

## Jacques Brel and Blindness: A Geography of the Soul

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### ABSTRACT

This article highlights the role of poetry and music as phenomena particularly accessible to the blind. The nucleus is the work of Jacques Brel (1929-1978), whose descriptive potential proves propitious for the intended approach.

### INTRODUCTION

Following more than forty years of the death of the Belgian singer, songwriter, actor, poet and director Jacques Brel (1929-1978), the least I can do is to dedicate a few lines to him. I speak just as an admirer. I listen to his music and read his lyrics for the simple delight of doing it. With his successful career in the theatre and in the movies, I am not well acquainted; so, I prefer not to go deep into that subject. As for his musical and poetic work, it is not a matter of stressing their aesthetic value, which is not only perceived, but also evident – and evidences do not require explanations, since they impose by themselves. Heir of Gilles Binchois, Guillaume Dufay, Johannes Ockeghem, Josquin des Prez, and so many other giants of the musical art that ennobled that tiny part of Europe once called Flanders, Jacques Brel, the Belgian troubadour of the twentieth century, is worthily acclaimed as a great poet-musician.



Jacques Brel in his thirties - Drawing made by the Author

### BREL AND THE “PLANET OF THE BLIND”

Among the myriad of topics addressed in Brel's songs, an important one seems to have been

overlooked: blindness. And this leads us to a kind of dual absence, since blindness, as a sensorial disability, is distinguished for being the lack of something, namely our natural capacity of seeing. Of course I could be wrong, since there can be some mention, even if it is one here and another out there, of the “planet of the blind” (as Stephan Kuusisto, the writer of Finish origin recently quoted – he himself a blind man –, describes the reality of those who can't see) in Brel's work, which I do not know on the whole. However, even if such hypothetical mention(s) is(are) found, this will not essentially alter anything concerning the dual absence we are talking about: blindness (absence of sight) is absent (at least much more times than not) in Jacques Brel's written and musical production.

Visuality, on the other hand, is always there, in Brel's lyrics; and this to such an extent that it is not an overstatement to say that his poems and songs are a great hymn to the visual beauty that Nature and Art are capable of engendering. What is more, Brel, just like the geologist *vis-à-vis* the interior of our planet, explored the human soul and portrayed the most diverse kinds of feelings that use to inhabit it.

Particularly beautiful seems to me this stanza taken from *Il neige sur Liège* (“It snows on Liège”), composed by Brel in the early 1960s:

*Il neige, il neige sur Liège.*

*Et tant tourne la neige entre le ciel et Liège*

*Qu'on ne sait plus s'il neige, s'il neige sur Liège*

*Ou si c'est Liège qui neige vers le ciel.*

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Brel tells us about the optical illusion caused by the snow falling over Liège, a city built in Belgium, definitely a *plat pays* (“flat country”), as he calls it in another song. Literary beauty is based on the *way* the words are connected to each other, not on the subject in question. That means that the *how* is much more important than the *who*, the *what*, the *when*, the *where* and the *why* – by the way a principle to be followed in all the arts, not only in Poetry or Literature in general. Brel’s stanza is beautiful thanks to the harmonious combination of its parts, in this case, the words and the concepts inherent to them.



France, Brel’s second homeland (Photo taken by the Author)

### CONCLUSION

Originally, literature and music do not belong to the visible world. Hearing is their target, and, through it, the brain, within which meaning and musical density may or may not be granted to them. Not depending directly on the eyes and their privilege of seeing, music and literature are particularly suitable for blind people to enjoy and also to practice. As for Brel’s musical-poem concerning the Belgium city of Liège under a snowfall, it seems to me that no better description could be made: whether for those who are able to see or for those who are not. As a matter of fact, the same kind of conclusion could be reached if we took Brel’s work *in toto*. But it is no use multiplying examples. Maybe we are even allowed to say that blindness is not absent at all in Brel’s poems and songs; a better way forward seems to consider that blindness is always there, implicit, as a possibility to be taken into account.

Of course a lot remains to be said, written and debated about Brel and blindness, this sensorial disability that concerns the lack of vision. As for me, admirer of Brel as a poet-composer, it is

time to give full stop to my reflections on such a theme; as for a deepening of it, let us leave the task to those who know Brel’s production better than I do.



“All art constantly aspires to the condition of music”

(Walter Pater) (Photo taken by the Author in Greece)

### REFERENCES

- [1] Patrick Baton. *Jacques Brel. Une oeuvre*, Bruxelles, Labor, 1990, p. 189.
- [2] “Brel was a successful actor, appearing in ten films. He directed two films, one of which, *Le Far West*, was nominated for the Palme d’Or at the Cannes Film Festival in 1973” (René Seghers et alii. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jacques\\_Brel](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jacques_Brel)).
- [3] “Having sold over 25 million records worldwide, Brel is the third best-selling Belgian recording artist of all time” (René Seghers et alii. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jacques\\_Brel](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jacques_Brel)).
- [4] “Blindness is often perceived by the sighted as an either/or condition: one sees or does not see. But often a blind person experiences a series of veils: I stare at the world through smeared and broken window panes. Ahead of me the shapes and colours suggest the sails of Tristan’s ship or an elephant’s ear floating in the air, though in reality it is a middle-aged man in a London Fog raincoat that billows behind him in the April wind. He is like the great dead Greeks in Homer’s descriptions of the underworld. In the heliographic distortions of sunlight or dusk, everyone I meet is crossing Charon’s river. People shimmer like beehives.” (Stephan Kuusisto. *Planet of the Blind*, London, Faber and Faber, 1998, p. 5; see also João Vicente Ganzarolli de Oliveira. *Do essencial invisível. Arte e beleza entre os cegos*, Rio de Janeiro, Revan/FAPERJ, 2002, p. 44 et passim).
- [5] “It snows, it snows on Liège. / And so turns the snow between the sky and Liège, / That one knows no more if it snows, if it snows on Liège

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/ Or if it is Liège who snows towards the sky”  
(*Tout Brel*, Paris, Robert Laffont, 1986, p. 325).

- [6] Cf., for instance, Jean-Paul Sartre. *Que é a literatura?* (translated from French into Portuguese by Carlos Felipe Moisés), 2<sup>a</sup> edition, Rio de Janeiro, Ática, 1993, p. 22.
- [7] “Louis Ciccone e seu livro sobre os músicos cegos na História: urgência de uma tradução e de continuidade”, in *Fragmentos de Cultura*, Goiânia (Brazil), julho/setembro de 2017, v. 27, pp. 413-424.
- [8] “Visual impairment, also known as vision impairment or vision loss, is a decreased ability to see to a degree that causes problems

not fixable by usual means, such as glasses. Some also include those who have a decreased ability to see because they do not have access to glasses or contact lenses. Visual impairment is often defined as a best corrected visual acuity of worse than either 20/40 or 20/60. The term blindness is used for complete or nearly complete vision loss. Visual impairment may cause people difficulties with normal daily activities such as driving, reading, socializing, and walking” (Gerald Liew et alii. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Visual\\_impairment](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Visual_impairment)).

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