



STUDIES IN COMPARATIVE LITERATURE 11

Singing Poets

*Literature and Popular Music in
France and Greece*

Dimitris Papanikolaou



LEGENDA

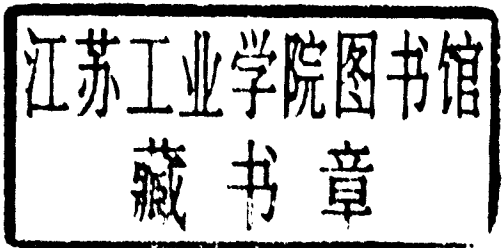
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Studies in Comparative Literature 11

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FOR MY MOTHER,
Κωνσταντίνα Κυριάκου Νάνου

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I would like to extend my thanks to the Faculty of Medieval and Modern Languages, the Sub-Faculty of Byzantine and Modern Greek at the University of Oxford, and the British Comparative Literature Association, for providing the generous grants that have made this publication possible.

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An Andrew Mellon postdoctoral fellowship in the Humanities (UCL) allowed me to rethink the focus of this book, but also gave me the necessary freedom to pursue other projects while taking some distance from this one. This was also a characteristic of the first year of my appointment as University Lecturer in the Faculty of Modern Languages at Oxford. I am grateful to numerous colleagues and friends at both Oxford and UCL for their support.

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I have always linked my experience of Savvopoulos's music to Alexis Kyritsopoulos's marvellous paintings and sketches. Thus, I feel extremely honoured to be able to reproduce one of them on the cover of this book. The sketch, comprising different

versions of a songwriter dancing in a neverending sequence, encompasses all I tried to say with the notion of the singing poet. I am grateful to the artist for permission to reprint.

My mother Konstantina Nanou and my sister Eleni Syminelaki-Nanou have always been there, my most consistent points of reference.

Finally, this book is the fruit, in more than one way, of my life with William McEvoy. It feels as if I owe him every single word here — and much much more.

NOTE ON transliteration, REFERENCES, AND TRANSLATIONS



There is still, unfortunately, no common framework for the transliteration of Greek words and names in the Latin alphabet. I have thus based my transliteration practice on the 'romanization style' followed by the University of Oxford Library catalogue. I differ from it in a small number of issues, especially in the transliteration of the different sounds of the Greek χ , and in the omission of stresses and diacritics. Moreover, in the transliteration of names of Greek artists, journalists and scholars who have been known in the West or have published in languages using the Latin alphabet, I adopt the already known version of their names. Thus, I write Mikis Theodorakis instead of Mikes Theodorakes, Dionysis (instead of Dionyses) Savvopoulos, Costas Taktis (instead of Kostas Tahtses). The same applies to terms already used by scholars in an accepted form in English. Thus, I write *rebetiko* not *rempetiko*.

Songs and poems have been quoted in the original followed by translation, all other quotations only in translation, with words or phrases in the original given in square brackets when deemed necessary. In the case of Greek texts, very short quotations were often transliterated in order to facilitate the non-Greek speaker in following the argument.

All translations of French or Greek texts not taken from an English edition are mine unless otherwise stated. I understand that, in particular in my translation of lyrics, the result may not be as powerful as the original text, especially when my effort to keep the connotations of the original has led me to circumlocution. Furthermore, every translation is always already an interpretation, and I accept that the translation solutions I have opted for in some texts may sometimes bear the mark of my analysis.

As one of the main themes of this book is high-popular publications of songs in poetic formats, I quote from the published collections of lyrics (available for all the texts discussed), which I reference meticulously. I believe that my careful quotation from these printed sources constitutes fair use. I quote more extensively only in the case of Dionysis Savvopoulos, who has kindly given his permission to do so.

In my citation of newspaper and magazine articles I have preferred not to load the reference with superfluous details (such as newspaper issue number, issue year and page number) and retain instead a date of issue, title of the article and author where available.

PREFACE



This book was inspired by the observation that the popular music of postwar France and Greece was dominated by discussions about what constituted a 'good' popular song, and that in these discussions literary criteria often predominated. I identify this as the impulse to create a field of well-defined *high-popular* music. Another point of initial comparison was that in both countries we can find a significant trend of setting published poems to popular music, a trend which culminated in the early 1960s.

