to leave school. Two years later he and his mother moved to Paris, where she tried to make a living by giving piano lessons. She couldn’t afford to send her son to a lycée there, but entry to the Ecole des beaux-arts was free, and he was accepted for classes in both sculpture and drawing. He continued to study Greek and Latin on his own, and for ten years attended every conceivable course of lectures at the Sorbonne and the Collège de France.

By the turn of the century he was beginning to earn a meagre living by restoring works of art for an antique dealer, and doing sculpture on apartment blocks. But he had also in the meantime set up house with Marguerite Bottini, the sister of a fellow student - and their fourth (and last) child was born in 1906. In 1909 Marguerite Bottini left him, married someone else and went to live abroad.

Four young children on his hands, no money... All this time PAB had been searching for his real way in life. He knew he had one, but he had hardly ever come across anything but the traditional in the arts. (His beautiful,
realistic sculpture, *The Widow*, is the centrepiece in the
cemetery of Issy-les-Moulineaux, just outside the gates of
Paris.) Extremely reserved, with no social skills, unable to sell
himself, unsure which of the arts he should concentrate on,
he painted, wrote poetry, sculpted whenever he could...

Ironically, it was the first world war that was to prove
his epiphany. Unfit for military service, he gradually saw it
was everyone’s duty to do everything possible to challenge
the sort of society that could allow such a catastrophe, and
that it was the artist, with his heightened awareness and his
power of invention, who was the best placed to communicate
the fundamental need for change to the man in the street. To
produce the new, but without rejecting tradition.

So what is needed, said PAB to himself, is an avant-
garde review, to link the artists scattered on war duty and
those still at home. I’d better start one, then. But he knew
no one at all in the world of the arts, so in January 1916 he
produced the first (six-page) number of *SIC*, illustrations,
advertisements and all, entirely by himself. (He paid the
printer with his unemployment allowance.) He called his
review *SIC*, from Sounds, Ideas and Colours, and also from
the Latin affirmative adverb.

By now his children were being taken care of in an
artists’ orphanage, and in 1913 he had married Germaine de
Surville, a composer. Germaine supported him in everything
he did, and she was not so retiring as her husband. She had
made friends with a neighbour, the wife of the Italian Futurist
painter Gino Severini. Severini was enthusiastic about *SIC*,
he introduced Albert-Birot to Apollinaire – and *SIC* took off.
In 1916 Apollinaire was in the Italian hospital (in Paris),
recovering from his war wound, and PAB interviewed him
there. He published the result in *SIC* number 8 (August
1916.) “Where do we stand now?” PAB asked. Apollinaire answered: “...whether poets, prose writers or painters, this has been our aim: to express new and human ideas with simplicity, to create a new humanism which, founded on the knowledge of the past, should adapt letters and art to the progress observable in science and the new means which Man has at his disposition...”

This was roughly the aspiration Albert-Birot had himself announced months earlier in his very first number of SIC. In spite of all the difficulties life had piled up on him, he told the world:

Our aim is
To act –
We want:
To look, to see, to hear, to seek, and to carry you with us.
To live life, and say so; to live it, and invite you to live it with us...

And his lifelong creed remained:

Listen
say
YES
and you'll make
and you'll make
and you'll make
the sun shine
It's true
Here's my hand on it
YES

The present little volume, the 1917 31 Pocket Poems, was published when SIC was about half way through its existence.
It is both a beginning and a summing up. It is the first of all the volumes of poems, plays, novels, that PAB was to produce once he had realized that destiny had decided he was a poet, and it sums up all that he had learned and taught himself during his long apprentice years. He liked to say, and to repeat, that he was born in January 1916 with his review *SIC*, and the *31* brought together many of the ideas he was putting forward so positively in the review. Poetry was not a remote, refined art for the intellectual élite, it was a blend of the everyday and the imaginary, it was the innocent newborn discovering the world for the first time, a celebration of every trivial little component of life and of the inter-relationship of everything, it was a continuity, a synthesis of life and all the arts. The artist/poet is at a central point in the world around him.

Despite its great success – and even popularity – by the end of 1919 Albert-Birot had realized that with the end of the war there was no longer a vital need for *SIC*. And anyway, “avant-garde reviews should die young.” What was more, he needed time to write. So without any fanfares, after the December 1919 number he simply stopped publishing *SIC*. Whereupon, now he was no longer of any use to them, many of his enthusiastic contributors equally simply dropped him.

