

Foreword

RADAC (Recherches sur les Arts Dramatiques Anglophones Contemporains) was set up in 1978 to provide a platform for academics and theatre practitioners working in the field of contemporary Anglophone drama in France. In collaboration with other associations or institutions, our group organises conferences and seminars and awards a prize to the best Master's dissertation on contemporary Anglophone drama in France. Every year we publish an issue of our journal *Coup de Théâtre* as well as special issues. Last year our special issue "Crossing Borders: Anglophone Theatre in Europe" was published as part of our 40th anniversary celebrations. Over the years we have tried to keep up with the many changes affecting both the Anglophone theatre and academic research whilst staying true to the aims of the founding members: conducting quality research in a spirit of friendship and mutual respect.

As our membership has evolved to include scholars and theatre practitioners beyond France, so too have the subjects treated. Increasing attention is given to performance and to adaptation. In recent years we have also turned to the question of translation. After all, most of the Anglophone drama staged outside English-speaking countries is performed in translation. Interest in translation has also contributed to building bridges to colleagues with similar interests in many other countries. Recent issues of *Coup de Théâtre* bear witness to the inclusion of a wide range of international contributors.

Adaptation and translation of canonical texts was the subject of the 2019 issue, suggesting ways in which the past is present in today's theatre. This year's issue focuses on another, perhaps less obvious example of continuity: verse drama, a form often decried, but never absent from the stage in Britain. The starting-point for the present volume, edited by RADAC vice-president Claire Hélié, was a symposium organised

by Claire Hélie and Cécile Marshall at Bordeaux University in 2018. The sheer range of topics addressed and works examined by a variety of international contributors is proof of the vitality of the form and its ability to evolve with the times. We are very privileged to be able to include the first translation into French of *Best Man Speech* by Glyn Maxwell (first produced as “The Best Man” in 2004 and published by Oberon in 2006 in *Plays Two*). Maxwell is one of the very small number of recognised contemporary playwrights consistently using verse in their plays.

In 2019, RADAC set up its first Prize for Outstanding Master’s Dissertation. The jury, whom we would like to thank for their contribution, was composed of Marianne Dugeon and Agathe Torti-Alcayaga. The prize was awarded to Saraé Durest for her annotated translation of Caryl Churchill’s 1994 play *The Skriker* (Sorbonne Université / Université Sorbonne Nouvelle). A short version of the dissertation is included in this issue.

As usual my thanks go to Claire Hélie for editing this issue with the help of Xavier Lemoine, director of publication. On behalf of RADAC, I would also like to thank all the contributors and the members of the advisory board.

Susan BLATTÈS
RADAC President

Verse drama on the Anglophone stage in the 20th-21st Centuries: An Introduction

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Abstract: This issue of *Coup de Théâtre* emanates from the contributions to a one-day conference co-organised by the Université de Bordeaux and the Université de Lille in November 2018. The guest speaker was poet-dramatist Glyn Maxwell and extracts from his *Best Man Speech* (2004) were performed by the English undergraduate students. The conference meant to put under the limelight a genre that used to be coterminous with drama originally but is now considered as just a branch of it, and not a popular one at that. This introduction aims at giving a broad overview of the main criticisms the genre has faced since the 20th century, criticisms that are more specifically addressed in the following essays.

Résumé : Ce numéro de *Coup de Théâtre* est issu des travaux qui se sont tenus lors d'une journée d'étude co-organisée par l'Université de Bordeaux et l'Université de Lille en novembre 2018. L'invité d'honneur était le poète et dramaturge Glyn Maxwell, et des extraits de son *Best Man Speech* (2004) ont été mis en espace par des étudiants en licence d'anglais. La conférence visait à mettre sous les feux de la rampe un genre qui était synonyme d'écriture dramatique à l'origine, mais qui est aujourd'hui considéré comme une branche du théâtre, une branche qui ne reçoit guère les faveurs du public et de la critique. Cette introduction a pour but d'offrir un vaste panorama des critiques principales émises à l'encontre du genre depuis le XX^e siècle, des critiques qui sont ensuite plus spécifiquement analysées dans les chapitres qui suivent.

Keywords: British theatre, metatheatre, naturalism, poetic drama, verse drama

Mots-clés : Théâtre britannique, métathéâtre, naturalisme, théâtre poétique, théâtre en vers

I am not saying or hinting that the poet is a bad writer of plays or that he has a bad influence upon the theatre, I only wish you to understand that the poet is not of the theatre, and that only the dramatist among writers has any birth-claim to the theatre.

Edward Gordon Craig (116)

The least to be said is that contemporary verse drama suffers from a bad reputation. To put it bluntly, some practitioners, academics, and audiences seem to believe it can generate neither good poetry nor good drama. In his 1974 foreword to his critical response to Denis Donoghue's ground-breaking book on verse drama, Arnold Hinchcliffe ironically deemed "the value of verse in modern theatre certainly doubtful" (xi). Forty years ago, William G. McCollom spoke of the "declining visibility of verse drama" (99) in the 20th century and claimed that the genre "may soon become a historical phenomenon, whatever the achievement of individual plays" (100). Some 20 years later, James Fenton, in a chapter on "Poetic Drama and Operas" that wrongfully considers poetic drama and verse drama as one and the same thing, still claimed that nothing of great value had been added to the canon of English verse on stage since the Jacobean period (122-125). Indeed, while verse drama was the norm on stage until the 17th century, it virtually disappeared for three centuries before going through a revival in the first half of the 20th century, as Irene Morra shows in what is probably the most complete historiographical narrative of the genre to date.

In the late 1950s, the genre declined again. Compared to prose drama or even poetic drama, the production numbers of verse dramas are rather low – Kayla McKinney Wiggins, in her *Modern Verse Drama in England: An Annotated Bibliography*, draws a list of 500 verse plays written and published in England between 1935 with T.S. Eliot's *Murder in the Cathedral* and the early 1990s with Lee Breuer and

Alexis Deveau. When reading reviews of verse plays today, the negative comments can be classified into two main types: 1. The reviewer sees no future for verse drama as a genre if one particular contemporary verse play fails at the box-office, regardless of its past achievements; 2. The reviewer blames the use of verse when the play is bad, but not the other components of the play (actors, staging, plot...). Morra claims that such lack of faith in the genre “is today reflected in the relatively marginal treatment of verse drama in mainstream critical and academic studies” (2). This collection of essays takes up her cue to critically challenge the idea that verse drama is both unreadable and unperformable, and to give evidence of its vitality by engaging with productions from 1945 to today, with a special focus on one of verse drama’s staunchest advocates, Glyn Maxwell, whose monologue, *Best Man Speech*, can be read at the end of this issue in a French version.

The idea that verse drama is a dead form of the past that can no longer attract large numbers of theatre-goers in England is deeply entrenched. And yet, living poets-cum-playwrights like Tony Harrison (whose plays have been performed at the National Theatre), Peter Oswald (the first contemporary writer in residence at Shakespeare’s Globe), Glyn Maxwell (whose plays have travelled well to the USA), Simon Armitage (the current Poet Laureate), or Richard O’Brien (who contributes an essay to this collection) have made a consistent use of the genre. Other verse plays have met with success, like Caryl Churchill’s *Serious Money* (1980), Sean O’Brien’s *Keepers of the Flame* (2003), Michael Frayne’s *Afterlife* (2008), Jenny Lewis’s *After Gilgamesh* (2011), and Mike Bartlett’s *King Charles III* (2014), to name but a few. Besides, the form is quite alive in the English-speaking world, be it in Ireland (with Seamus Heaney, Bernard O’Donoghue, and Tom Paulin for instance), in Scotland (Edwin Morgan, Liz Lochhead, and David Greig), in Wales (Owen Sheers, for example), in the United States (Alexis Deveau and Lee Breuer), and in former colonies (Wole Soyinka and Derek Walcott to name just two). Therefore, considering verse plays as a mere oddity for the happy few can only be understood as a blatant misreading of the contemporary relevance of the genre for the creative team, for the audience, and for the scholar. As a con-

sequence, this misconception needs to be addressed. By working on the definition of verse drama, this short introduction aims to raise a few issues surrounding the reception of verse drama and some of the challenges faced by its practitioners from the beginning of the 20th century to today.

The generic definition of verse drama does not seem to be a problem at first sight – it is a play written in verse. Verse lineation is indicative of the genre on the page while rhythm (and sometimes rhyme) enhances it on stage, differentiating verse drama from performance poetry, dramatic poetry, and poetic drama. Eliot made a strong case for aligning form and content in his essay “Poetry and Drama” (1951):

For I start with the assumption that if poetry is merely a decoration, an added embellishment, if it merely gives people of literary tastes the pleasure of listening to poetry at the same time that they are witnessing a play, then it is superfluous. It must justify itself dramatically, and not merely be fine poetry shaped into a dramatic form. From this it follows that no play should be written in verse for which prose is *dramatically* adequate. (132)

Denis Donoghue, in *The Third Voice* (1959), agrees that verse drama is not just a verbal construct but that poetry must be found in all the components of the play – words, gestures, plot, visual image – what he calls the “‘situation’: the play is a succession of enacted situations so chosen and arranged as to constitute the objective equivalent of the motive which is the ‘action’ of the play” (7). Verse drama requires “organic unity” between form and content, a concept derived from Coleridgean “fusion” or Aristotelian “entelechy” (8), the conditions under which something potential becomes actualised. The organic unity between form and content is what defines verse drama more than the mere use of verse. This does not mean that verse, as a metonym for poetry, deals only with the poetic, understood as an elevating, otherworldly type of material. On the contrary, as Rowland Cotterill puts it in his essay, verse drama is a genre in which poetic and anti-poetic forces are set in tension to question the very definition of poetry and the poetic. Verse drama is therefore not that easy to define as it is a genre that goes beyond the mere lineation on the page to include

other aspects, such as content, but also stage design and actor training as we shall see.

Still, verse is considered as unbefitting to contemporary theatre. The most common argument used to support this is probably that there is room for only one poet on the national stage, and he hasn't been dethroned for over 400 years. Let us say more generally that blank verse is always set against the production of the Early Modern period (i.e. Shakespeare, if he has to be named, but also Marlowe and Jonson), and lacks speakability in other epochs, making Eliot remark that both the Romantics and the Victorians failed in the genre because of that. Critic and poet John Wain thought likewise – verse plays try to echo Shakespeare's success by “employing a kind of thinned out Elizabethan iambic to suggest Shakespeare, and thus charge the air with theatrical and literary incense” (59). Blank verse is presented as a ritual that has lost any power to enthuse the audience. In “The Possibility of Verse Drama” (1922), Eliot had already suggested that “the Elizabethan drama was aimed at a public which wanted entertainment of a crude sort, but would stand a good deal of poetry.” He therefore suggested that to avoid “poetic pastiches of Euripides and Shakespeare”, playwrights had to “treat [art] as a joke” so as to engage the audience into “one more quiver and giggle of art debauch” (63). Eliot subsequently mentioned the music hall as a possible life-saver. Tony Harrison heard him loud and clear when he put Lancashire comedian George Formby on a par with Czech composer Bedřich Smetana in his own verse drama, an idea which is at the core of Cécile Marshall's essay. Yet, Richard O'Brien, in his essay on contemporary productions at Shakespeare's Globe, shows the difficulties playwrights face to free themselves from these past models and overcome the audience's resistance to verse on stage. This begs a tough question: can verse drama be anything else than citational or ironical today? Estelle Rivier-Arnaud highlights the reflexive nature of contemporary verse drama in some adaptations of classical plays, in scenes in which characters, or even actors, comment on the genre and its reception.

There are other reasons why verse drama virtually disappeared in the 1950s, reasons that William G. McCollom summarises in a debatable list :

Many reasons contribute to this change of taste – the coming of TV and the related decline in demand for excellent or even educated speech, the increasingly high risks of theatre production, the defensive reaction of the poets to the money-changer, the sense that verse drama belongs to a distant and irrecoverable past, the supposition that iambic pentameter fails to suit our speech patterns, the movement of poetry from metered verse to prose rhythms, and [the poets'] tendency to prefer verse or even prose dialogue to drama. (99)

All of these reasons seem contextual for some, limited for others, but most are probably disparaging to the potential theatre-goers. Yet, John Wain had already expressed the idea of a “decline in demand for excellent or even educated speech” in no cautious terms in 1960 :

Perhaps, after all, it is a social rather than an artistic matter, perhaps there are certain habits and preferences set up in bookish people by the kind of education they have and the kind of circle they live in, that demands verse as an extra trimming to a play, lifting it automatically into a higher class. (62)

The age-old classist assumption that verse drama is an elitist form of theatre can be challenged by the huge success of plays translated or adapted from the classics for the modern English stage, as volume 33 of *Coup de Théâtre* (2019) dedicated to that trend or the many interviews with playwrights and directors collected by Margherita Laera in *Theatre and Adaptation* (2014) have shown. Yet, there is no grounded evidence that a period costume play makes verse drama more acceptable (even though in French we could say that “le vers habille la pièce”). For instance, Tony Harrison’s epic retelling of Nansen’s exploration to the North Pole in *Fram* (2008), and Benjamin Askew’s take on the Arthurian legend in *The Lady of the Lake* (2015) received the same kind of mixed reviews as most verse plays set in a contemporary setting.¹ Clearly, the success or failure of verse drama cannot be caused by verse alone.