I have accordingly coined the term *singing poets* in order to describe the discourse that shaped the work and reception of a series of celebrated popular musicians in Greece and France in the period between 1945 and 1975. The term obviously refers to those popular musicians widely recognized as 'poets singing' as well as those artists who created a style through 'singing the poets', that is, setting canonical poems to popular music. Thus, in my discussion of the *singing poets* I have included such figures as Georges Brassens, Léo Ferré, Jacques Brel, Mikis Theodorakis, Manos Hadjidakis, and Dionysis Savvopoulos. These are very different artists whose writing and performing styles varied widely. Some wrote the lyrics and music of their songs, others only the lyrics in the songs they performed, while artists like Theodorakis and Hadjidakis mainly wrote music and collaborated with poets for the lyrics. What links them all together is a discourse which views the popular song as a form of poetry and the popular musician as *auteur*. A primary aim of this book is to show how the model of *singing poets* becomes then an organizing principle for a system of national popular music.

Even though critics have previously noted interesting parallels between French and Greek popular music, in particular in relation to the artists on whom I focus, there has not thus far been a detailed comparison of the two countries and sets of artists. Furthermore, the claim that certain styles of popular music that came into being after the Second World War have played a crucial role in national representation and the forging of identity in both France and Greece has never been paired with a detailed analysis of the precise context in which these popular music styles emerged, evolved, and interacted. This study does not go in search of sources and influences, though these will be discussed. The main aim of the comparison is to enrich our understanding of the parallel cases of two national music traditions and to reach a more sophisticated set of conclusions than we have at present. I have not aimed to establish a point-for-point comparison between the two case studies; instead, I analyse both in such a way that the reading of one shapes our understanding of the other. Thus, even though I present each country in turn, the overall progression of my argument will be clear as it moves from a detailed discussion of how the singing poet model emerges, develops into a genre (in France), and shapes the high-popular (in France and Greece), before

focusing on the ways in which those very processes are subverted in the late 1960s (in Greece).

I begin by discussing the context in which a new intellectual song emerged from the clubs of the Rive Gauche in Paris in the late 1940s. I describe in detail the emergence of the genre of the *Auteurs-Compositeurs-Interprètes* and review the tendency to consider these artists as poets in their own right, with their lyrics published in poetic format in books and assessed as written poetry. Georges Brassens's elevation to the status of singing poet par excellence is seen as the ultimate example of a process resulting in what was hailed as a 'popularization of poetry'. I also review the impact of Léo Ferré's recording series 'Les Poètes', in which he undertook the task of turning a large number of canonical poems into songs.

An analysis of the emergence of 'a new popular music' in Greece after 1945 follows in Chapter 2. Through a review of their cultural politics, I assess the role played by the popular composers Manos Hadjidakis and Mikis Theodorakis in a rearrangement of the field of Greek popular music, as well as gauging the use of literary trends and poetic texts in forming a distinct high-popular genre (*entehno*). Finally, I turn in Chapter 3 to Dionysis Savvopoulos, a Greek singer-songwriter much influenced by Georges Brassens and Bob Dylan, and show how Savvopoulos both absorbed and undermined the model of the singing poet and the generic space of the high-popular through the countercultural poetics of the 1960s.

This book's inquiry engages with methodological issues long debated in comparative literature and cultural studies. It is guided by a firm belief in the need to widen our views of what constitutes the text we study, and to pay more attention to the cultural contextualization of the 'literary'. As a book, it also responds to the growing call for the teaching of the textual networks of popular music within the domains of literary and cultural studies. First and foremost, though, it remains an effort to analyse (at times even psychoanalyse) that comment one hears so often in France and Greece: 'These are not really singers, are they? They are more like real poets.'

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INTRODUCTION



Conceptualizing popular music

'Popular music' is a term that, for many, is still in need of definition. This is exactly why this book starts by confidently asserting popular as radically different from folk or traditional music, a modern global institution that cannot be divorced from the entertainment industry and the mass media, or stratified industrial and post-industrial societies. Critics have gone as far as to argue that 'popular music was constituted in the last decades of the nineteenth century and the first decade of the twentieth [when] a recognisable commercial music industry was created and a mass music market took shape, the phonograph and cinema were invented', and a fuller copyright system was put in place (Frith 2004a: 8). By adopting such an axiomatic definition as its starting point, this book moves in line with much of the cultural study of popular music today, shifting its focus from 'what popular music is' to questions of 'how popular music works'.