But in 1918, in a forest by the sea in Royan, Grabinoulor had suddenly appeared to him – and he stayed with him until the end of his life. Grabi was the author’s alter ego, but without the handicaps of being a mere man. He could “naturally travel at the same time in the past and the future”, he was interested in absolutely everything in this world (and in all the other worlds), he was funny, he had fun, he loved people and he loved life, everybody loved him... And between 1918 and his death in 1967, PAB told Grabi’s story
in six large volumes, most of which just got piled up in his wardrobe... (The book I reviewed for the TLS was merely a shortish selection from Vols: 1, 2, and 3.)

The 1920s were a prolific period for Albert-Birot. He wrote several volumes of poetry, he wrote novels, he developed his theory of the theatre, working with actors on his own plays, some of them set to music by Germaine, founding his own (shortlived) theatre, Le Plateau, in 1929. Constantly rejected by "proper" publishers, he and Germaine printed much of his work themselves, including the first book of Grabinoulor.

But in January 1931, Germaine died suddenly, and PAB's sad third period began. He was earning just about enough to live on as a restorer of antiques at the Larcade gallery, and he disciplined himself to write for one hour after lunch and one hour after dinner. Incapable of pushing his own wares, abandoned by many former friends, for nearly quarter of a century he lived a life that was "excessively, and much too solitary." Poems, plays, novels, Grabinoulor filled his wardrobe. He became resigned to having been almost totally forgotten - and yet his message never changed: "Listen/say/YES/and you'll make/the sun shine..."

There was one brief, but important, exception to this general abandonment. In 1933, Donoël published the first two books of Grabinoulor, and this led to Albert-Birot's lifelong friendship with the poet Jean Follain, who was a generation younger. It was Follain who insisted on Gallimard publishing the 1964 version of Grabinoulor - and this is where we came in - although he could not persuade the publishers to invest in anything other than a truncated version of the first three books. It was Follain who in 1936 invented the "Dîners Grabinoulor". (And it is thanks to Arlette that just
the other day [2002] PAB enthusiasts celebrated the 120th Grabi dinner.) It was Follain who was responsible for the long-overdue Albert-Birot number of Seghers' *Poètes d'aujourd'hui*. (Which was published just over three months before PAB's death in 1967.)

Back in the thirties, though, he saw almost no one, he went almost nowhere. And yet, towards the end of 1954, he casually said YES to a meeting that was to have unimaginable consequences. It inaugurated his fourth period, it made the last decade of his life unbelievably happy – and it also ensured his posthumous recognition.

Serge Férat, the painter, who had been a close associate of his in the SIC days, asked PAB if he would receive a young postgraduate student, and he said: All right, send her along to the gallery at lunchtime. The young postgraduate student was Arlette Lafont, who was preparing a thesis on Férat’s sister, Roch Grey. Roch Grey – the pen name of the Baroness d'Ertingen – had with her brother been in almost daily touch with PAB all those years before, and Férat told Arlette that no one knew his sister better than PAB, he was the ideal person to help her with her research. “But,” he added, “he is so much of a recluse these days, he certainly won’t see you.”

But he did see her. And his first words were to express his amazement that, being a woman, she was nevertheless on time! He invited her to go to his flat the next day to pick up a document... and there his amazement grew as a result of her own amazement. The rue des Saints-Pères was a revelation to Arlette. “A vast apartment, but dark; high ceilings, immense mirrors, paintings, the walls covered in paintings, objects on the tables, books everywhere. An extraordinary accumulation. I couldn’t stop looking, exclaiming. Everything was so marvellous, but it lacked a bit of warmth, a bit of
gaiety; even, if I may say so, a bit of life, rather like the master of the house. But he livened up. He brought out SIC, then a poem, then a book of poems, ten books of poems, Gravinoulor, and what was unfolding in front of my eyes and dazzling me was an entire period, yes, but above all an entire man's life.”

In her account of their meeting, Arlette laconically remarks: “Should I add that the way to the rue Saints-Pères soon became familiar to me?” She tells how she went there often, then more and more often, and one day she simply didn’t leave. “I had so naturally become the companion of Pierre Albert-Birot.”