Translations and adaptations from classical plays constitute the bulk of contemporary verse drama. Yet, the repertoire studied in this

issue mostly includes new plays in verse and original productions that have been thought out with the contemporary world in mind. Can verse sound congenial to modern themes, to the social and political preoccupations of the present time? Donna Gerstenberger, in "Poetry And Politics : The Verse Drama Of Auden And Isherwood" (1962), already challenged Richard Hoggart's claims about Auden's plays that "their importance in the history of the modern theatre is negligible", and that they are at best "amusing", for "sports" (73). On the contrary, she claimed that Auden and Isherwood's verse drama expressed complex social and political dilemmas that were most important in the 1930s "in vocabulary and images drawn from contemporary science, clinical psychology, Marxian economics, power politics, and mechanized warfare" (125). Though her close reading of *The Dog Beneath the Skin* and *The Ascent of F-6* reveals some of their weaknesses, she concludes by affirming that "[the plays] aid in defining limits and in exploring possibilities as well as in objectifying an inherent dissatisfaction (poetic and political, in this instance) with the conventionally established products of the past" (132). In other words, the timely relevance of verse drama lies in the way it conjures up a historical genre to lampoon the past assumption it is ridden with. Even today, a play in verse is deeply political. For instance, Kerry-Jane Wallart, in her essay on Derek Walcott's *Drums and Colours*, delineates how the genre, which is communal in essence, can be appropriated to write back at England, its literary canon and official historiography.

Furthermore, maintaining that "verse drama belongs to a distant and irrecoverable past" does not do justice to the work of each epoch's practitioners, because verse drama is not a backward-looking form that should be brought back to life, but a living mode of expression that can rejuvenate theatrical practice by breaking loose from the "mind-forg'd manacles" of prosaic statements to use Blake's words. Nor is verse drama escapist, at least if we are to believe Eliot: "What we have to do is to bring poetry into the world in which the audience lives and to which it returns when it leaves the theatre; not to transport the audience into some imaginary world totally unlike its own, an unreal world in which poetry is tolerated" (1951: 141). Still, its

decline in England accelerated in the 1950s with the emergence of the Angry Young Men and Kitchen Sink drama, which adopted prose as the main verbal vehicle on stage. This realist type of drama was believed to better represent English identity at the time with its mix of class issues, accents, education and sexuality, as in the works of John Osborne, than verse drama, which was perhaps more classical in its expression, less in touch with the social changes of the past, and which looked to the continent to find models, as Morra claims in her book. Verse and drama increasingly occupied separate spheres. While prose theatre could deal with English issues, verse drama was relegated to “the distant, the vague, the exotic, and the heroical” (24), according to Gerstenberger in “Perspectives on Modern Verse Drama” (1960). The paradox is that while in the 1930s, verse drama was intrinsically linked to social movements with Auden and Isherwood, it became associated with a bourgeois, elitist form of theatre in the 1950s with Christopher Fry, a reputation which lasted until Tony Harrison got his foot in the door and had the working class speak in rhyming iambic pentameters.

Gerstenberger mentions another consequence of such dissociation: “The conception of verse drama as a formal experience was what had been lost as a result of an increasingly rigid separation on the stage of the domain of poetry and the world of real and vital concerns” (24). Following “the movement of poetry from metered verse to prose rhythms”, another genre, namely poetic drama, seems to have superseded verse drama as a means to experiment with language and structure, while verse drama is relegated to drama in verse but with no poetry in it. For instance, Wanda Rulewicz states that “it is the inadequacy of language which causes the use of poetry in drama, but in the hands of a genius, prose can also become the vehicle for transcending reality and presenting, what is not easy to be communicated” (175), thus suggesting that verse is used by those who lack genius.

Verse drama is often considered as coterminous with anti-realistic drama first because poetry itself is deemed anti-realistic. It superimposes a verbal order that sounds inauthentic. Yeats’s experiences consisted exactly in finding a reconciliation between the rhythms of the voice

and the prosody of metre, as Pierre Longuenesse analyses in his essay. Still, Derek Walcott, in “The Poet in the Theatre” (1990), remarks that, in spite of such experimentations, metre is dismissed as too artificial to be used on stage because of its rhetorical and formal aspects that prevent dialogues from sounding like everyday speech. Indeed, audiences are required to pay attention to the words, the rhythms, the sounds, so much so that the process of identification with the characters is disturbed; audiences cannot become engrossed in the action. But is this necessarily detrimental to the theatrical experience? Tony Harrison, in his introductory pack to *Fram* (2008) advises his viewers not to be afraid of verse because they have been immersed in it since they heard their first nursery rhyme. Rhythms, rhymes, sounds are a source of pleasure. For him, verse drama is “nearer to opera than it is to naturalistic drama” (National Theatre Workpack).

The idea that audiences have “certain habits” is probably a more stimulating one for the practitioner and the scholar. For instance, W. B. Yeats, after the performance of *Deirdre* at the Abbey Theatre in November 1906, saw that the reception of verse drama was changing and deplored the fact that the “modern audience has lost the habit of careful listening.” He therefore embarked on a quest to re-educate audiences to verse on stage, even if, he admitted, “the difficulties of holding an audience with verse are ten times greater than with the prose play” (quoted in Bushrui 122). Still some 50 years later, Eliot made a similar observation, but drew opposite conclusions: “We have to accustom our audience to verse to the point at which they will cease to be conscious of it. [...] The verse rhythm should have its effect upon the hearers, without their being conscious of it” (1951: 134). Whether verse drama is at its best when it lulls its audiences into a semi-conscious receptivity or when it triggers their participation through heightened attention is definitely an artistic choice that can work for many different types of audiences.

Besides, in the context of what Elisabeth Angel-Pérez has called “a revival of the verbal theatre: a theatre ‘In-Yer-Ear’ rather than In-Yer-Face” (2013) in the late 1990s, that is to say a theatre in which

nothing happens but language, poetic drama has probably given the impression that verse was redundant. Glenda Leeming's *Poetic Drama* (1989) reminds us that the classical rules were elaborated over a long period, starting with Aristotle. They persisted into the Renaissance through the Anglicisation of classical plays and the autochthonous tradition of Folk Plays, Morality Plays, and Mystery Plays. Yet, many books on 20th century verse drama begin with a reminder of these classical rules, even if they are quite alien to contemporary taste and theatrical practice. Leeming therefore contends that poetic drama is "a reaction against the conventional realism of current commercial theatre writing, and a willingness to experiment with relating form and content to the twentieth century, instead of limply imitating Shakespeare" (2). *Mad About the Boy* (2012), by Gbolahan Obisesan, is a case in point: while the three-hander is not written in verse, the lines are so short they look like verse, as if the play was an extended stichomythia, each character picking up a word or phrase from the other to develop his own poetic line of thought. By intertwining the storylines of the three characters through poetic means such as repetition, word-play, and sound patterns, the drama unfolds until its tragic denouement.

When critics and audiences do not immediately recognise verse as verse, but sometimes merely as contrived diction, free verse or rhythmic prose, that might be because they have run out of the habit of listening to poetry on stage, but it is more likely that the playwright has decided to dress his choice of medium in the guise of the natural rhythms of speech. That is what Eliot meant to do in the early 1950s when he wanted "to find a rhythm close to contemporary speech, in which the stresses could be made to come wherever we should naturally put them, in uttering the particular phrase on the particular occasion" so that "the audience should find, at the moment of awareness that it is hearing poetry, that it is saying to itself: 'I could talk in poetry too!'" (1951: 140). Mike Bartlett, in his much acclaimed *King Charles III* (2014) also made that choice by "avoid[ing] lines with monosyllabic words, because, spoken out loud, they expose the

rhythm too much” (2014). The issue then is to find a way to adapt verse to speech rhythms and still be verse.

Dan Rebellato and Nicholas Holden have noted that with the emergence of performance studies, which places live performance at the heart of the discipline, the text and the page it is printed on have started to look suspicious.² Yet, one might think that with plays in verse, the writtenness of the playtext goes against this phonocentric trend, and that the success of the play depends on the compliance of the actors. Verse is a means to intensify the dramatic action so the actor must sacrifice emotion, accentuation and expressive intentions to promote fidelity to scansion. Indeed, diction is fixed through phonological rules, typography, and rhyming patterns. Patrick Le Boeuf, in his close reading of Edward Gordon Craig’s rare material held at the Bibliothèque Nationale de France, shows how verse drama’s staunchest opponent changed his mind in the 1930s, and set up what can be called a programme for actor training in how to deliver lines of verse on stage, beginning with the metronome, with a strict observance of metrical rules and original pronunciation, to finally break free from the rules and find a voice. There is an emphasis on rhythm and sounds as orchestrated in the written text. Of course, the performance can shift the attention to meaning. However, the creation of a regular rhythm tends to restrict the possibilities of variation during a performance. The text reads as a sort of musical score. The musicality of verse, rejuvenated by the recourse to rap, hip hop, and performance poetry, is at the heart of Kasia Lech’s panorama of ultra-contemporary experimental production of verse in plays.

Versification sets expectations because it is based on regularity, which the dramatist can play with. For instance, Caryl Churchill, in *Serious Money* (1980) eases her audiences into rhythmical regularity progressively since the first lines are in prose and then progressively shorten until line breaks marked by rhymes are introduced. Throughout the play her characters move in and out of tetra-, penta-, hexameters, depending on the needs. The line break, especially when it ends with a rhyme, allows to delineate the psychological contours

of the characters, for instance when Greville Todd, Jake and Scilla's father and a stockbroker, complains :

Scilla, you don't seem to realise. Newspapers across the nation.
I could easily lose my job if I lose my reputation.
You and the yobs you work with are hardly worth a mention
(no one expects them to have any standards),
But I have to keep very quiet, and not attract attention.
Until it's all blown over I think I'll stay in bed. (223)

The extended use of the -tion rhyme, which Greville will take up a fifth time and his daughter a sixth as if to put an end to his rambling, suggests the extent to which the character is trapped in his own thoughts. Yet, the two lines that do not actually rhyme show that this is all pretence, that he is subjecting his daughter to emotional blackmail (he later rhymes "sad" with "Dad", and rejects her accusation of "pomposity" by pointing at her "monstrosity" (224)). This is not poetry, but versification and this is very effective as a dramatic tool. The switchback rhyme and the shared line are other such tools that can prove the dramatic nature of verse.

In a dialectic movement, Daniel Jean, in his essay on Eliot's *The Confidential Clerk* (2009), asks the question: if poetry cannot be limited to the use of line, what are the grounds for writing verse drama? His contention is that verse does not help reach a kind of truth or authenticity in the dialogue, but, because it is the sign of a verbal order, it does point at the artificiality of any speech act. Using verse is not a conservative choice but a revolutionary one, it is a metatheatrical tool to deconstruct dramatic illusion.

In spite of all the reservations mentioned by critics in this introduction and as this volume will show, verse drama can make the most of both verse and drama. Verse drama, which is not a play that *happens* to be written in verse, but a play that *had* to be written in verse, is an experimental form that makes it necessary to rethink what theatre can do and explores new types of reception for the audiences. The genre is necessarily reflexive – it deconstructs both theatrical and poetic il-

lusion, and in doing so, it is critical of dramatic and linguistic modes, but also of national and aesthetic norms.

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¹ While Aleks Sierz stated that Harrison's *Fram* proved that "verse plays are among the best ways of driving audiences to narcolepsy" (132), Alfred Hickling went as far as to say that the use of blank verse "bore[d him] senseless."

² This idea is taken from Dan Rebellato and Nicholas Holden's call for papers for a one-day conference entitled "From Stage to Page: The Material text in Contemporary Playwriting" which was scheduled at The Royal Court Theatre on Friday 20 July 2020. The conference organisers intended to show that the page had made a huge come-back on stage in the last couple of years, but the conference was cancelled due to COVID-19.

Du vers à la vision, entre musique et imagination : le poème dramatique selon W.B. Yeats

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Abstract: In his essay “A General Introduction for My Work” (1937), Yeats defends the link between poetic form and the living voice, or passionate speech. For the poet and playwright, Drama needs Poetry just as Poetry needs Drama : among the 26 plays published in 1952, 17 are written in verse. In the 1900s Yeats invents the concept of “Written Speech”, in which verse and syntax mix with each other, and “the magic word is the chanted word”. By this technique he intends to create a particular state of “self possession in self surrender” for both actor and spectator, and a special quality of vision – similar to those created by the ceremonies of the *Golden Dawn*. I will therefore analyse, for instance in the play *The Dreaming of the Bones*, how the poet, under the influence of Japanese aesthetics, constructs a tragic theatre where the music of speech, or the scenic ritual of both voice and dance, are the medium of transfiguration, or spectral appearances, creating what the Japanese Nô calls the *Yugen*.