Stuart Hall has surely provided the most enduring legacy here. He has argued that we cannot understand what 'the popular' stands for at any given historical moment except by placing it in its broader cultural context: that is, in relation to those categories with which it is in opposition, in parallel, or in accordance. Hall maintains that, as a concept, popular culture does not possess any essential, fixed content of its own, and is not the unmediated expression of a distinct social class — neither the authentic voice of the people, nor the space of manipulation by the dominant classes. We have to conceive of the popular rather as a huge battlefield which integrates complex dialectics of resistance and acceptance, refusal and capitulation. Hence popular culture is in a state of constant transformation, its elements moving incessantly between resistance and appropriation, its forms moving up and down the ladder of a high-low taxonomy; in the end popular culture is defined as the 'ground on which the transformations are worked' (Hall 1981: 228).

In this context, cultural theorists place their emphasis on how popular music is situated in a given cultural milieu, what role it fulfils at a certain time and place, what value is associated with it, and how it produces cultural work and meaning (Hall 1981; Middleton 2001a; Frith 1996). Richard Middleton, for instance, notes that

'popular music' tries to put a finger on that space, that terrain, of contradiction — between 'imposed' and 'authentic', 'elite' and 'common', predominant and subordinate, then and now, theirs and ours, and so on — and to organize it in particular ways. (1990: 7)

A crucial aspect of this undertaking involves analysing how musical practices achieve what looks like 'coherence' in a given social context, transforming themselves from an assemblage of different styles, histories and connotations, into an expression of a particular time, society and locale. Simon Frith explains in a classic article originally written in 1987:

The question we should be asking is not what does popular music *reveal* about 'the people' but how does it *construct* them [...] Popular music is popular not because it reflects or authentically articulates some sort of popular taste or experience, but because it creates our understanding of what popularity is. The most misleading term in cultural theory is, indeed, 'authenticity'. What we should be examining is not how true a piece of music is to something else, but how it sets up the idea of 'truth' in the first place — successful pop music is music which defines its own aesthetic standard. (2004a: 36)

I shall be asking similar questions about popular music in France and Greece in the period between 1945 and 1975. My analysis will focus on the process by which a certain model of popular music came to be related to an idea of national authenticity. The extent to which this idea was a product of specific notions of culture, nation, and society prevalent in those countries will also be examined. I shall, moreover, document the emergence in both countries of similar genres which, even though they were an amalgam of different styles and histories, succeeded in producing a concrete genealogy and system for Greek and French national popular music.

My view has been strongly influenced by the well-known articles on genre in popular music written by Franco Fabbri in the 1980s (1982a; 1982b; 1989). Fabbri has looked at how genres of popular music shape its production and consumption, analysing their function as sets of semiotic, economic, behavioural, and social rules that evolve into codes and conventions. Genres arrange their own position in a more or less stable system (Fabbri calls it 'the system of song') familiar to both producers and consumers of music. The audience's knowledge of the generic formulations within the system channels music consumption, but also becomes the basis for a reworking of generic boundaries; the system of songs and its internal organization is also constantly employed and exploited by the culture industry while being disturbed and reinvigorated by new works. Building on Fabbri's work, we can see popular music within given sociocultural contexts operating as a system, that is, 'a closed net-of-relations, in which the members [the genres and the styles] receive their values through their respective oppositions' (Even-Zohar 1979: 291). Through inclusions, exclusions, and the shifting of borders, the dominant genres of popular music re-present themselves at the centre of a circle which is so arranged that their characteristics serve as canonical values. These dominant genres, and the discourses by and about them, both create a genealogy of popular music (older musical styles presented as precursors) and promote a sense of 'what popular music is' and 'should be'. If such a mechanism proposes popular music as a concrete system with set value criteria, their constructedness and fluidity emerges with an examination of the national ideologies, culture industry practices, and subversive countercultural discourses which contribute to the formation of these value criteria in the first place.

Even though such an approach is generally accepted today (see, for instance, Negus 1999; Frith 1996), the growing academic interest in the micro-level (identity, semantics, local perspectives) also means that it is often left in the background. In this way, what also remains unexplored is the potential of Fabbri's theory for a rethinking of the relation between popular music and systems of national culture, as well as a historical perspective on this genre-oriented systemic arrangement of popular music. When did popular music start being self-consciously organized as a system of genres? The historical specificity of Fabbri's own analysis may offer a preliminary answer.