Natural this certainly was, and destined, if you believe in destiny. PAB liked to say, with metaphorical truth, that he had been born with SIC in 1916. Some 50 years later, he was reborn with Arlette. But there were difficulties. Arlette had been married very young to a childhood friend, a boy in the merchant navy. Her parents were aghast at this natural turn of events – particularly as, according to bureaucratic statistics, PAB had actually been born in the same year as Arlette’s grandfather. She was only just starting out on her teaching career. They had very little money. But it was clear to Arlette as it was to PAB that this simply had to happen, and nature took its course. In October 1962 they were finally able to marry.

PAB’s re-rebirth was total. From being a hermit, he again became his natural self, a sociable, outgoing man who positively enjoyed meeting his fellow men. Arlette had a decrepit old car, and he delighted to be driven everywhere. He loved going to openings of exhibitions, new plays, concerts, she arranged for him to take an active part in conferences, she surrounded him by writers, artists, critics,
and especially by young poets with whom he had endless, mutually-enlightening discussions.

For 2½ years I had the extraordinary experience of being welcomed as a visiting member of this “family” of PAB’s. Particularly unforgettable were the few days I spent with them in the remote countryside of the Lot département in August 1966. A “cultural and artisanal” group had grown up round the beautiful medieval castle of Bonaguil, they were fêting the 50th anniversary of SIC, Arlette and PAB had taken a house nearby, and they invited me to stay with them there. The PAB/Bonaguil connection had only begun a little over a year before, with the publication of the truncated Gallimard Grabinoulor. The poet Max Pons, who ran the castle and the cultural circle and edited their review, La Barbe, had been pacing up and down in the nearby town where his wife was expecting their first baby when his eye was caught by Grabinoulor in the window of a bookstore. Grabinoulor became almost as important to Max Pons as the baby (Stefan), and he wrote to Albert-Birot saying that the old stones of Bonaguil could only fascinate someone whose name, Pierre, fitted him so entirely. They were made for one another.

And so it turned out. By the following year the mutual fascination was so great that the castle had organized an exhibition for SIC’s birthday, a book signing, and, in the vaults, an almost medieval banquet. As the owner of a very small Fiat I was detailed to go and fetch PAB’s old friend Zadkine, who lived in the neighbourhood...

Arlette Albert-Birot has always had, and still has, phenomenal energy — and she knows how to use it. “Phenomenal” is no exaggeration. She had not much more than a decade to change PAB’s life on earth, but it became her mission (a word she herself would never use) to ensure his
survival after his death. All those manuscripts came out of
the wardrobe and became accessible to an ever-widening
public. Rougerie have published some six volumes of Albert-
Birot poems, six volumes of his plays, and all his novels. In
1973 Jean-Michel Place reissued the whole of *SIC* (and re-
reissued it in 1980, and again in 1992), and in 1991 the same
publisher brought out *all six books of Grabinoulor* – for the
first time! Now, 2003, Gallimard have announced that they
are publishing Pierre Albert-Birot’s poetry in their fabled
*Poesie/Gallimard* series.

In the meantime, Arlette became a professor at the
École normale supérieure – the élite university where they
teach élite professors to teach – she travels all over the world
lecturing and taking part in conferences, she encourages and
harbours Italians, Germans, English scholars and translators
at the Pierre Albert-Birot Archive. For twenty years she has
been one of the prime organizers of the open-air Marché de
la Poésie which takes place every June in the shade of the
ancient church in the Place Saint-Sulpice. When I translated
the *First Book of Grabinoulor*, which Atlas Press published in
1986 and Dalkey Archive Press in 1987, I read the whole
translation aloud to her, and we had long discussions. Before
this, the only translation into English of anything by PAB had
been back in the sixties – just after my TLS article and a
programme on him I did for Radio Three here. This was my
selection of maybe ten of the 31 *Pocket Poems*; they were
published by the extraordinary Scottish artist, Ian Hamilton
Finlay, in his magazine called *Poor Old Tired Horse*. But in
1997, eleven years after the *Grabi* translation, Debra Kelly
produced her scholarly work *Pierre Albert-Birot, A Poetics in
Movement, A Poetics of Movement* (in intimate consultation with
Arlette, naturally), which was published by Associated University Presses.