Résumé : Dans son essai « A General Introduction for My Work » (1937), Yeats défend le lien entre forme poétique et parole vivante – ou « passionate speech ». Des vingt-six pièces qui composent son œuvre théâtrale éditée en 1952, seules neuf sont écrites en prose. Pour Yeats, la poésie a besoin de la scène pour s’arracher à une aphasie qu’il réprouve précisément lorsqu’il s’agit de faire œuvre de poète, c’est-à-dire de mage. Symétriquement le théâtre a besoin de la poésie : parce que le théâtre, à l’égal des cérémonies de la *Golden Dawn*, se doit de révéler un invisible, la parole poétique, par sa qualité incantatoire, est la condition d’émergence d’un état d’éveil où se croisent passion et raison, « *self possession in self surrender* ». D’autre part, elle est le socle d’un protocole scénique où l’activité d’écoute, sous certaines conditions de qualités acoustiques, rythmiques, musicales, accompagne une certaine qualité de vision. On s’efforcera donc, à travers l’analyse de la pièce *The Dreaming of the Bones*, de repérer quelques-unes des motivations

qui poussent le poète à faire pour la scène un usage aussi abouti de la forme versifiée. Par le poème théâtral, le dramaturge cherche à révéler un autre du visible qui ne soit pas l'invisible, un état d'incarnation semblable à ce que la lumière fait au vitrail – l'équivalent, peut-être, de ce que les Japonais nomment le *Yugen*, ou la fleur.

Keywords: Yeats, dramatic poem, theatre and magic, theatre of speech, modernism

Mots-clés : Yeats, poème dramatique, théâtre et magie, théâtre du discours, modernisme

Dans son essai « A General Introduction for My Work », écrit en 1937, Yeats défend le lien entre forme poétique et parole vivante, entre le vers, la voix et la scène. Pour le dramaturge qu'est en même temps ce poète, le théâtre a autant besoin de la poésie que la poésie du théâtre. On ne traitera pas ici de ce qui fait théâtre dans son œuvre poétique. Mais on réfléchira sur les raisons qui poussent le poète à faire pour la scène un usage aussi complexe et abouti de la forme versifiée.

Des vingt-six pièces qui composent l'œuvre théâtrale complète éditée en 1952, dix-sept sont en vers – et encore doit-on tenir compte des passages versifiés, souvent chantés, qui ponctuent la plupart des neuf autres. À l'abandon au flux lyrique d'une parole de transe poétique, caractéristique des premières esquisses de *The Shadowy Waters* dans les années 1890, succède dans la décennie 1900 l'invention d'un « *Written Speech* » – c'est son expression –, où se nourrissent mutuellement rigueur de la syntaxe et cadre contraignant du vers. C'est le cas de pièces aussi différentes que *Deirdre* en 1906, *The Green Helmet* en 1910, elle-même ré-écriture significative d'une pièce précédente quasi identique, mais en prose, puis, à partir du tournant des années 20, les *Plays for Dancers*. Certes, Yeats tente de se frayer une voie entre les multiples formes prises par le théâtre de son temps, qu'il s'agisse du théâtre à grand spectacle victorien, des traditions militantes ou

burlesques du théâtre amateur irlandais, et aussi, et ce n'est pas peu, du courant naturaliste, de plus en plus prégnant tant sur le continent que dans le monde anglophone. Mais l'invention de ce « *Written Speech* » ne tient pas seulement à une querelle de genre, et procède plutôt de choix à la fois dramaturgiques, voire idéologiques, essentiels. Yeats est en quête du mode adéquat d'expression des passions, ou d'une réconciliation entre noblesse aristocratique et simplicité populaire. En outre, cette parole est aussi, de par sa qualité incantatoire, la condition d'émergence d'un état d'éveil dont le poète rêve qu'il soit partagé par l'acteur comme par son public. Enfin, il est la clé d'une tentative de faire du théâtre, à l'égal des cérémonies occultes dont Yeats est familier à la Golden Dawn, le lieu d'accès à un invisible devenu visible. Dans ce cadre, la parole poétique est le socle d'un protocole original d'écriture de l'image et du mouvement où à l'événement lui-même se substitue sa verbalisation, et où l'activité d'écoute, sous certaines conditions de qualités acoustiques, rythmiques, musicales, accompagne une certaine qualité de vision.

La clé lyrique de l'esthétique tragique

Yeats, dès les années 1900, place une parole alternativement lyrique et épique au cœur de l'esthétique tragique nouvelle qu'il entend fonder. Dans des drames dont l'objet est centralement la mort et la perte, lesquelles sont à chaque fois épreuves initiatrices et passages nécessaires vers la transfiguration, à l'événement se substitue en effet sa verbalisation : son annonce angoissée ou prophétique, son récit, son ressassement par la parole, son commentaire, son développement élégiaque ; la mort n'est que parole : « All is lyricism, unmixed passion, "the integrity of fire" », déclare-t-il dans son essai « The Tragic Theatre » (*Essays and Introductions* 240),¹ édité en 1910 dans la revue de Craig *The Mask*. Jusqu'aux *Plays for Dancers*, le poète dramatique démultiplie une parole lyrique partagée entre personnages périphériques et personnages héroïques : le chœur des musiciennes de *Deirdre*, les femmes et les mendiants de *On Baile's Strand*, le peuple de *The Countess Cathleen*, entourent à chaque fois la voix du protagoniste –

lequel n'est lui-même, à l'instar du poète, qu'une figure « raging in the dark » (*Variorum Poems* 495). Plus tard, à partir des pièces inspirées par le Nô, la voix du ou des protagonistes semble l'émanation de celle, alternativement chantée et parlée, des musiciens. Ceux-ci, qui encadrent la fable au point de parfois s'y substituer, déroulent une parole compassionnelle qui redouble et amplifie la plainte du héros ou de l'héroïne. Noël Péri rappelle, à cet égard, que le Nô, source d'inspiration des *Plays for Dancers*, est un code dont le chiffre est surtout lyrique (37). Si l'événement tragique, lorsque le sujet en comporte, y est raconté plutôt que mis en acte, c'est bien que l'intention est moins de le représenter que de le chanter.

Or c'est évidemment cette clé lyrique et épique qui nous guide dans la lecture de ce théâtre versifié. Il faut noter, dans l'histoire de l'élaboration de tels principes de composition, le rôle déterminant qu'eut la mutation de la pièce *The Golden Helmet* en *The Green Helmet* : entre décembre 1909 et janvier 1910, selon les dires mêmes de Yeats, *The Golden Helmet* est ré-écrit tantôt en vers longs de 14 syllabes, tantôt en *ballad meters* et voit son titre transformé, avant d'être re-créé le 10 février 1910 à l'*Abbey Theatre*. Cette mutation est le signe d'un changement stylistique majeur dans l'écriture dramatique du poète : si les textes précédents, dans leur ensemble, sont dominés soit par la prose, soit par l'usage du *blank verse*,² Yeats ne se satisfait pas d'une métrique trop culturellement connotée, comme il s'en explique vingt-cinq ans plus tard :

When I wrote in blank verse I was dissatisfied. My vaguely mediaeval *Countess Cathleen* fitted the measure but our heroic age went better, or so I fancied, in the ballad metre of *The Green Helmet*. There was something in what I felt about Deirdre, about Cuchulain that rejected the Renaissance and its characteristic metres, and this was the principal reason why I created in dance plays the form that varies blank verse with lyric metres. (*EI* 523)

À partir des *Plays for Dancers*, et d'un texte à l'autre, Yeats hiérarchise encore plus clairement des types de discours, qui coïncident avec une identité rythmique, explorant l'alternance entre pentamètres et vers plus brefs, surtout les trimètres de la tradition des ballades. Le croisement entre les deux modèles, grec d'une part, et extrême-oriental d'autre part, permet d'identifier les sources selon lesquelles Yeats

détermine la nature, comme la fonction, de ces différents niveaux de voix. Dans la tragédie grecque, on retrouvait trois débits distincts constitutifs de l'écriture tragique : le *melios*, le paracatalogue, ou chant récitatif, non rythmé, et le catalogue, simple déclamation parlée. Dans le Nô on retrouve ces trois niveaux de voix selon le même principe dit de mutation progressive, c'est-à-dire de passage par degrés d'un niveau à un autre. Ces différents niveaux ont chacun une fonction dramatique.³ Même si Yeats ne connaît pas, ou en tout cas n'applique pas à la lettre, les arcanes de la composition du Nô, il n'en distingue pas moins, dans les *Plays for Dancers*, des formes différentes dans la métrique et la rythmique, qui organisent de façon musicale et cérémonielle le discours et les prises de paroles, en un système vocal à quatre niveaux : chant du chœur, récitatif chanté-parlé du chœur, parlé-chanté des protagonistes, parole dialoguée. Ainsi, le discours narratif ou descriptif des répliques didascaliques du chœur est le plus souvent en tétramètres non rimés ; leurs fragments épico-lyriques, chantés, en trimètres ou en tétramètres rimés ; et le discours dialogué des personnages de la fiction en *blank verse* ; parfois enfin, des vers brefs, rythmés et rimés, font leur apparition, et rendent compte d'un échange dialogué, dans une sphère onirique et étrange, entre deux personnages surnaturels. Dans cette composition, le dialogue en *blank verse* n'est plus qu'un mode particulier, parmi d'autres, d'organisation de la parole. Cette mise en perspective lui donne un caractère musical inattendu : c'est un schéma vocal à côté d'autres schémas.

Ainsi, la pièce *At the Hawk's Well* s'ouvre sur une réplique formée de deux strophes en trimètres à rimes croisées, chantées *a capella* par les musiciens – la première strophe, à valeur didascalique, résume le cadre et la situation, pendant le dépliement du rideau. Les effets de circularité produits par la rime ou par les jeux d'échos et de variations (par exemple « mind – wind – climb – win – ninety ») lui confèrent un caractère litannique qui fait du discours une hallucination plus qu'une description raisonnée. La seconde, tandis qu'ils s'assoient près de leurs instruments, est un aparté méditatif sur le thème du temps et de l'âge. Après une pause durant laquelle les instruments entrent en jeu, un fragment de quatre vers rimés reprend l'évocation initiale, que

le premier musicien interrompt par une longue réplique narrative de vingt-huit vers, parlée, sans les instruments : cette réplique, toujours en trimètres mais non rimés, introduit cette fois-ci concrètement le cadre spatio-temporel de la fable, puis l'arrivée du personnage. Elle est elle-même interrompue à deux reprises par quatre vers rimés et chantés, exprimant l'émotion suscitée par la situation. Ce n'est qu'après ce cycle alternant séquences parlées et chantées que s'ouvre la séquence parlée, en *blank verse*, d'abord du vieillard, puis entre celui-ci et le jeune homme. On constate qu'est ici expérimentée, à l'échelle de la relation parole-musique, une structure spiralée chère à Yeats : un même module métrique et discursif est présenté d'abord à la voix, puis à la voix accompagnée par les instruments, et ce en alternance avec un autre, qui suit la même évolution, tandis qu'un troisième s'est entretemps interposé entre les deux, et va à son tour alterner avec le deuxième. Globalement, cette structure spiralée permet d'organiser musicalement des moments discursifs différents, dont les trois temps forts manifestes sont les trois quatrains lyriques chantés avec les instruments, qui expriment le sentiment tragique croissant des musiciens.

Le « *Written Speech* »

Cela dit, cette forme versifiée de l'écriture dramatique a d'autres moteurs que le lyrisme inhérent à une nouvelle dramaturgie tragique, ou l'organisation hiérarchisée des voix. Est également en jeu la mission dévolue à la parole « à haute voix » au cœur de l'événement théâtral, parole à laquelle la forme poétique donne toute sa valeur. Dans le poème « *Upon a House Shaken by the Land Agitation* », Yeats emploie pour la première fois l'expression « *Written Speech* » dans *The Green Helmet and Other Poems* : « *A written speech / Wrought of high laughter, loveliness and ease* » (*Variorum Poems* 284).⁴ Yeats met ici des mots sur une évolution de son écriture qui se manifeste au tournant des années 1910, mais dont on sent les signes avant-coureurs depuis toute cette décennie. Cette évolution, il la caractérisera *a posteriori* de nouveau dans « *A General Introduction for My Work* » :

I tried to make the language of poetry coincide with that of passionate, normal speech [...] I discovered that I must seek not as Wordsworth thought, words in common use, but a powerful and passionate syntax. (EI 509, 521-522)

Le « *Written Speech* » est un principe poétique fondé sur la relation complexe entre syntaxe et versification, dont l'horizon est de rechercher une dialectique entre élégance aristocratique et simplicité d'une conversation ordinaire. Le phénomène a été longuement étudié par la critique, surtout pour ce qui est de l'œuvre poétique.⁵ Il l'a peu, voire pas été pour le théâtre ; la question est pourtant d'autant plus cruciale dans ce cas, car non seulement ce théâtre est pour les trois quarts en vers, mais aussi d'une part parce qu'il s'agit par nature d'une parole à dire et à entendre, et d'autre part parce que son usage oriente et révèle à la fois les choix du poète en terme de dramaturgie. Quoi qu'il en soit – et pour en revenir à la description du phénomène –, pour ce qui est de la syntaxe, Yeats construit des phrases d'une longueur inhabituelle, usant à l'envi de la subordination ou des tournures interrogatives. La dissociation fréquente du sujet et de son verbe principal, rejeté en milieu ou fin de réplique, est source d'une tension aussi bien du discours que de l'énonciation. Dans le même temps, la structure de la phrase est maintenue par un jeu savamment dosé d'anaphores, qui préserve la visibilité discursive, et cadence rythmiquement la réplique. Par ailleurs Yeats, en inscrivant ce phrasé déjà très cadré dans un cadre second, celui du vers, renforce la contrainte exercée sur le discours et la voix, contrainte où s'articulent complexité du discours et solidité de son armature énonciative. Certes, il vise d'abord l'adéquation entre les deux trames, syntaxique et métrique – chaque vers se superposant à une unité syntaxique donnée –, contribuant ainsi à la sensation de fluidité d'une conversation courante. Mais il joue aussi de leur décalage, par le jeu des enjambements et des rejets. Rythmiquement parlant, il en résulte une dialectique entre la régularité de la cadence binaire de l'accentuation prosodique, et les effets de syncope ou de contrepoints générés tantôt par les enjambements et rejets, tantôt simplement par des ruptures rythmiques volontaires dans le vers.