Fabbri developed his theory of genres with the aim of mapping the system of songs in postwar Italy. Generic visibility is a key development, in his example, on the way to framing the national popular music space at that particular historical moment. Not surprisingly, at the centre of the system Fabbri describes, lies the genre of *cantautori*, singer-songwriters hailed as literary figures. The present study adds to Fabbri's genre theory by studying more precisely the influence of *literature* (as institution, model, vehicle of prestige, and cultural framework) on the creation of specific styles and practices of popular music in two further countries during the same historical period. I analyse how literature, and in particular poetry, contributes to the evolution of these styles into concrete genres, and how these genres are used as organizing principles for an effective taxonomization of popular music that does, indeed, result in the production of a system of popular music with definably national characteristics.

The logic of the high-popular: the case of the singing poets

In the France of 1965 a critic noted that

at the moment, most young singer-songwriters [*auteurs-compositeurs*] ensure that they include poems set to music in their performances, on the one hand to indicate at what level they want to situate themselves [*à quel niveau se situer*], and on the other, to confirm the inextricable unity of songs and poetry [*affirmer l'indissoluble unité de la chanson et de la poésie*]. (Charpentreau 1965a: 39–40)

Poems set to music are used in this case to make a cultural point (showing the 'unity of songs and poetry'), while also acting as a generic marker, a proof of value and a demand for a high place in the hierarchy of popular music.

This argument is an example of a discourse evident in many countries at the time that acknowledged a number of intellectual song-styles as the vehicle for the popular song's postwar 'legitimization'. These styles were also considered as occupying the highest level of a system of popular songs ('à quel niveau se situer'), and were thus used as a measure for its taxonomization. The territory I am describing comprises songs whose lyrics were written by acclaimed poets turned popular song lyricists, well-known poems turned into songs, and, finally, a more defined genre whose exponents would in France be called *Auteurs-Compositeurs-Interprètes*.

Whether in the form of a poem previously published and then turned into a song, or in the form of songwriters who were hailed as poets and whose work was subsequently published in poetic formats, the important discursive link here is

the one between popular music and poetry. I therefore propose, for the purposes of my analysis, the term *singing poets* to describe all those artists associated with this particular postwar cultural trend. The term will be used to refer both to a concept of a songwriter singing songs that are considered poetic, and to composers who use already published poems for their songs, thus 'singing' the work of poets. I shall argue that, through a web of critical acclaim and cultural politics, the singing poets occupied the highest level of an emerging conceptualization and further taxonomization of popular music; they constituted what I shall thus be calling the space of the *high-popular*, and played a role in its evolution into a hard currency within popular music.

The idea of the high-popular is linked to the larger issue of cultural hierarchy in the twentieth century. Rather than being drawn into a discussion of why and when high and low culture emerged as distinct fields, I shall focus on how these distinctions play a significant role in the reordering of popular culture in the period in question. Thus I accept as axiomatic that the growing distinctiveness and professionalization of popular culture in the nineteenth century gave rise to its definition as 'low' rather than, for example, 'other' or 'outside'. A more detailed cultural hierarchy was reinforced by the bourgeoisie through the imposition of a model of highbrow-lowbrow culture which would later evolve to include a middlebrow space (DiMaggio 1982; DiMaggio 1992; Levine 1988; Rubin 1992). Accordingly, I accept that 'the Great Divide' Andreas Huyssen has read at the core of modernist poetics informed cultural work in the period under discussion, but often in unexpected ways. Huyssen has discussed how modernism became associated with so-called masculine characteristics, such as irony, distance, and control, while mass culture was seen as feminine, tending towards chaos, dissolved boundaries, and uncontrolled feelings (Huyssen 1988: 44-63). Yet modernist artists often used popular culture in their projects (whether reasserting or bridging the divide is a different matter) and, more important, their views strongly influenced the milieu in which the high-popular emerged at a later stage.

I shall not dwell on the ways in which this earlier phase influenced the period under discussion. My intention, first and foremost, is to study how the singing poet model, in the terms described above, came into being as a distinct high-popular genre and how it was used to give shape and visibility to the modern popular song in France and Greece. I am aware that the cases to be described present similarities to a long list of other national popular music contexts of the same period, and my analysis here will, it is hoped, provide some new tools for tackling the issue in a larger comparative framework; to be sure, there are also differences in each country, and my analysis in this book points to the fact that this is bound to be the case.

