

## Waterboarding & Poetry:

### Francois Villon & the New Extreme Experimental American Poetry

The rack was the reality.

In the chill air he was stripped. He was attached to the rack that sloped down from head to feet. His outstretched arms were strapped behind his head to iron rings in the wall. The middle of his naked back was arched on a raised, painfully wedge-shaped wooden block. His ankles were lashed to bolts in the floor. The rack was ratcheted, stretching his body. His penis was tightly laced, preventing urination. He was told to open his mouth. He would have been beaten, had he refused. All this without haste. All this in numb terror. A pear-shaped object was pushed into his mouth, the *poire d'angoisse*, named after a bitter-tasting pear grown in the Dordogne village of Angoisse. {Note: *angoisse* in modern French means “anguish”—a very bitter-tasting pun, as are many in Villon’s own work--dbc} The *poire* was hinged in upper and lower sections that could be levered apart with a key, widening them, forcing the jaws open. A strip of gauze was laid across the prisoner’s mouth.

(continues next page due to image)

Then, slow dribble by dribble, slow pint by pint, pipkins of water were poured down the throat through a horn tunnel, gradually but on and on.



Usually about four coquemars,  
large kettlefuls, sixteen belly-swelling pints, water pouring from  
swollen ears, but always into the trapped bladder until the body was  
bursting, drowning, helpless, fainting,. Then release, retching and spewing  
in the straw, the clerk asking for names, getting no answer, the half-  
conscious victim roughly dressed and hauled in soaking clothes back to his  
cell.

(Images here and below & this text from: Danse Macabre: Francois Villon  
Poetry and Murder in medieval France by Aubrey Burr)

These are the procedures used on the 15th Century French poet Francois  
Villon.

In the early 21st Century, the USA produced its first truly Extreme  
Experimental Poetry--the military censored Poems from Guantanamo,  
writing produced by tortured detainees held as "enemy combatants" in a War  
on Terror based on among other things, the "16 words" of the forged "Italian

Letter" and the transcribed ravings of a desperate alcoholic would-be Iraqi immigrant to Germany (Curveball.)

The translations have also been an issue for some, in that they are by "non-literary" translators assembled by the lawyers who made the book possible in the first place.

(The lawyers and translators and Iowa University Press who published the book, have long shown great courage in the face of the military and governmental extreme restrictions and censorships.)

Thank you to Joseph Parsons, Acquisitions Editor of Iowa Press, for providing the following details:

Just as the habeas attorneys must pay their own way to Guantanamo to meet with their clients, the "nonliterary translators"--as they've come to be known--were hired by these attorneys so they could communicate with the detainees. In many cases the original Arabic or Pashto versions of poems were deemed too sensitive and not released by the Pentagon's privilege review teams, though the translated forms were. By "released," I mean the attorneys could not even keep copies as they worked to represent their clients. All of this left Marc Falkoff and the Press to make do with translations rendered without benefit of the range of tools (dictionaries and other reference works, in particular).

By basing reasons for War on Terror on Error--forgeries, invented "evidence," to be furthered by "embedded reporters" and the propaganda and disinformation filling the media thanks to near total use of the former Israeli Intelligence member co-founded MEMRI as "sources," "reports," and "news"--everything that follows becomes contaminated, turning Language into Lies, Weapons of Mass Destruction of "critical thinking" and "poetics," reading and writing and producing immense Walls of mirrors, which are taken to be windows into a world of "Open forms" and "radical resistances" of phoneme and morpheme to "closure" and where, to paraphrase the title of memoir by Lynne Cheney, "the skies are not cloudy all day."

The skies of Empire--the open forms of the "open range" "where the deer and the antelope play" and

Seldom is heard

a discouraging word  
and the skies are not cloudy all day."

Along the way this New Extreme Experimental American Poetry has included the sky writing of 9/11 in NYC, eerily echoing the CIA backed Coup's bombing of the Presidential Palace in Santiago, Chile 9/11 1972, the Photographic Atrocity Exhibit of Abu-Ghraib and a "disappeared" CIA library of waterboarding torture videos.

This new Waterboarding Extreme Experimental Poetry (WEEP) permits the USA to accomplish something dazzling: not only to forge into the Unknown of the 21st Century, but to simultaneously travel into the period of the 15th century just prior to and including Columbus' "Discovery of the new World." By opening the Future of American poetry, America has also been able to reverse the colonization process and begin to establish "outposts" in 15th Century Europe, and so, beating Europe to the punch, "Discover the Old World" prior to its discovering of the "New."

American reviewers and commentators on the Poets of Guantanamo have so far found exactly what they were looking for: "bad" poetry in Formal terms, written by "bad" people and translated by "bad" (i.e. "non-literary") translators.

Since, ironically, the translation procedure is not unlike some advocated by such luminaries of American "radical" "experimental" poetries as Charles Bernstein, one might posit the Guantanamo works as simply "bad" Experimental poems by "bad" people, "untrained amateurs," and relegate it to the dustbins of history along with a lot of other "poetry of witness."

Due to their methodologies of reading and writing, American reviewers, commentators; have missed the hidden In Plain Site/Sight/Cite nature of these "purloined letters."