L'une des répliques du personnage de la jeune fille, dans *The Dreaming of the Bones*, est un exemple limite de cette écriture, puisqu'elle ne déroule qu'une phrase sur une longueur de quatorze vers.

Young Girl: Although they have no blood, or living nerves,
Who once lay warm and live the live-long night
In one another's arms, and know their part
In life, being now but of the people of dreams,
Is a dream's part; although they are but shadows,
Hovering between a thorn tree and a stone,
Who have heaped up night on winged night;
Although no shade however harried and consumed
Would change his own calamity for theirs,
Their manner of life were blessed could their lips
A moment meet; but when he has bent his head
Close to her head, or hand would slip in hand,
The memory of their crime flows up between
And drives them apart.

Young Man: The memory of a crime – [...]

(*Variorum Plays* 771-772)

Ici la construction syntaxique mêlée à la rythmique du vers est source d'une tension entre rapidité et lenteur du flux verbal, ou entre clôture et relance. Seuls deux verbes principaux gouvernent l'ensemble de la réplique, eux-mêmes rejetés, le premier au dixième vers (« Their manner of life were blessed »), et le second au treizième (« The memory of their crime flows up »), créant une longue suspension du discours, et plaçant pour ainsi dire le « corps de la parole » en lévitation, dans une sorte d'apnée respiratoire, jusqu'à leur apparition. Du premier au treizième vers pourtant, trois occurrences successives de « Although » maintiennent fermement la réplique dans sa logique discursive, et encadrent trois sous-ensembles eux-mêmes armaturés par d'autres verbes, non sans introduire un deuxième niveau de subordination (une relative des vers 2 à 5, une autre au vers 7, se faisant écho par la reprise de « who »). Ce sont ces subordonnées incises, ou des verbes au participe présent, qui permettent de différer encore un peu plus le

verbe principal, et de donner toute son amplitude à cette architecture verbale. Sa fluidité n'en est au demeurant pas affectée, puisque Yeats fait aussi un usage calculé des enjambements et rejets,⁶ jouant alternativement de la conjonction ou de la disjonction entre unité syntaxique et unité métrique, et créant, lorsque la phrase chevauche les limites du vers, des effets de contrepoint et de relance rythmique, brisant la régularité binaire du *blank verse*.

La *Sprezzatura* et la joie tragique : esthétique et politique

Une telle rigueur ressort de motivations aussi bien esthétiques qu'idéologiques. Ce « *Written Speech* » n'est en effet rien d'autre que la représentation imaginaire que se fait Yeats d'une forme idéale de conversation, elle-même clé de voûte d'un rêve d'une utopique réconciliation entre raffinement aristocratique et simplicité pastorale. Il n'est pas un essai, durant la décennie 1900-1910, qui ne soit concerné par la mention récurrente du peuple, déclinée sous des formes variables : « the speech of the people », « the country people ». Il le dit encore dans son essai « Certain Noble Plays of Japan » : « I love all the arts that can still remind me of their origin among the common people » (*EI* 222). Cette posture n'est pourtant pas sans arrière-pensée, car à certains égards, cette vision romantique du peuple devient ici la caution morale d'une posture politique plus proche de ce que Lionel Pilkington nomme le « *constructive unionism* » (3),⁷ laquelle, sous couvert de la défense d'une mythologique culture populaire, nourrit souterrainement une vision plus conservatrice d'une nation rassemblée autour de ses élites aristocratiques ou intellectuelles. C'est dans cette perspective qu'il faut comprendre l'influence qu'a exercée sur Yeats *The Book of the Courtier* de Baldassare Castiglione. Paru en 1528, ce *Libro del Cortegiano* était l'œuvre d'un courtisan au service du Duc d'Urbino, près d'Ancône. Yeats a visité Urbino en 1907 durant son voyage en Italie avec Lady Gregory, et y fait à plusieurs reprises allusion dans son œuvre ; il en fait le symbole d'un âge d'or et d'un art de vivre perdu, dont Coole Park et Lady Gregory sont une forme de réminiscence. Entre ces deux pôles, le poète artiste se tient

à une place équidistante. Dans le chapitre « Estrangement » de son *Autobiographies*, Yeats associe explicitement l'élégance aristocratique et la noblesse d'âme de l'artiste :

Every day I notice some new analogy between the long established life of the well-born and the artist's life. We come from the permanent things and create them, and instead of old blood we have old emotions and we carry in our heads always that form of society aristocracies create now and again for some brief moment at Urbino or Versailles. (*Autobiographies* 473)

Cette forme de *parlacantando* qu'est le « *Written Speech* », en confortant Yeats dans son utopie d'une sorte de « démocratie spirituelle » fondée sur un art qui fédère ensemble, sous sa tutelle, le peuple et les « bien-nés », selon son expression, s'inscrit donc dans une démarche qui n'est pas qu'esthétique. Il s'agit d'élaborer une vision de la nation fondée sur l'héroïsme d'une communauté rassemblée culturellement autour de la figure du poète. « Does not the greatest poetry always require a people to listen to it? England or any other country which takes its tunes from the great cities and gets its taste from schools and not from old custom may have a mob, but it cannot have a people » (*EI* 213).

Autrement dit, ce n'est pas tant la réalité sociale ou économique du peuple irlandais qui intéresse Yeats, que son imaginaire, la poésie de sa langue, et les figures héroïques de ses légendes – ce qu'il avoue dans une remarque telle que : « My own preoccupation is more with the heroic legend than with the folk » (*Explorations* 183). Du reste, cette figure idéalisée du poète rassemblant en lui-même âme aristocratique et âme du peuple, c'est aussi le profil de bien des personnages héroïques du théâtre de Yeats, de Cathleen à Cuchulain, de Deirdre aux fantômes de *The Dreaming of the Bones*. Le poète isole un personnage à un moment de confrontation d'une particulière intensité : Deirdre qui choisit de mourir, Cuchulain se dressant contre les vagues, le cri d'Emer renonçant à son époux, le rebelle qui refuse de pardonner aux fantômes, le Christ doutant un instant sur la croix. Dès 1904, il associe, dans un vocabulaire visiblement marqué par sa lecture de Nietzsche, la mort avec le triomphe de ce qu'il désigne lui-même comme la joie

tragique : « the tragic joy and the perfectness of tragedy – when the world has slipped away into death » (*Explorations* 170). Dans son introduction aux *Plays for an Irish Theatre*, en 1911, il précise la nature de cet état : « This reverie, this twilight between sleep and waking, [...] this perilous path on the edge of a sword, is the condition of tragic pleasure » (*Variorum Plays* 1299). Etat de rêverie lucide, entre veille et sommeil, qu'il reformulera une dernière fois encore dans « A General Introduction for My Work » : « I am awake and asleep, at my moment of revelation, self-possessed in self-surrender » (*EI* 524). Yeats articule dialectiquement dionysiaque et apollinien, passion et raison, abandon à la transe et maîtrise de soi.

Or, c'est bien cet état d'équilibre que vise le « *Written Speech* », en mêlant la fluidité incantatoire du flux de parole à l'armature de la syntaxe et de la structure versifiée. La strophe devient corps vocal, et ce corps est à la fois *logos* et chant, sensible et intelligible, matière et esprit. Loin d'être sans organe, il est au contraire, comme tout corps, structuré par un squelette d'os, comme Yeats le dit lui-même :

I have written a good many plays in verse and prose and almost all those plays I have re-written after performance, sometimes again and again, and every re-writing that has succeeded upon the stage has been an addition to the masculine element, an increase in the bony structure. (*Explorations* 220)

Et comme l'a également très bien compris Seamus Heaney, parlant de l'écriture de Yeats : « The voice muscles its way over the obstacle course of the form and flexes like an animated vine on the trellis of its metric and rhyme scheme » (13).⁸ C'est pourquoi le rythme de la parole est essentiel pour accéder à l'état intermédiaire entre veille et sommeil, condition de la contemplation tragique, selon Yeats dans « The Symbolism of Poetry » :

The purpose of rhythm, it has always seemed to me, is to prolong the moment of contemplation, the moment when we are both asleep and awake, which is the one moment of creation, by hushing us with an alluring monotony, while it holds us waking by variety, to keep us in that state of

perhaps real trance, in which the mind liberated from the pressure of the will is unfolded in symbols. (*EI* 159)

Le voir et l'entendre

Mais au-delà de cette quête de transfiguration personnelle, du héros comme du poète, que révèle un tel rapport au pouvoir alchimique, à l'expérience extatique de la parole – et l'on reconnaît là, de ce point de vue, ce que dit Yeats, à différents endroits et moments de son œuvre, de la figure du Christ, dont il fait une figure d'humanité exceptionnelle – au-delà, donc, de cette quête intérieure, le poète est mû aussi par une autre motivation, liée également à la magie, mais sous l'angle, cette fois, de la représentation, ou plutôt de l'apparition.

Ainsi, dire, à propos du théâtre de Yeats, que « l'entendre fait voir » (« I call in the mind's eye » est le premier vers de *At the Hawk's Well*), ou que le récit se substitue à l'action réelle, ne veut pas dire que le poète se contente d'un théâtre de parole. À cette parole poétique, Yeats donne aussi la mission de faire surgir, *eyes wide shut*, pourrait-on dire, pour pasticher un titre célèbre.

Dans la réplique finale du jeune homme, extraite de *The Dreaming of the Bones*, les mots prononcés par celui-ci font référence à une action : les deux personnages fantomatiques de la jeune femme et de l'étranger s'éloignent, dansant, et disparaissent au lointain. Il ne s'agit pas ici, pourtant, de la substitution d'un récit épique à la vision directe d'une scène, mais plutôt du déploiement des mouvements et des choses par le mouvement de la parole poétique elle-même :

Young Girl: Seven hundred years our lips have never met.

Young Man: Why do you look so strangely at one another,
So strangely and so sweetly ?

Young Girl: Seven hundred years.

Young Man: So strangely and so sweetly. All the ruin,
All, all their handiwork is blown away
As though the mountain air had blown it away
Because their eyes have met. They cannot hear,

Being folded up and hidden in their dance.
 The dance is changing now. They have dropped their eyes,
 They have covered up their eyes as though their hearts
 Had suddenly been broken – never, never
 Shall Diarmuid and Dervogilla be forgiven.
 They have drifted in the dance from rock to rock.
 They have raised their hands as though to snatch the sleep
 That lingers always in the abyss of the sky
 Though they can never reach it. A cloud floats up
 And covers all the mountain-head in a moment;
 And now it lifts and they are swept away.
The Stranger and the Young Girl go out.

(*Variorum Plays* 774-775)

Ici le « *Written Speech* », entre vers et syntaxe, est au cœur d'une dramaturgie de l'épiphanie. En effet, cette réplique se déploie en une succession de nombreuses propositions brèves, sans subordination. Ce phénomène de parataxe, auquel viennent s'ajouter l'accumulation des verbes actifs, les jeux de répétitions, et pour finir la scansion rythmique du *blank verse*, elle-même travaillée de l'intérieur de nouveau par les enjambements ou contre-rejets, créent une forte tension entre étirement et brisure, régularité et rupture de rythme, continuité et discontinuité, élan et chute, inspiration et affaissement – bref, autant de signes d'une présence du corps, du point de vue du souffle et du mouvement. Trois mouvements se dessinent : Tout d'abord, de « all the ruin » jusqu'à « hidden in their dance » des vers 1 à 4, les liens articulatoires permettent d'étirer la phrase et de rebondir rythmiquement de vers en vers : la reprise des termes « all », et « blown away », la proposition comparative introduite par « as though », ou causale par « because », les enjambements très fluides, les sonorités nasales. La pause brève du point en fin de première phrase valorise une relance rythmique créée par le contre-rejet de « cannot hear », se prolongeant dans le vers 4. Dans un deuxième temps, (jusqu'à « be forgiven »), il est dit que le mouvement change (« the dance is changing ») en même temps que change également la syntaxe : plus brisée, elle se caractérise par une succession d'affirmations juxtaposées, séparées par des virgules.

les, s'ouvrant par deux verbes au *present perfect* repris en écho : « they have... », ou une variante d'écho de « their hearts », reflété dans « their eyes ». Cette accumulation se résout en une rupture rythmique, rupture qui coïncide avec « suddenly » et « broken », et qui introduit une phrase négative portant une charge très lyrique « never, never ». Le troisième mouvement reprend la structure syntaxique du précédent : « they have drifted / they have raised » et aussi « their hands / they can / they are », et rappelle même un vers antérieur avec de nouveau « as though », comme si la phrase initiale ressurgissait, reprise en boucle, avec une légère variante. Du reste, le fragment se clôt sur une reprise du terme « away », écho à « blown away » : « swept away ». De plus, au dialogue entre syntaxe et prosodie s'ajoute le jeu systématique des répétitions. Répété en effet, le mot perd sa transparence. Le signifiant prend le pas sur le signifié ; le mot devient musique. Or ici les répétitions sont marquées par de subtiles variations : « is blown away » devient « blown it away » (le point de vue a changé, le sujet du verbe passif devenant objet du verbe actif), et plus tard « swept away » ; « dance » précédé de « their » en fin de vers (complément) est repris en début de vers (sujet), précédé de « the », pour finalement être repris plus loin comme complément, mais précédé de « the ». Puis tous les « they » sont repris, martelés, comme si les deux amants étaient désignés du doigt après avoir été nommés ; mais ils sont repris avec de nombreuses variations sur les verbes : « they cannot - they have dropped - they have covered - they have drifted - they have raised. » Enfin « dropped their eyes » devient « covered up their eyes. »

Cette réplique est donc construite selon une logique non descriptive (description chronologique des actions des deux personnages), mais de perception rythmique d'un mouvement : le mouvement des phrases épouse le mouvement des personnages. C'est la syntaxe qui crée le mouvement : mouvement circulaire d'une danse faite de rebonds (« from rock to rock »), d'élans (« raised their hands ») précédés ou suivis d'affaissements, mouvement d'éloignement et de fuite, jusqu'à la disparition des personnages engloutis ou aspirés par la brume. Et dans ce tableau sonore, les répétitions variations sont à l'origine d'un effet de spirale : le mouvement est à la fois circulaire et ascensionnel.