An obvious question is why I do not opt to stay within the analytic premises of the term *singer-songwriter*, widely acknowledged as describing a popular artist who writes the songs he or she performs. The singer-songwriter represents for many a distinct (global) genre that emerged in the second half of the twentieth century, and as such it now merits an entry in the latest edition of *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*. But as the entry makes clear, this definition is far from unproblematic:

Singer-songwriters *have been described* variously as *folk poets* [...], *auteurs* [...], *poet-composers* [...] and even *bards* [...], indicating the supreme importance of the words, with both the sung lines and their instrumental accompaniment providing support. Although many singer-songwriters have published poems as *literature* [...] the genre is both an aural and oral one with its roots in *ancient oral traditions*. The songs have the *legitimacy* of a poet reading his or her own verse, to which is added the *authority* of a musician singing an own composition. The direct connection between performer and audience can produce a cultural commonality or *authenticity* which has made some songs extraordinarily representative of their time [...] [Even though singer-songwriters have been using very different styles] what gives them coherence is the creative connection between music, text and listener, and which is mediated by a single singer. (Potter 2001: 424, 427, emphasis added)

The *New Grove's* references to the singer-songwriter's 'roots in ancient oral traditions' and the use of such words as 'legitimacy', 'authority', and 'authenticity', betray, I believe, the mechanics of the larger formation of which singer-songwriters were part — that is, a persistent use of literary models to establish legitimacy and authority for a part of popular music.

It is difficult to argue in the modern world that there can be a part of 'oral culture' unmediated by writing, what Walter Ong calls 'primary orality' (denoting 'an oral culture untouched by writing'; Ong 1982: 6, 31, and *passim*), even if we accept the term 'secondary orality' which many critics have preferred in response (the situation where orality and writing interact). In twentieth-century music, the dominant presence of the record, sound technologies, and the promotion techniques of the recording industry make it almost impossible to speak of 'an oral genre of popular music' especially if we restrict our analysis to the Western world (see Frith 1988: 12). On the contrary, the references to orality in the period this book covers were, as we shall see, very much caught up in a web of written texts (criticism, music industry promotion, book series) and were exploited and further elaborated by the extremely text-centred and bureaucratic record industry. What these texts referred to was a form of *originary orality*, a view which suggested that primary oral genres of the past were at the very foundation of 'good' modern popular music. This is the main reason why I introduce the term singing poet and include in my study not only singer-songwriters in the strict sense, but also popular music composers who worked with literary texts and poets who wrote song lyrics. I am concerned not with assessing or reclaiming the singing poets' secondary orality, but with showing how the reference to an originary orality (that is to oral poetry, to troubadours, oral minstrels, or wandering storytellers), like references to 'writing', 'poetry', and 'authorship', provide textually grounded legitimacy and authority to certain artists, genres, or to a whole field that is re-narrated as the system of popular music.

Last but not least, a further reason for adopting this framework is that I want to break free from what I would call the 'Dylan factor': the rock critics' view that the 'emphasis on words' is a particular product of the 1960s, related to certain key figures, especially Bob Dylan. Even though the best of such scholarship analyses this trend less and less in essentialist terms and more through its cultural specificity

(Frith 1996: 176–82), it still sees it as a global phenomenon based on and starting from Anglo-American music. My work brings out the example of French music where a model of the singing poet developed much earlier than the 1960s and very much influenced a view of national popular music. The Greek example also shows how a similar reorganization of national popular music occurred around various formations of the singing poet and only at a later phase conversed with Dylan, and even then in a far from straightforward fashion.

Rereading auteur popular music

As the use of the words 'writer', 'author', and 'poetry' to define some of the genres that display the features of the singing poet shows, the comparison between literature and popular music after the 1940s was largely aimed at exploiting the prestige and the role of the author in the modern, textual world. As such it has little to do either with oral cultures or with a deeper questioning of how literature works.