That is, that the poems are the production of American language, American readings and writings and "mistranslations" (non-literary) and the most advanced and most medieval techniques of the "discipline of Writing."

In effect, the writing has not yet been recognized as American.

But what looks back at American eyes from the poem's letterings on the page--is the writing produced by years of American training, discipline, censorship, forced and tortured words further tortured along their restricted and supervised journey to the page in a book published only in these versions in the land of the torturer.

So--of course, the torturers are very happy and self-satisfied in reading these works and finding them lacking in poetry.

It is a sign of the "rightness" of their cause--and of their Security--from there being any "good" poetry to issue from these "enemy combatants," "Islamofascists" and "terrorists."

The sign of a major defeat for the American reader and writer is that their distance from Language has become so great they cannot recognize their own writing staring them back in the face.

But then--this is for the better, is it not?--For it absolves the American reader and writer of all responsibility, of recognizing any "hand in the matter."

Robert Pinsky, former Poet Laureate, while acknowledging the situation of poetry in a raw state of the Guantanamo poems--also remarked--"No Mandelstams here." How comforting for the uneasy American readers and writers to be so reassured!

But then Stalin's Gulags contained far more millions of prisoners than Guantanamo.

Rejoining the 15th Century, as also the 21st is forged into--a few words from a Contemporary, Maitre Francois Villon, born 1431, the year Jeanne d'Arc was burned at the stake by Occupation forces during the One Hundred Years War. --An early ancestor of the War without End on Terror.

In many ways the poem below by Villon finds echoes in the writings from Guantanamo.

But then--Francois Villon was a "bad" man.

Probably a far worse "bad" man than the great majority of those in Guantanamo.

(Villon, already twice sentenced to hanging, several times imprisoned and

tortured, was banished from Paris in 1463--from which he'd already absented himself twice, for five years of self-imposed exile-- & "vanishes from history.")

from "Ballade"

(aka "Ballad of the Hanged Men"; translation by Galway Kinnell)

Brother humans who live on after us  
Don't let your hearts harden against us  
For if you have pity on wretches like us  
More likely God will show mercy on you  
You see us five, six, hanging here  
As for the flesh we loved too well  
A while ago it was eaten and has rotted away  
And we the bones turn to ashes and dust  
Let no one make us the butt of jokes  
But pray God that he absolves us all . . .

The rain has rinsed and washed us  
The sun dried us and turned us black  
Magpies and ravens have pecked out our eyes  
And plucked our beards and eyebrows  
Never ever can we stand still  
Now here, now there, as the wind shifts  
At its whim it keeps swinging us  
Pocked by birds worse than a sewing-thimble  
Therefore don't join in our brotherhood  
But pray God that he absolves us all

Prince Jesus, master over all  
Don't let us fall into hell's dominion  
We've got nothing to do or settle down there  
Men, there's nothing to laugh at  
But pray God that he absolves us all



---d-b chirot

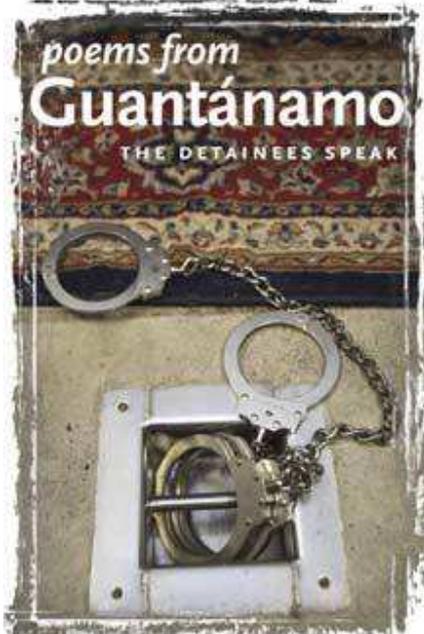


Ly comence le grant codicille & le  
statut maistre francois Villon

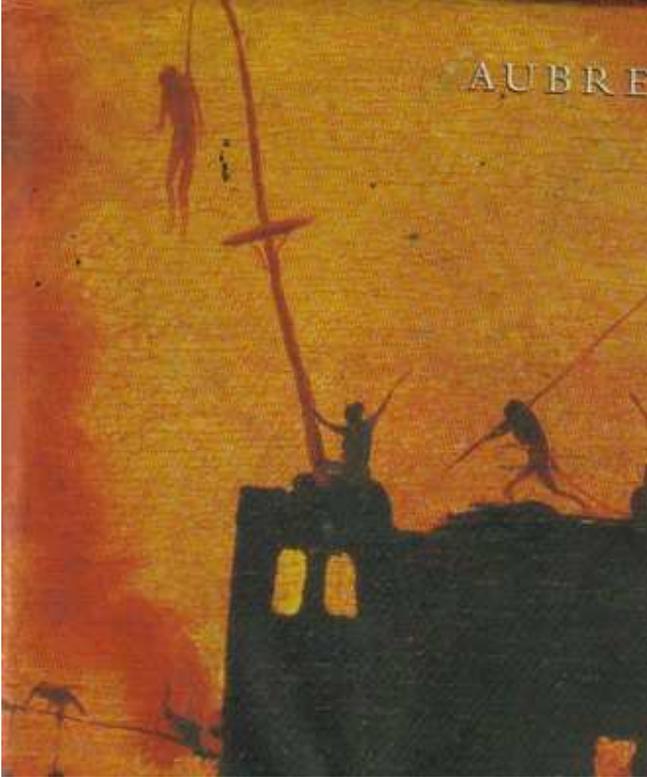
En lan de mon trentiesme aage  
Que toutes mes hontes ieuz beues  
De du tout fol encor ne saige  
Non obstant maintes peines eues  
Lesquelles iay toutes receues  
Souz la main tshaulte danffigny  
Seue que il est seignant les tues  
Qu'il soit le miey le le regny