Dans un tel exemple, les mots constituent donc le lieu même de l'action. La frontière entre l'intérieur et l'extérieur, entre le « subjectif » et « l'objectif », tend à s'abolir, et l'action se situe moins « dans le monde » que dans l'esprit – et surtout la voix – de celui qui parle. Il n'y a ni danse, ni absence de danse, mais bien le troisième terme d'une danse-dans-les-mots. Rien ne nous dit dans le texte que ces deux fantômes dansent effectivement, ou au contraire ne dansent pas, et sur ce point la décision ultime repose en réalité sur le metteur en scène.⁹ Il n'est pas sûr pourtant que le choix d'une représentation effective de cette danse soit le meilleur : si danse il y a dans le texte, il est certain, en effet, qu'elle se situe d'abord dans le langage.

Une relation particulièrement intense s'instaure donc entre le jeu de la parole et l'apparition du personnage. Le rythme et le souffle donnent à l'écriture ici une vertu hiérophanique. Il ne s'agit plus d'évoquer de façon indicielle un univers invisible, mais d'incarner un monde en quelque sorte « parallèle », double, et peut être métaphore, du monde réel. Cette incarnation s'opère de façon magique : dans un texte où s'effacent les didascalies, où s'efface aussi bien la première personne du singulier dans le discours du jeune homme, une voix impersonnelle, voix présente par sa dimension sonore et rythmique, fait surgir par enchantement, au sens propre, un univers imaginaire de figures en mouvement : le protagoniste parlant s'efface, se dissout, par sa propre voix, dans la vision qui l'habite, donnant à cette vision une dimension apocalyptique. Julia Kristeva nous signale ainsi l'existence, soixante ans après W.B. Yeats, et dans une perspective contemporaine, de cette écriture rompant avec la narration et la représentation :

Une nouvelle rhétorique de l'apocalypse (étymologiquement, *apocalypso* signifie dé-monstration, dé-couvrement par le regard, et s'oppose à *aletheia*, le dévoilement philosophique de la vérité) est apparue nécessaire pour faire advenir la vision de ce rien cependant monstrueux, de cette monstruosité qui aveugle et impose le silence. (231)

Julia Kristeva, évoquant ici l'écriture de Marguerite Duras, problématise la question de la représentation de l'irreprésentable que constituent la Shoah et Hiroshima. Nous n'en sommes pas là avec

The Dreaming of the Bones – il n'est cependant pas indifférent que le propos de cette pièce soit la catastrophe de Pâques 1916 – et que, de même, la thématique centrale de nombre des pièces de Yeats soit la confrontation à l'indicible de la mort.

Conclusion

Des références baroques jusqu'à l'aventure mallarméenne, en passant bien sûr par le Japon, tous les modèles auxquels Yeats se réfère, explicitement ou implicitement, lui permettent de faire stratégiquement cohabiter, dans un même projet, des motivations de type très divers. La musique de la parole fonde aussi bien ce théâtre-culte au service d'une transfiguration personnelle, ou de l'émergence de l'invisible, qu'une pratique plus simplement profane de la voix comme lieu de l'expression de la subjectivité et des passions. Dans cette dernière, elle réalise en outre une utopique réconciliation entre authenticité populaire et élégance aristocratique – dont on a vu qu'elle n'était pas sans implicites idéologiques.¹⁰ Dans tous les cas, cette parole épico-lyrique pose un immense double défi. Défi aux traducteurs d'abord, qui se doivent, pour ne pas manquer leur cible, porter une attention de chaque instant aux innombrables ciselures de la langue. Mais défi aux acteurs ensuite, de qui le poète exige à la fois une écoute subtile des inflexions de cette même langue, et des souplesses de rapsode dans leur interprétation, entre incarnation et effacement, entre parole et chant.

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¹ Désormais signalé par l'abréviation « EI ». Si le terme « lyrique » peut renvoyer à l'idée de voix, il est également employé par Yeats, plus généralement, lorsqu'il s'agit de désigner la passion, par opposition à l'action – ce qui renvoie indirectement à la rêverie d'une voix poétique.

² A quelques exceptions notables qui ne sont pas sans importance, telles que les trimètres utilisés dans les chants de *On Bailé's Strand* ou *Deirdre*, ou les ballades empruntées au fond populaire dans tel ou tel autre texte.

³ Ainsi le *shidai*, ou chant d'ouverture du Nô, est-il composé de vers réguliers de huit syllabes ; il introduit le sujet ou le cadre de la fable. Le *Uta*, de son côté, est un chant lyrique dans le plein sens du terme : chant d'attente du *waki*, chant méditatif du *shite*, il est un moment important de suspension du temps. Le *sashi*,

mélange du chanté et du parlé, est un récitatif, sans forme littéraire nettement déterminée. Au sens littéral, le terme signifie « introduire entre, ajouter ». Cette prose, récitée avec des inflexions mélodiques, permet d'introduire un personnage, une idée, un sentiment, ou d'opérer une transition. D'autres formes enfin, parlées, ne sont astreintes à aucune contrainte rythmique, même si le débit en reste régulier, et les inflexions vocales récurrentes. Le *mondo* ou le *katari* ont pour fonction d'introduire un dialogue ou un récit personnel et libre. Tous ces modules s'articulent les uns aux autres : un dialogue, forme libre et non scandé, se termine par un *sashi* dialogué, qui lui-même introduit un chant lyrique du chœur.

⁴ Nous pouvons traduire cette expression par le français « écriture parlée », même si une traduction littérale en serait plutôt « parole écrite ». Mais le terme « parole », dans son sens courant en français, semble plus rattaché à l'idée d'une oralité concrète, et moins polysémique que le terme « *speech* » anglais, qui inclut plus clairement l'idée de discours. Or c'est bien le texte écrit que Yeats « oralise », sans plus le calquer sur un modèle extérieur.

⁵ C'est dès la fin des années 1960 que le phénomène commence à être examiné (Veeder, Vendler) ; mais c'est surtout à partir des années 1990, sous l'influence de la critique post-structuraliste et des nouvelles théories de l'oralité, que l'étude en devient systématique. L'ouvrage de Michael Sidnell, *Yeats's Poetry and Poetics*, publié en 1996, marque de ce point de vue un tournant décisif. De notre côté, nous avons tenté d'en analyser les modalités et les enjeux dans l'œuvre théâtrale, avec l'ouvrage *Yeats dramaturge*.

⁶ Dans la réplique de la jeune fille, il y a trois enjambements entre les vers 2 et 3, 8 et 9, 13 et 14, et trois rejets, entre les vers 3 et 4, 10 et 11, 11 et 12.

⁷ Dans l'introduction de *Theatre and the State*, en particulier, Lionel Pilkington défend très justement la thèse selon laquelle toute l'entreprise pilotée par le « triumvirat » Yeats/Synge/Lady Gregory, depuis l'*Irish Literary Theatre* de la fin des années 1890, jusqu'à la *National Theatre Society* qui régit le jeune *Abbey Theatre*, adopte moins, durant ces années de construction d'un mouvement politique indépendantiste nouveau, notamment à travers l'émergence du *Sinn Féin*, une posture nationaliste qu'une position modérée visant à défendre l'idée d'un « *Home Rule* » éclairé et libéral, qui préserve les liens avec le Royaume-Unis tout en accordant à l'Irlande les droits et prérogatives qui lui sont dues. Au passage, ce qui est ainsi écarté, c'est surtout le spectre d'un soulèvement populaire de type révolutionnaire – notamment sur le plan agraire.

⁸ Yeats lui-même emploie une métaphore proche de cette dernière idée à propos du travail de ré-écriture de *Deirdre* : « Tragic drama must be carved out of speech as a statue is out of stone » (*Variorum Plays* 1299).

⁹ C'est la raison pour laquelle nous ne souscrivons pas totalement aux réflexions de Sylvia Ellis concernant cet exemple de séquence dansée. Même si elle reconnaît que la danse des fantômes n'est pas indiquée dans une didascalie, elle n'en considère pas moins pour acquise son existence concrète dans le texte. Cherchant les raisons d'un tel paradoxe, elle émet l'hypothèse du caractère, selon elle, particulièrement pantomimique, du mouvement, qui justifie une prise en charge narrative par la parole à la fois descriptive et subjective du jeune homme. En réalité, au fil de son raisonnement, elle n'en retrouve pas moins les vraies raisons pour lesquelles cette danse est exprimée par les mots, notamment lorsqu'elle suggère que ceux-ci permettent de traduire pleinement la fragilité des personnages. En effet, outre la rythmique dansée des mots eux-mêmes, on peut encore arguer de la légitimité d'un tel procédé par un nouveau niveau de spectralité : comment un personnage parle pour d'autres qui se taisent, ne pouvant exprimer leur souffrance que par le silence du mouvement (Ellis 284).

¹⁰ Ces « implicites » sont sans doute ce qui explique l'écart apparent – mais seulement apparent –, entre le « pastoralisme » des pièces des années 1900 et l'élitisme avoué, voire virulent, qui se manifeste dans une pièce tardive comme *Purgatory*.

Gordon Craig and English Verse

Patrick LE BOEUF

Abstract: Throughout his life, Edward Gordon Craig (1872-1966) had an (apparently) ambiguous attitude towards dramatic literature: on the one hand, he claimed a complete independence from playwrights for stage directors, on the other hand, he kept working on texts by great poets, most notoriously Shakespeare, thinking about the best way of producing such texts. English verse is a challenge for Craig, since its rhythmic pattern partly predetermines the sonic features of the performed text and, as a consequence, seems to deprive stage directors of some of their prerogatives. This paper therefore investigates Craig's relationship to versified writing, either as a playwright (as in the *Masques* projected by him in his early career, or his cycle of puppet plays entitled *Drama for Fools*) or as a theoretician, particularly in unpublished texts from the 1930s (*Creating a Theatre*, 1935-1937 ; *A Note on Sanity in Stage Production of Shakespearean Plays*, 1937-1940), in which Craig delves deeper into English verse drama and advocates an unexpected approach, most certainly too radical for the time in which he conceived it.

Résumé : Edward Gordon Craig (1872-1966) a entretenu toute sa vie une relation (en apparence) ambiguë avec la littérature dramatique : d'un côté il revendiquait l'autonomie totale du metteur en scène par rapport au dramaturge, de l'autre il n'a cessé de travailler sur des textes de grands poètes, à commencer par Shakespeare, et à réfléchir aux moyens de monter ces textes. Le vers anglais présente un défi particulier pour Craig, puisque par son carcan rythmique il prédétermine en partie la façon dont le texte va sonner sur le plateau, empiétant ainsi sur les prérogatives du metteur en scène. L'article examine donc l'attitude de Craig face à l'écriture versifiée, que ce soit en tant qu'auteur (lorsque Craig se fait lui-même dramaturge, comme dans certains projets de *Masques* du début de sa carrière, ou dans son projet plus tardif de cycle marionnettique intitulé *Drama for Fools*) ou en tant que théoricien, notamment dans des textes inédits des années

1930 (Creating a Theatre, 1935-1937 ; A Note on Sanity in Stage Production of Shakespearean Plays, 1937-1940) où Craig approfondit sa réflexion sur le vers dramatique anglais, et propose des approches inattendues, trop radicales sans doute pour l'époque à laquelle il les a formulées.

Keywords: Edward Gordon Craig, diction, rhythmic patterns, playwriting, Original Pronunciation

Mots-clés: Edward Gordon Craig, diction du vers, schéma rythmique, écriture dramatique, prononciation restituée

The scholarly discourse on Edward Gordon Craig (1872-1966) usually insists on his rejection, or at least distrust, of the dramatic text, and his lack of interest in actors' skills in delivering it. Christopher Innes, for instance, writes that "for Craig, theatre is the equal of literature, but a very different form of art that can reach its full potential only if it is no longer subordinated to the written word" (112), and Olga Taxidou asserts that "his theories have little space for ideas and formulations on acting as a creative process. Fighting certain aspects of the old actor-manager system and defining his own role as the all-powerful director left no room for theories on acting" (124-125). Although Craig was obsessed with the idea of running a school for the Art of the Theatre, actors' formal training in declamation is assumed to have been absent from his preoccupations: "Craig veut bien sûr se démarquer des écoles d'interprétation qui forment les acteurs à la déclamation et aux clichés gestuels" (Warnet 266). When scholars are strongly biased against Craig, this preconception can even lead to such definitive condemnations as: "[Craig's] vision epitomised a theater that ever more valued technology and stagecraft and simultaneously disparaged the human contributions of actors" (Falocco 20).