In more ways than one, the tendency towards a conceptualization of the popular song through a persistent reference to literature and writing, especially as it emerged in France, can be compared to a similar critical vocabulary which at around the same time attracted the cinematographers of the *nouvelle vague*, mainly in the *Cahiers du cinéma*. The cinema director was seen as an *auteur*, his *œuvre* as the sum of his films, his style compared to a writing style and his camera to a pen (*caméra-stylo*). This critical tendency functioned, like its counterpart in song criticism, as 'a basis for distinction and evaluation [and] emphasized the cinema's claim to parity of treatment with other arts' (Reader 1979: 131–32). But *auteur* theory introduced ways of seeing the cinematic work as a whole, emphasizing its distinctiveness and providing new models for assessing films; it was also used to dismantle an earlier critical focus on scripts, providing an escape from 'text-only' criticism. In contrast, the critical discourses associated with the singing poets in France signalled a retreat to an appreciation of the songs' lyrics, thus reducing the song almost exclusively to its verbal text. They also introduced a semi-mythological idealization of a unity of music with poetry which was not analysed but only reiterated as a critical fixation.

Critical appreciation of the singing poets largely viewed literature as a stable field and the author as the most prestigious artist in the cultural system. Undoubtedly, our idea of what constitutes literature's prestige in the modern world is interwoven with a prevailing 'author-function' which is itself culturally determined (Foucault 1988). My argument in relation to the popular song is that, especially in the two countries and the period chosen as my primary focus, a (conservative) author-function was borrowed from literature in order to legitimize popular songs. Thus the notion of the singing poet came about to represent an authorial song that could function as high-popular, the highest point in a system of popular music. Yet the radical review of our thinking about literature that has occurred in recent decades as a result of structuralism, post-structuralism and cultural studies provides the space for a similar review of the concepts underlying the critical appreciation of the popular song as a literary form.

Combining cultural studies and literary theory, my framework is bound to start from reading(s). But in order to do justice to the medium, one has to accept a different form of reading, an open reading of the multiple, palimpsestic texts that converge in the production of a popular song. This is a view that has gained momentum in recent studies of popular music. Richard Middleton, in the introduction to a collection of articles tellingly entitled *Reading Pop*, argues that our idea of the text in this case has to be open and discursive, cultural and fluid:

Well, what exactly *is* the text here? Aren't the channels of dissemination, the institutions and social settings, the collective behavioural practices of musicians and fans, the associated visual styles, the surrounding media discourses, aren't these all parts of a *multiple text* — an interactive network of semantic and evaluative operations? This is a fair comment: pop's mode of existence (dizzying chains of replication and intertextual relations; ubiquitous dissemination; production processes and reception contexts characterized by multi-media messages) does indeed render ideas of the bounded, originary text and of its single *auteur* outmoded. (2000: 8)

The main focus in this book will be on how songs, through their *multiple text*, produce meaning, and how I, as critic, listener, and reader, am supposed to interact with this multiplicity. Starting from various texts (predominantly the lyrics themselves, but also details of performance, recording features and presentation aspects, interviews and criticism about the songs), I try to read the tension between divergent semiotic webs (connecting popular music and literature, for example, or art theories and the culture industry) when they come to define a popular song. But my question also goes back to reception: popular songs produce meaning while also altering our understanding of (their place in) the cultural milieu. This is what Paul Zumthor means when he claims that 'It is no longer a past that influences me and informs me when I sing; it is I who gives form to the past' (Zumthor 1990: 203).

Zumthor takes this view to support his decision to analyse the work of the artists whom I categorize as singing poets in terms of his notion of 'oral poetry'. But, as he makes clear, the postwar singing poets *are seen* as modern oral minstrels and poets *at the moment of listening*. As the songs perform their inverted parentage, we the listeners decide to 'read' orality in(to) them. Thus both 'poetry' and 'oral' become in Zumthor's view resignified as modalities of the modern song's place in the world.

What remains, when the abstract categories (stemming from writing) are thus emptied out, is the statement of a fleeting agreement, of a momentary reconciliation between an expectation and what suddenly responds to it: this brief encounter. Jacques Brel stated one day to Clouzet [the editor of a book on him] that song is not an 'art'. Developing this assertion into a series of paradoxes, he had meant to accentuate the 'artisanal' aspect, but managed only to show just to what extent he was a prisoner of the literary conceptualization of poetry [...] yet no one will deny, I think, that Brel was a great poet, but *we* feel it to be so, in his *song*. The term 'song' refers back to a mode of aesthetic existence that is not of the same kind as that which we currently call 'poetry'; *we* refer back to our (historically and spatially determined) culture. (Zumthor 1990: 100)