Frontispiece of the first printed edition of the *Testament*, 1489.

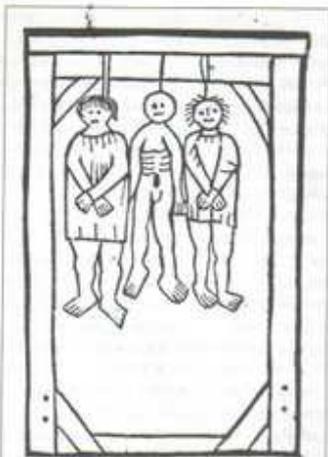
"At last Guantánamo has found its voice."—Gore Vidal



MARC FALKOFF





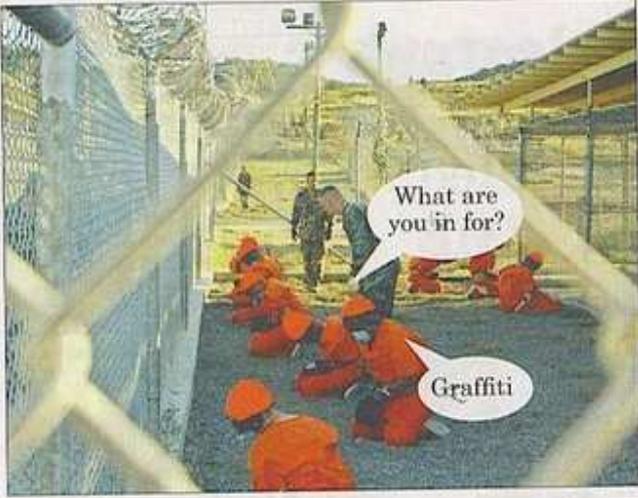


Epitaphie dudit Billon  
freres humains qui apres nos crimes  
flayez les cieux contre nos endurances  
Car se pitié de nos pouurez auez  
Dieu en aura plusost de vous mercis  
Dous nous hoies cy ataches cinq sie  
Quat de la char q trop au des nouzue  
Ellest pieca deuouree et pouttie  
et nos os deuends cédies a pouldre  
De nostre mal personne ne sey tie  
Mais piteo-dieu que tous nous ducif  
se absouidre  
g iii.

The multiple sufferings of the hanged man. 'Erism humains'







**DI IINKETT TO RE FAST.**



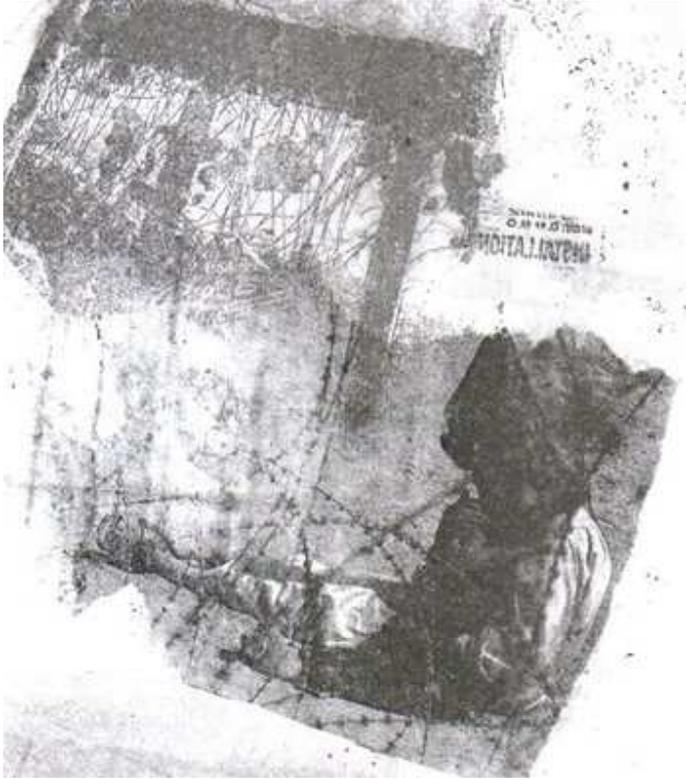
View of the boulevards, Paris, with its towers and charred houses.

U. Roger-Viollet, Paris



our Manassés, Meung, in which Villon is thought to have been imprisoned.





--d-b chirot