Over the years Arlette has been gently nudging me to translate the remaining poems in this 31 collection, and I have been meaning to... But a few months ago, Paul Rosheim wrote and almost casually remarked that he thought it high time that at least a small volume of Pierre Albert-Birot’s poetry should be published in English. That precipitated my own epiphany. It somehow seemed that nothing else mattered than that I should complete the translation of the 31. I called Arlette that evening, to communicate my enthusiasm, and left a garbled message on her mobile phone. When she called me back later it was to tell me that she was in Cherbourg, where she was surrounded by a group of PAB fans to whom she had just given a talk – on Trente et un Poèmes de poche! And one day very soon we are going to meet, and go over every word of the translation, as we did with Grabi, until we are satisfied that we can do no better.

And this we have just done, in July 2003.

Barbara Wright
31 POCKET POEMS
POEM
PREFACE
PROPHECY

1

Pierre Albert-Birot is a sort of pyrogen
If you want to light a match
   Strike it on him
   It's quite likely to catch fire
   There aren't enough pyrogens these days
   But I don't know about matches

2

He asked me for a preface
   That's to say a prophecy
But I haven't the nerve to set up as a prophet
   So here's a poem
Seeing that I like and we like poets
But if you only knew how much I like prophets
And yet how more than anything else I like reality
   I'm not really interested in the future
But Pierre Albert-Birot is
   With you
   And me
   The present
What Pierre Albert-Birot does is so pure
   Or so full of simplicity
That at first you are disagreeably surprised
   The thing is he isn't afraid
   Of being called "primitive"
You could have said the same about Charlemagne

So modest that for so long he's remained anonymous
   Yet he's extremely proud
Of the people he likes and of the things he loves
   But not proud himself
And the first thing this proves is that he is full of that modern spirit which of all things
   in this world
   is the furthest removed from egoism

Tenderness is the reality
In which he discovers new poetic values
   They are formal or lyrical
   And so consistent with the truth
   That in less than ten years people will be amazed
   That they ever found them amazing
And I give him a fraternal accolade
   And to his kiss of peace I offer
   The Lip of the Well of Truth

Guillaume Apollinaire
I

What are you going to paint Friend? The invisible,
What are you going to say Friend? The unsayable
Sir, for my eyes are in my head.
– Don’t worry, he’s a poet.
II

At the very back of the courtyard
At the very back of the bedroom
A poor devil crouches down

A THOUGHT GRADUALLY FEELING ITS WAY
Where are you? Where I'm not
Where are you not? Where you see me
Where? where? Elsewhere
What colour?
A different one
And your shape? Not this one
Can you speak? When I'm keeping quiet
What are you saying? WHAT IS
I'm sitting by the fire.

What am I doing?

It's snowing.

White houses
You yield your singing body to the sand to the sea to the sun. Your body is
sand
seasun
white
houses
green
pine trees
bluesky
bluesky
bluesky
V

IN THE SUN things beings shapes noises sounds colours IN THE SUN
O my eyes
    take it all in
like hands
IN THE LIGHT like a fly IN THE LIGHT so merrily swirling in our beautiful world       my being

July 1916
VI

(Start reading from the bottom line)

I live I have lived
  I go out and I turn off
    I come in and I turn on
Light bulb and two-way switch
  LIFE
Yesterday today tomorrow
  Hallo Granddad
  Hallo Monsieur
Hallo baby
The passers-by are walking quickly
My hand was cold just now I'd been carrying a parcel
When shall we see lights on the boulevard?
They're talking as they pass by but what are they saying?
I too was a passer-by just now
and I was cold
and I was walking quickly
but I wasn't talking
What a lot of things you see on a boulevard
even when you can't see
VIII

I am the telephone exchange where all the wires converge
I can hear what they all say
what a lot of things and lights and noises
I shall never be able to put through all the calls they ask me to
I shall never be able to hear all they're thinking
all these wires
IX

I can hear that nothing's stirring
The atmosphere's asleep around
the alert shell of my inquisitive ear

And the worlds are revolving

And I can't hear them revolving
Italian shapes, soft ovalities in slow ellipsoidal motion - delicately coloured in blond light

My feet and my back are warming up
The fire is catching
They're naked
lying in the sands
They're hidden under their furs
They're in the water round the fire
They're yellow they're red they're white
they're black

Where's it coming from the wind that's trying
to open my door?
XII

It's the bedroom he died in.