One of the most delicate of those "human contributions" lies in the art of speaking verse. Since Craig is assumed to have had no liking for

the declamatory aspects of acting, he is all the more assumed to have shown no interest in verse-speaking techniques. Although commentators generally acknowledge Craig's taste for poetry, they rarely discuss his opinions as to how to deliver poetic lines; and when they happen to do so, it is in a negative way that records how he did *not* want verse to be spoken, rather than how he *did* want to hear it: "Stanislavsky discovered [...] that [...] as soon as verse was attempted the actors [...] lapsed into declamation. In an attempt to clear up the difficulty, Stanislavsky acted some passages from his own roles before Craig, using different methods [...]. None of this was to Craig's liking" (Bablet 154).

While it remains true that Craig never was *primarily* concerned with verse-speaking techniques, the generally received (and most often tacit) assumption that he had no, or only very little, interest in them needs to be somewhat qualified. The objective of this contribution is to draw scholars' attention to little known primary sources that alter to some extent the conventional perception of Craig as a stage director and theoretician who focused exclusively on the visual dimension of the stage and despised traditional acting skills, and more particularly the art of speaking verse. Craig's attitude to this aspect of actors' training underwent a drastic change after 1930: this essay therefore discusses first Craig's opinions on verse-speaking and verse-writing prior to that date, and introduces in its second part a handful of texts that Craig wrote in the 1930s and that show how his ideas had evolved by then.

Pre-1930 period

Craig started his career as an actor. In 1894, at the age of 22, he played the leading role in *Hamlet*, but he never expressed his views as to what it meant to him to play such an important part written in iambic pentameter, and never bothered to declare whether he felt it was different from playing in prose.

As a reader, he was very fond of poetry, but his favourite poets were Walt Whitman and William Blake, and neither's prosody can be compared with the metres traditionally used in verse drama.

As a stage director, he never really had to meet the verse drama challenge: he only directed operas and masques and translations of plays originally written in other languages than English; he co-directed *Hamlet* with Konstantin Stanislavsky (1863-1938), but it was in Russian translation. *Much Ado About Nothing*, the only Shakespeare play he directed in English (in 1903), happens to be mainly in prose. Laurence Housman's (1865-1959) play *Bethlehem*, directed by Craig in 1902, is in verse, but Craig added a considerable amount of music to it, and cut many of the speeches. As Christopher Innes puts it, "In a play of just over 600 lines (before cuts), yet with a performance time of almost two hours, the musical and visual elements of the production clearly overwhelmed the poetry" (83).

As a set, costume, and mask designer, he contributed to the 1912 production of William Butler Yeats's (1865-1939) play *On Baile's Strand* at the Abbey Theatre in Dublin, but there is no evidence that Yeats solicited his advice as to how the text of this play, which is partly in prose and partly in verse, should be delivered on stage.

As a teacher, Craig deliberately and explicitly excluded verse-speaking from his programme. He wrote in *The Mask*: "In speaking we avoid Hamlet's 'To be or not to be.' We read a paragraph from a newspaper... or a prose passage from a book on the Theatre which speaks of some interesting development in the Art of the Stage" (Craig 1914: 231).

As a theoretician, he developed the notion that poetic drama is inferior to silent drama. In an article published in 1912, he complained that "speech has usurped the place of action in Stage-Drama." The use of words, he opined, lends itself to "argument [...] between the creator, the seer and the on-looker" while silent action is preferable because it is "open to such an infinite variety of interpretations." As a conclusion, he expressed his confidence that "ultimately words will be silenced in the purest form of Drama" (Craig 1912: 188-189). Which did not prevent him, however, from including in *The Theatre—Advancing*, in 1919, a very brief article devoted to "The Voice."¹ It begins with a forceful assertion: "Poetry cannot be beautifully spoken by English speakers. Even the best of them veneer the sounds with a slight mono-

tone.” Craig goes on hinting that his countrymen are actually afraid of poetry, and that they hide their fear behind “sanctimonious faces and voices”, sounding like priests at “a baptism or a burial.” He blames “the theatre with its sing-song reciters” for such cowardice, and calls implicitly for actors who would not be afraid to look straight into the blazing “truth” contained in poetry, and who would be able to discover another way of delivering verse lines (Craig 1919: 260).

Ironically enough, it is as a playwright that Craig displayed, during that period, most interest in verse drama. In the first years of the 20th century, Craig was obsessed with the idea of reviving the tradition of masque, a form of performance which he thought epitomised the very essence of the Art of the Theatre, as the verbal element did not prevail in it, but all components were at an equal level of importance: text, music, dance, scenery, lighting, costumes, and acting. He wrote several scripts for masques, most of which remained unproduced. These scripts are interesting, as they display the characteristics that Craig was looking for in plays that would no longer be regarded primarily as literary dramas, but rather as pretexts for stage creations. For instance, the masque script titled *Hunger*, written by Craig in 1902-4, displays a complex alternation of forms: 1. pantomime, 2. prose, 3. a procession, 4. prose (firstly improvised as in Commedia dell’Arte, then written), 5. a song and dance, 6. prose, 7. verse, 8. pantomime, 9. prose, 10. a song and dance, 11. prose, 12. verse, 13. prose, 14. a song and dance, 15. pantomime, 16. a song, and 17. pantomime.

In this script, all pantomime passages are accompanied by music, and all sung passages are in verse. These songs are strongly reminiscent of the nursery rhyme style:

The dog that swallowed all the soup
The dog that bolted all the meat
The dog that in the pudding—whoop!
What shall be done to him

What shall be done to him... (Craig EGC-Ms-A-49: 15v)

The metre used in the first spoken lines in verse is more accentual than syllabic, and rhymes play an important role as a marker of verse-writing:
Pride of the earth, sweet noblemen,

Beautiful ladies, tell me when
The earth will be found
To be kind and round
And the sun to shine and feel warm again. (Craig EGC-Ms-A-49: 25r)

The core of the script consists of a soliloquy delivered by a pauper whose children are starving. Most of this soliloquy is in prose, but as the dramatic acme approaches, it shifts suddenly to verse, when the father urges his children to stab themselves to death right in front of banquetting courtiers:

Now—This is the way we meet the Foe.
Weapon held in the right hand—so,
Slash, and stab to the left, and thrust.
Follow my actions—children must.
Right and left, and left and right,
Twist the weapon and win the fight.
Stab—and do it with all your might. (Craig EGC-Ms-A-49: 30v)

After this violent action, the pauper's soliloquy shifts back to prose. Craig does not use here the traditional metre of tragedy, the iambic pentameter, but turns to a four stress tetrameter, the lilt of which is in sharp contrast with the horror of the situation.

The last song in the script is written in regular trochaic tetrameter, except for three incomplete lines, in which stage directions explain that music and action are supposed to fill the metre, and two catalectic lines at the end:

Shall we show you how the peasant
How the Hungry worn out peasant
With the Lords and Masters present
Carries home his dead... (*Long note for action.*)
See! 'tis so. (*All follow her actions.*)
So the peasant
In the winter, in the dead time,
Lifts each priceless perfect body.
Six to hold a little baby,
Thirty carrying a man,
Thirty kneel to lift a man. (Craig EGC-Ms-A-49: 33r)²

Craig's avoidance of the established blank verse is obviously intentional: this text is to be sung, and its metric scheme has to be rather lyrical than tragic. An annotation facing this song in the manuscript shows that Craig is eager to shun a tragic atmosphere at all costs: "Never forget this: all this must have a smile and a *glow* about it. It must not grow grey and pathetic. It must warm up till it becomes a *triumph*!!" (Craig EGC-Ms-A-49: 32v) The choice of an unexpected metre is part of the playwright/director's strategy aiming at creating the right dramatic mood.

During World War I, Craig began to work on an ambitious project, titled *Drama for Fools*, and consisting of a cycle of 365 plays for marionettes (only seven of which were published by Craig in his lifetime). He never finished that cycle, but he worked on it almost until his death. Only one of the plays that Craig managed to put in definitive shape contains versified parts. It is *The Gordian Knot*, published by Craig in 1918; here, Craig introduces verse only for the sake of rhythm, as a mere display of meaningless phonemes arranged in a metric scheme. The plot of the play confronts a young and brilliant genius with a crowd of old and tired conformists who can but follow always the same traditional path, as they are unable to imagine anything more innovative. These conformists go literally in circles, chanting:

Round around about around,
Out about around abound,
Bound abound around about,
Bout out and abound arout. (Craig 2012: 244)

A subsequent variant of this couplet is even more meaningless. The rest of the play script is in prose.

At this point, readers can rightly wonder whether the topic was worth tackling or not: Craig's declarations on verse-speaking, verse-writing and actors' training in declamation prior to 1930 are virtually non-extant. Had Craig died in 1930, scholars would have been right in assuming that the art of speaking verse was of no value to him. Only after 1930 did Craig develop an interest for these matters; but the main sources in which he expressed his views remained

unpublished in his lifetime, and were not exploited by scholars after his death.

The 1930s

In 1930, Craig had his book on Henry Irving (1838-1905) published by J.M. Dent and Sons Ltd. The celebrated actor-manager, who had run the Lyceum Theatre in London from 1878 until his death, had taught Craig all the basic theatrical skills, and Craig venerated him, although Irving epitomised the Victorian theatre that Craig contributed to destroy. In his book, Craig devoted two pages to the criticism made against the way his mentor used to declaim verse:

Ever since I can remember, theorists have said that Irving mutilated the rhythm whenever he came to speak verse. When asked how Irving might have improved, these theorists would either begin to caterwaul unctuously [...] or they would mutter as paterfamilias does at evening prayers [...]. In short, they were unable to utter six words beautifully, yet would be instructing one of the best verse speakers of the age. (Craig 1930: 67)

To such criticism, Craig simply replies that Irving “never deliberately mutilated or wrecked the rhythm” of verse (Craig 1930: 68), but, unfortunately, he does not bother to provide any detailed information about Irving’s technique of verse-speaking.

In the years 1934-6, Craig began to write a very interesting essay, titled *Creating a Theatre*, which he left unfinished and unpublished.³ His initial plan was to write a trilogy that would have comprised: 1. Creating a Theatre, 2. Creating Actors, and 3. Creating a Poet. He commented on his plan in the following terms: “This is the order of procedure—a natural order and one which should be productive” (Craig EGC-Ms-B-69, fascicle 3, 1r). As a matter of fact, however, the text he titled *Creating a Theatre* is mainly about creating actors. Through an incredibly demanding training programme, Craig wishes to restore the technical skills of touring companies from the past, which were able to play a different show every night. He reckons that “Henry Irving in 1857-1859 [...] played 429 different parts in about 782 days” and he wishes to train 20th-century actors so that they could do the same

again. Although he admits that times have changed, he argues that “the job (the art of becoming an actor) remains the same. The job must be learnt. Practice—continual exercise—alone will teach it” (Craig EGC-Ms-B-69, fascicle 3, 2r). As a consequence, he wants his actors to work on five distinct plays per week during the first year of training. Rehearsals will be overseen by a prompter who “will sometimes beat on the ground: —*Bim*, —*Bim*, —*Bim*, —*Bim*, —*Bim*; in which case they have to take up [...] taking care to stress the syllable on which the thump falls” (Craig EGC-Ms-B-69, fascicle 6, 6r-7r). At this point, Craig introduces a development, in the form of a footnote, on verses that do not seem to adhere strictly to the iambic pentameter scheme. He quotes a line from *Hamlet*: “Peace, break thee off, look where he comes again” (I,1, line 38), and although he admits that actors would spontaneously tend to pronounce it: “*Peace*, break thee *off*, *look* where it *comes again*”, he insists that the correct stressing of the syllables is: “Peace, *break* thee *off*, *look where* it *comes again*.” He finds it extremely important that actors should first learn to observe strictly the rules of metrics, *before* they feel entitled to break these rules and enjoy the same freedom as apparently poets and playwrights have enjoyed:

This correctness has to be learned, and after it we can learn where to break. But if we imagine that we have Shakespeare’s facility and understanding of how and where to break, before we know how and where to stress, we shall be taking a short cut [...]. [M]etres were invented when Dance and Verse and Song went hand in hand. Unless you know first to keep the beat of a dance [...] you will never learn how to step off the beat, or when, or why. And because Shakespeare knows how to do it, and the great dancers know how to do it [...] that is no reason why we should learn to break the metre before we have learned to make it.

[...] I am sure that to follow the blank verse metre strictly, even at the cost [of] many other things, would recapture something of great value, which today seems to be disappearing more and more. (Craig EGC-Ms-B-69, fascicle 6, 7r)

Such a passage is trickier to analyse than it may seem, as Craig does not explicitly state what kind of effect he hopes to achieve through such experimentation. It is most probable that he had no preconceived

idea as to what the outcome would be. As the motto of *The Mask* says, “After the practice, the theory”: Craig is not theorising here for the sake of pure theory, he wants to *hear* these experiments before he can draw any conclusion. But one must bear in mind that in those years, Craig was rather isolated in France; he had no disciples around him, no English-speaking actors at hand who would have been willing to make these experiments for him. It is therefore impossible to jump to the conclusion that Craig is calling here for a mechanical, inflexible delivery of iambic pentameter. At the end of his development, Craig highlights the distinction between two notions, rhythm and metre:

If the actor of Marcellus is a man with a strong sense of metre, without having been taught he will, by the grace of nature, speak them [*i.e., these syllables*] in the way in which Shakespeare meant it to be spoken; and then he will very probably (though not certainly) stress the word “peace” instead of “break” and “look” instead of “where”.