Windows doors draught people taking away
people bringing in people washing sweeping shaking
polishing
The walls look just the same as before
The sheets are white

"If the lady and gentleman would like to come upstairs, their room is ready."
XIII

All around
above
below
men and machines dance
rhythmic attendance on it

Afterwards, after its mortal act, the whole steel body bows majestically

That was made by a man.
kisses death rattles engines bells cannonstrams voices thunderstorms shouts cracks groans
songs lies hates loves pains joys men animals machines

What a row when you can't hear anything!
Who is that laughing blond child running after his coloured marbles? It's me.
And who is the poet writing this poem?
It's that laughing blond child who was running after his coloured marbles.
I said I would say what I shall say
But I've never said what I said I would say
And I always say something else

O POEM ARCHITECTURE OF THOUGHT
XVII

The town is free from sin
The snow has given it absolution
A nun slipping
   A horse falling
No though the town is in its nightgown
XVIII

Down there at the bottom of the road I've never seen
I'm looking at the enamelled vase
a person I don't know is talking to me he
is walking and takes no notice of me
it is purple it is blue
Is he dead or alive? has he been born?
On my table is a Chinese vase
XIX

What a lot of shapes colours and sounds
What a long way you can travel in a human head
THE EIFFEL TOWER IS NO TALLER THAN A MAN
XX

Two eyes of violet electric light

speed

Three letters to be written

VIOLET

Every evening
all through the night
they remain
I pass by
XXI

I dreamed no I am dreaming that I dreamed that I would dream the dream that I dream when I'm walking Hey! Hey! Look out handsome that must have been in the dream I dreamed that I would dream

But I've forgotten the number
XXII

Why have I a nose a mouth and two eyes and hair on my head and two feet and two hands like a man?
And why is there earth and air and water how strange it all is I’d never seen it before
XXIII

I’m waiting for some letters
I’m waiting for death
I’m waiting for the tram
Today’s tomorrows will become yesterdays

ETERNITY

Your very good health!
It’s cold, I’m waiting for the Summer
I’m unfolding an old bit of paper Sunday tram rattling along a suburban road
tfull up full up bell ringing garden sunlight hallo Papa she must have had
pointed breasts in the ornate little salon with its seascapes black-gold-metal-piano
where we were watching the rain

4.30! what if I got dressed and went out
XXV

eyes eyes eyes voices hats light shouts
“I will speak but I will speak...”

I've taken on the shape of the hall and I contain the eyes the voices the hats the light the shouts

26 February 1917
XXVI

It's something running after something
I'm not running I'm sitting down and yet
I go from the moon to the sun but never catch
the thing I'm running after
     she was wearing her green dress and her big black hat
there was sun there were strawberries  whoa whoa whoa whoa whoa look't th'train it
used to be an old monastery as silent as an ancient painting now it's a boulevard  hoo!
hoo! hoo! hoo! hoo! the town was enormous when I was very small that way, that
way, go and hide in the corridor but when I saw it again it had become very small.
I can see myself hanging by my feet from the trapeze as it swings
gently between two trees in my old days garden path

Today is Sunday
XXVIII

Little white table a pot of honey medicine bottle a glass a spoon in it tick-tick tick-tock
tick-tock ten to 5 a bed a man in it Albert-Birot the neighbours are chopping wood
in my head they're singing on the right they're talking on the left the children are
shouting under the window
the train is going by at the end of the street you think you can hear fire engines
Germaine Dollie
music dance crowd Paris
New York
Peking Universe
infinities
XXIX

The clock has struck because years and years ago a man wanted it to strike at this particular passage of time
Are we by any chance clocks?

But my dear man, the half hour's just struck, you're late!
XXX

Why can't we see beyond what have you lost she ought to be here good morning madame that one's in a hurry so you see he told me just like that it was day it is night ni back you stand Henri after all it would be very boring if we saw everything Papa's calling me for dinner
XXXI

Nature has no full stops
Day isn’t separated from night
nor life from death
enemies are united by their hate
Væ soli
Why? Because he doesn’t exist
This book is not
separated
from those that will follow it
and I’m going to stop
using full stops
This edition is limited to 60 copies.

This is number 6.