There are two things, rhythm and metre. Rhythm we may call the magic thing, metre is a distinctly pedestrian thing; and here we have to learn to walk before we can run—and certainly before we can leap and gambol. (Craig EGC-Ms-B-69, fascicle 6, 7r)

In other words, actors have a natural tendency to convey the meaning of sentences, at the expense of the metric pattern of verse. During their period of training, Craig wants them to fight against this natural instinct, and to master to perfection the art of adhering strictly to that metric pattern, even if this obscures the meaning of the text. But the final aim is not, I think, to impose such an absurd treatment on the audience; rather, in a dialectic perspective, this mastery will be used as a springboard for the most talented trainees to explore new ways of declaiming verse, not necessarily returning to the ‘natural’ and spontaneous way that the apparent meaning of the text had initially hinted to them. Those results are unknown to Craig himself, as long as he has not had an opportunity to conduct with actors of flesh and blood the experimentation he is calling for.

Craig addressed the issue of verse-speaking again in another essay that he wrote in 1937 and revised in 1938, 1939 and 1944. It is titled:

A Note on Sanity in Stage Productions of Shakespearean Plays. It follows a dialectic purpose similar to Craig's approach to the metric pattern of blank verse in *Creating a Theatre*. Craig investigates what can be reconstructed from the theatrical practice in Shakespeare's time, not so much for the sake of mere archaeological reconstruction, but rather in order to impose constraints on actors and stage directors so that they can reform their own way of making theatre in the 20th century. Once again, the result of such a process is unknown to Craig, as long as the experimentation he describes has not actually taken place.

This essay is divided into three sections: 1. The Place, 2. The Voice, 3. Movement, Action, Acting, Costume. Naturally, it is in the second section that Craig expresses his opinions on verse-speaking. Craig's line of thought can be summarised as follows:⁴ contemporary scholars criticise actors who ruin the rhythm of English verse, but they themselves are unable to speak verse convincingly: therefore, actors cannot take them as their models. Contemporary poets are unable as well to declaim their own verse satisfyingly, and actors cannot take them as their models either. The only solution for actors is to follow their instincts, although theoretically "there must be the one and perfect way of speaking the words of [Shakespeare], but it is not recorded, this perfect way" (Craig 2017: 178). For lack of archival evidence, it is "lost and broken, the very swing of the verse, *the very sound of every word*" (Craig 2017: 176; the italics are Craig's). The task is even more difficult for contemporary actors, as their Elizabethan predecessors, Craig insists, did not have *one* style of acting that fitted all playwrights, but adapted their style to every single playwright: Shakespeare's lines should not be spoken the same way as Webster's, Kyd's, or Marlowe's. The ultimate challenge for contemporary actors is to return to "the speaking both the verse and the prose *as the Elizabethans heard it*" (Craig 2017: 179; the italics are Craig's). Craig is convinced that this challenge is simply impossible to meet; however, the attempt itself is worthwhile "in some school of experiment", as "something might come out of such tests" (Craig 2017: 179). Such experiments should be based on the work of scholars who study the Elizabethan pronunciation of English. Craig enthuses for historical phonology, and calls

for “a dictionary giving us, word for word, the correct Elizabethan pronunciations” (Craig 2017: 181).⁵ Such training would be necessary, but not sufficient, as it would only lead to mastering the *correct* pronunciation of every single word, while acting demands something more than mere correctness. Once actors have come to master that correct pronunciation, they will have to learn how to add ‘dramatic fire’ to it. “A hundred different changes are rung on these correct tones” (Craig 2017: 181).

In the passage in which Craig asserts that poets are unable to speak their own verse, he provides the example of William Butler Yeats, which is interesting because for once, Craig lingers on the type of verse-speaking he definitely cannot stand. He reports that whenever Yeats spoke verse, “it seemed so pedantic, so reserved, even woebe-gone.” Craig complains that he “couldn’t hear the verse for the words, couldn’t hear the words for the crooning.” He is particularly irritated by the sing-song quality of Yeats’s delivery: “when he speaks verse he seems transformed into the clergyman. It’s up and down and down and up, and ‘Oh, my dear brethren’” (Craig 2017: 179). In his opinion, the main requirement for being a good verse speaker consists of a complete lack of lyricism: “They say Tennyson could speak his own verse. I wonder. I’ll tell you who I think could speak verse: Daniel Defoe. He is so all that is not lyrical in what and how he writes” (Craig 2017: 179). And when it comes to mentioning explicitly the names of actors who, in his opinion, are excellent verse speakers, his choice is rather surprising: “I can grow warm hearing a line of verse *however it be spoken*, and I can grow mad hearing it spoken by Michoels, [or] Friedland” (Craig 2017: 179; the italics are Craig’s). Surprising, because Solomon Mikhoeles (1890-1948), from the Moscow State Jewish Theatre, acted exclusively in Yiddish, and Zvi Friedland (1898-1967), from the Habima company in Tel Aviv, acted exclusively in Hebrew. Most probably, Craig never heard either delivering a line of English verse; but he presumably heard them speaking verse in Yiddish and Hebrew. Although he could speak neither of these two languages, he seems to have been sensitive to their prosody.

Craig's unexpected interest in historical phonology and what we now call Original Pronunciation, or 'OP', goes far beyond a mere archaeological hobby. The objective here is a quest for more expressiveness through the use of 'exotic' sounds, so to speak. In his book on Henry Irving, Craig already insisted that one of the elements that made his mentor's acting particularly appealing was the peculiar way in which he pronounced certain English words ("Gud" for "God", "god" for "good", "ritz" for "rich", etc.). Whereas many criticised Irving's oddities of utterance, Craig claims, on the contrary, that "his tendency was to enrich the sounds of words—to make them expressive rather than refined" (Craig 1930: 63), and he is convinced that Irving's pronunciation was actually closer to the Elizabethan pronunciation than to the received pronunciation of Victorian English, which should have led critics to respect him rather than deride him: "how strange it is that it is always for preserving the best that men lay themselves open to the attacks of their fellows. For this [*i.e., the way Irving pronounced English words*] is the old English speech, and Irving brought back to us something of the ripe old sounds" (Craig 1930: 65). Craig is interested in those "ripe old sounds" indifferently for verse and prose, but it is well known that the impact of OP is particularly important when it comes to verse drama, as it makes it possible for lost rhymes to sound again as rhymes.⁶ David Crystal writes that the actors who experimented with OP under his direction made "repeated reference to the process of discovery—how OP had helped them to get closer to the metre, how it helped them find fresh phonetic echoes and rhymes within and between lines" (167).

The last text in this brief corpus consists of annotations on an article by Austin Clarke (1896-1974), titled "Verse-Speaking and Verse Drama." This article was published in 1937, but Craig's annotations are not dated; he probably jotted them down in 1937 or 1938.

At that time, the Irish poet Austin Clarke had not become yet a major successor of William Butler Yeats as a verse-playwright. He was about to co-found the Dublin Verse-Speaking Society in 1938 with Robert Farren (1909-1984); the Lyric Theatre Company of Dublin

would follow in 1944. In this article, Clarke attacks “the Yeatsian cult of aestheticism” (Craig EGC-Ms-B-83: 8), and advocates a new form of verse drama, along with new methods of speaking verse, methods that will involve “tones and inflections which are beyond the present range of the ordinary actor” (Craig EGC-Ms-B-83: 10).

Craig was both intrigued and frustrated by Clarke’s assertions. Frustrated, because he felt Clarke refrained from revealing important truths about the craft of speaking verse.⁷ Intrigued, because Clarke’s ideas fuelled his own reflections on the issue, and obliged him to pose the following questions, which he left unanswered:

1. Do we need verse drama—if so, why?
2. Can verse drama be what Greek verse drama was—what we suppose it was? A music-dance-drama, with the text written in verse. But before answering consider *how* was this verse spoken?
3. Why, if we can do this again, were the Florentines not able to do more in 1600 when they created the 1st Italian form of *opera* [...]?
4. [C]an verse be spoken so as to be dramatic—can verse drama be acted dramatically so as to be rhythmic and lovely like verse?
5. Is it the result obtained by the C[omédie] Franc[aise] that we hope to achieve? Then our Public must first come to enjoy verse, to respond to it, for this it does not do and has never done, I imagine. [...] [The English public] finds in prose all the thrilling sounds and emotions which the Frenchman finds in verse drama. (Craig EGC-Ms-B-83)

Craig rejects forcefully the idea that a contemporary play script should be entirely in verse, and that only verse drama should fill the stage throughout a show. Instead, he calls for dramatic progression based on a rigorous succession of various forms of performance: “*Verse drama. Why?* All verse. Verse, verse, verse, will we nill we? What a notion, what folly, what an utter misunderstanding of the value of verse, say I. Prose, verse, song, dance: this crescendo” (Craig EGC-Ms-B-83; the italics and chaotic punctuation are Craig’s). Clearly, Craig is turning again here to his ideal of a masque around 1900. Although his *Hunger* script is much more complex than this basic pattern, on the whole it can be said to follow it. In Craig’s view, contemporary

full-length verse drama is sheer nonsense: but verse passages are an important link within a dramatic chain that goes from the prosaic exposition of a plot to a non-verbal, choreographed climax.

Conclusion

Although Craig's interest in the topics of verse drama and verse-speaking is limited to a decade only, during that decade he developed an original line of thought and made important statements that can be summed up as a series of advice notes to playwrights and actors. His advice to playwrights can be reformulated as: avoid full-length verse drama; instead, be careful to use verse at strategic points only, and not to undermine the intrinsic value of verse. His advice to actors can be summed up along the following lines: strive to respect the specific style of each single playwright from the past; first master the 'correct' way to speak verse, *e.g.* by training to adhere strictly to the iambic pentameter scheme, *then* try to act the part "and at the same time to speak the verse as it should be spoken" (Craig EGC-Ms-B-83); avoid "sing-song" and "crooning", do not sound like a clergyman; add an exotic flavour to the speech, *e.g.* using OP; get acquainted with obsolete techniques, experiment with radically new ones; first learn the rule; then, and only then, learn how to best break the rule.

Craig's apparent obsession with a rigid adherence to the iambic pentameter is certainly the most surprising, possibly even shocking aspect of his verse-speaking theorisation, and the least likely to be accepted in contemporary practice. Giles Block, the 'Master of the Words' at Shakespeare's Globe in London, writes that, whenever Shakespeare substitutes an iamb with a trochee, "we mustn't worry [...] that, for a moment, we have lost that powerful emotional iambic rhythm [...]. Shakespeare will always revert to the iambic: it is his default setting. But [...] these few trochees bring variety" (30). Craig would undoubtedly have agreed that they do; but he urges actors and directors to experiment with the rhythm of speech and the Shakespearean text, and to never take anything for granted.

In a sense, Craig's views on verse-speaking are not incompatible with his distrust for the dramatic text, which was mentioned in the Introduction and on which all Craig scholars agree. Imposing a rigid and inflexible beat to the iambic pentameter tends to turn verse drama into a sheer flow of sounds comparable to music, and colouring it with OP tends to substitute the received text with some text in a foreign language, so to say. The audience is no longer expected to *understand* the uttered words, but simply to get drowned in the hypnotising, regular flow of odd-sounding syllables. This is a theatrical experience quite different from what we are used to, and assuredly, such a revolutionary director and theoretician as Craig wished we could make new and refreshing experiences, and shake up our routine.

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¹ This article is dated "London, 1908", but it does not seem to have been published prior to its inclusion in Craig's book of essays *The Theatre—Advancing*.

² The song is sung by the pauper's daughter, hence the phrase "her actions."

³ Three sets of typescripts of portions of this unfinished essay are held at BnF, ASP: EGC-Ms-B-69, EGC-Ms-B-157, and EGC-Ms-B-166. A fourth one is held in the Edward Gordon Craig Collection of the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center at the University of Texas at Austin, MS-00960, Container 8.10.

⁴ Craig's arguments are not presented here in the exact order in which he expressed them.

⁵ Craig adds angrily: "How is it that [such a dictionary] is not used to train the modern actors of Shakespeare to speak the speech as *he* pronounced it?"

⁶ In *A Note on Sanity*..., Craig is fascinated to discover that in a ballad written in 1613, "might" rhymes with "eight" (Craig 2017: 180).

⁷ Along with his annotations, Craig began to draft a letter to Clarke, which he never sent: "can you not [...] tell me (for no one wishes more than I to solve the problem) how exactly one should proceed to master the craft of verse-speaking. Unless I have missed something in your article [...] you do not tell me, step by step, the way to learn (or teach) the craft" (Craig EGC-Ms-B-83).

Poetic Drama, Worldliness, and the Anti-Poetic in Plays by Charles Williams, T. S. Eliot, David Hare and Mike Bartlett

Rowland COTTERILL

Abstract: The uncertain achievements of 20th- and 21st-century verse drama in English invite enquiry concerning the possibilities of the genre. This essay considers three dramas, by Charles Williams, T.S. Eliot, and Mike Bartlett, and also a play by David Hare published as prose drama but comparable in its themes and rhythms. Discussion is advanced through the category of the 'anti-poetic', as exemplified in a reading of Goethe's *Faust*. Three issues are raised with regard to each drama – its scenario and agents, its implicit claims about poetic utterance and linguistic intercourse, and its achievement as dramatic poetry. Williams and Bartlett present protagonists who champion unimpeded speech and action and seek to renew the energies of fading societies, but become trapped by their initiatives and entangled in their own residual worldliness. Eliot and Hare stage a worldliness which is maintained and perhaps, for their audiences, poetically reinvigorated by the martyrdom, or the contradictory life and language, of their heroines. Bartlett's blank verse and Williams's prosodic variety barely sustain plausible dramatic conversation, whereas Eliot's careful gradation of poetic rhythm stages, with some success, a confrontation between different levels of verbal and emotional intensity. In Hare's play, poetry is reborn from apparent prose.

Résumé : Les succès incertains du théâtre en vers en anglais aux XXe et XXe siècles invitent à réfléchir aux possibilités offertes par le genre. Cet essai se penche sur trois pièces de Charles Williams, T.S. Eliot et Mike Bartlett, ainsi que sur une pièce de David Hare publiée en tant que pièce en prose mais comparable dans ses thèmes et ses rythmes. La discussion utilise la catégorie de 'l'anti-poétique', dont la meilleure définition se trouve dans la lecture du *Faust* de Goethe, et qui est analysée dans chaque pièce – dans ses scénarii et agents, ses revendications implicites quant à la parole poétique et la communication linguistique, et ses succès en tant que poésie dramatique. Williams et

Bartlett présentent des protagonistes qui défendent une parole et une action qui ne connaissent pas d'obstacle et cherchent à renouveler les énergies de sociétés sur le déclin, enfermées dans leurs pétitions de principe et embarrassées par leur propre expérience résiduelle. Eliot et Hare mettent en scène une expérience qui est maintenue, et peut-être, pour leurs publics, revigorée poétiquement, par le martyre, ou la vie et le langage contradictoires, de leurs héroïnes. Le vers blanc de Bartlett et la variété prosodique de Williams soutiennent à peine le dialogue dramatique, tandis que la minutieuse gradation du rythme poétique d'Eliot met en scène, non sans succès, une confrontation entre différents niveaux d'intensité verbale et émotionnelle. Dans la pièce de Hare, la poésie renaît de ce qui est en apparence prose.

Keywords: Drama, poetry, anti-poetic, worldliness, renewal

Mots-clés : Drame, poésie, anti-poétique, expérience, renouveau

Why have there been so few successful poetic dramas in the history of twentieth- and twenty-first-century English theatre? We think of Eliot's *Murder in the Cathedral*, unusual in occasion and structure; we weigh up success and failure in Eliot's more conventionally-staged *The Family Reunion* and *The Cocktail Party*; and we pause. Pausing, we remember, or research, plays, long unperformed, from before and during Eliot's period of dramatic creativity - by Stephen Phillips and Gordon Bottomley, by Ronald Duncan and Christopher Fry, by Charles Williams and Dorothy Sayers - and we continue to pause upon, to adjudicate, and on the whole to dismiss the claims of their many verse dramas. We notice more recent plays by Tony Harrison - albeit mostly skilful translations and adaptations of works from earlier centuries and traditions - and the growing oeuvre of Glyn Maxwell, with his spirited and intelligent defence of a specifically conversational mode of verse. More recently we may observe the success, in London's West End and in adaptation for television, of *King Charles III*, Mike

Bartlett's meld of royal gossip with Shakespearean pastiche. And we wonder whether, amidst such partial successes, something is missing; some recipe for success, some undiscovered site of neglected achievement, perhaps some interpretative formula offering to make, out of apparent or supposed failure, intelligibility or paradoxical triumph.

In this essay I shall discuss dramatic texts by three of the authors so far mentioned - by Eliot, by his precursor and (by him) admired contemporary Williams, and by Bartlett. In choosing these plays my aim is to range across three of the theatrical modes most frequently explored by recent English verse-dramatists. Bartlett's recent success is overtly Shakespearean in its dramaturgy, indebted most clearly to *Richard II* and *Macbeth*. Williams's drama, originally performed in the cloisters of Canterbury Cathedral, invokes traditions and examples of medieval and early Renaissance Moralities and chronicle Histories. Eliot's tragicomedy, typically more various in its use of tradition, blends mythic narratives drawn from Euripidean tragedy with features of two other sharply antithetical styles - the brittle conversation of boulevard comedy (one thinks of Sacha Guitry) and the spiritual interrogation typical of baroque martyr-drama (given renewed critical salience during Eliot's career by the writing of Walter Benjamin).

In my discussion I shall have three types of questions in view. An obvious and basic question: what happens in such contemporary verse-plays? What kinds of scenario, what types of dramatic agent, what types of personal and social confrontation are, in these dramas, emphasised and placed into sharp relief? A supplementary question, which in fact requires some prior consideration: what features of these plays bring them to life as, to different degrees, compelling dramas? in what ways (to anticipate some of the terms of my answers) do 'poetic' energies and protagonists confront and interact with forces, seemingly very different in nature, which may, in action, be represented as 'worldly,' and, for aesthetics, as 'anti-poetic'? And a third question, which I shall consider throughout my individual analyses and more generally in a brief conclusion: in what respects are such plays intelligible as being poetic? What, beyond the deployment of verse-lineation in their printed formats, sets them within the lineages of verse-drama?

My very summary responses to these questions will suggest that Bartlett's and Williams's plays are, given obvious differences of temporality and milieu, in some ways rather similar, and importantly different from Eliot's drama. In brief development of this idea I shall offer reflections on a play written and set in a time-frame halfway between those of Eliot and Bartlett; a play printed, published and characteristically discussed as prose, yet abounding in verse-rhythms and increasingly governed by them, and usefully comparable in its dramaturgy to Eliot's tragicomedy - David Hare's drama *Plenty*.

In discussing these four texts I shall mainly proceed play by play, partly because of the relative lack of currency, for different reasons, obtained so far within academic study by the earliest and latest dramas, those of Bartlett (the most recent, with which I shall begin) and Williams. Into each discussion I shall interweave material relating to the three types of issue I have identified. Both in advance, however, and later in conclusion I shall draw out, in response to my initial questions, claims - about 'anti-poetic' worldliness, about dramatic action, and (in conclusion) about poetic language - which are relevant to these plays and may have wider validity.

For the notion, first, of '(the) anti-poetic' I must acknowledge indebtedness to a remarkable study, by the Germanist Benjamin Bennett, of Goethe's immense two-part poetic drama, or dramatic poem, *Faust*. Bennett's elaborate interpretative arguments, and also of course the coruscatingly various modes and verse rhythms of Goethe's epic, far outrun the scope of the present essay. In particular Bennett's conception of the anti-poetic involves applications of such notions as self-consciousness, irony, and 'submergence,' whose value in relation to my chosen set of English plays, while not negligible, would be impossible adequately to suggest here. But a brief presentation of Bennett's line of thought, and of a reading of *Faust* (my own, not his) which it might stimulate, may be relevant to what follows.

Early in his book Bennett advances a claim fundamental to his sense of what it might be for *Faust*, and for any drama, to be poetic: "The business of poetry is to 'reveal' a world-shaping or in truth a

world-originating ‘power’ in *all* language” (16). In the dramatic context of *Faust*, Bennett’s point is to develop a correlation between the lyrical poetic flights of Faust and his inexhaustible imagination, beyond the worlds of scholarly and scientific disciplines which he has mastered and in which he finds nothing but frustration and ennui, of exciting and life-enhancing worlds elsewhere. Hoping, in such imaginations, for self-renewal and (to varyingly conscious extents) renewals of the human societies in which he invests his energies - petit-bourgeois Germany, Imperial culture, and an independent republic - he experiences, and comes damagingly to expect and indeed engender, for himself and others, disappointment and disaster. Mephistopheles, for his part, is the chief vehicle of the ‘anti-poetic’ energies of *Faust*, at once devilish and worldly-wise. He offers Faust the chance - in truth, for Goethe’s thought, at once negative and positive - to submerge himself in the seemingly tangible reality of such worlds, to sustain his hopes so as all the more reliably to exacerbate his disappointment and eventual despair. On this interpretation, the drama directs irony against Faust’s ‘poetic’ supposition that self-renewal is to be achieved solely by his own individual powers, enhanced as they may be by Mephistophelean magic and poetic charisma. Mephistopheles in practice works to accelerate, in and around Faust’s self-servingly egotistic projects, the self-shaping and mutually limiting energies inherent in the world, made up at it seems to be more or less separable worlds, through which he and Faust pass - worlds of erotic love (Gretchen), aesthetic and cultural beauty (Helen), and political and technological reform (the reclamation of land from sea). Faust’s poetic solipsism, in each of these spheres of poetic lyricism and dramatic action, is fulfilled to the point of destruction - a fulfilment which, from a different and more general perspective, involves the powers, at once creative and transitory, of all humans and all human language. Poetry, thus, by being claimed on behalf of an individual and supposedly unique vision or language, automatically generates its ‘anti-poetic’ antithesis; and poetic drama lies in (some version of) their dramatic interaction, and the self-consciousness which is thereby, in a theatre audience, generated with regard to their own powers, even if latent, of poetic self-creation.

Turning now to the question of dramatic action - of what, at a basic level, takes place in the English plays upon which I shall focus - I shall first suggest a few summary conclusions; I take these to be in line with the possible reading of *Faust* sketched in the previous paragraph, and hence amenable to Bennett's notion of the anti-poetic, from which it has been derived. Protagonists in these dramas seek free agency for themselves and, for themselves and others, sincere and direct linguistic self-expression; in practice, however, they are entrapped in self-contradictions and unintended consequences, in both self-discontinuity and self-repetition. Their socio-political worlds appear to them as encoded, figured, caught up in a network of worldly and all too easily accepted lies and half-truths. Such worlds seem, to the sincere (and more or less poetic) protagonists, either overtly hostile or, more significantly, unreliable just when seemingly most responsive to the protagonists' aims and hopes. Thus, within these worlds and in relation to these protagonists, there emerge functionally ambiguous dramatic characters - wise tempters, mysterious Guardians, false friends and friendly enemies. Such character-functions embody processes and energies of an antipoetic, regularly impelling protagonists into obsessive double-or-quits projects and patterns of action, while at the same time implying the limitations of such agency. Hence, at the level of the individual protagonist and would-be hero(ine), there may emerge a sense of pathos, elegiac in defeat or even potentially tragic in martyrdom. Upon the social worlds of the plays, in their turn, the impact of the protagonists may amount merely to confirmation in their own worldliness, or to some larger sense of its true necessity; on the other hand a poetic protagonist may, by or beyond his or her conscious intention, to some extent renew the anti-poetic world against, and yet within, which they stand and act. Across the actions of such dramas, thus, there may resonate the ambiguities of poetic prophecy and utopian dream.

My consideration of individual plays can usefully begin with Mike Bartlett's *King Charles III*, the most recent and in some ways most straightforward example of issues and features so far discussed. Its roy-

al protagonist is perceived, by himself and others, as one who is alone; as “A virtuous man of dignity and grace, / Immovable, inscrutable as stone”, and as a man, in his “whole existence”, “built upon the ones who gave [him] birth” (11). These claims and representations are not obviously coherent. It is also unclear how far Charles (or even, perhaps, his author) is conscious of significant tension between them. In fact the tensions here are important for the emergent dramatic action. At the outset Charles is seen to be released, by the death of his mother the Queen (Elizabeth II), from endless princely potential into the actuality of kingship. Having (as one says) his own ideas, he seeks to put them into political effect. He takes a stance as defender of sincerity and emotional freedom, refusing to be limited by the superficial and worldly theatricality to which his daughter-in-law Kate expects and fears that his coronation and monarchy, and that of her own husband William after him, will be reduced. Against the plans of his Prime Minister (Evans), and despite his own past and emotionally damaged family history, he stands up for the causes of free publication and free comment by the Press. Unable to impose, upon Evans’s pre-existing political plans, his own personal will, and given ambiguous encouragement by the Leader of the Opposition (Stevens - one hears here the phrase ‘even-steven,’ ‘nothing in it either way’), Charles takes a constitutionally invasive step, proroguing by personal intervention a sitting of the House of Commons. Public order is threatened. The ghost of Diana (Charles’s dead first wife) appears on stage to Charles and to William, promising to each that “You’ll be the greatest King we ever have / had” (62, 71). Kate, anxious for the fate of the monarchy, and for her power through her husband to influence and dominate, propels William into what is ostensibly a process of mediation between King and Parliament; this quickly turns into usurpation by William, while Charles, abdicating, self-pityingly projects his future as an old forgotten gardener.

Has anything changed or been renewed with William’s succession, to the throne and to the ambiguous limits of monarchic power? He promises renewal by way of a return “to what your mother [i.e. Elizabeth II] did, / Stability and certainty, above all else” (112).

Kate for her part hopes to:

be a Queen unlike the ones before,
...[with] power to achieve my will in fair
Exchange for total service to the State. (92)

Here again one may sense a pattern of contradiction within seeming or supposed continuity. Meanwhile the subordinate dramatic action around Prince Harry generates, within repetition, a certain difference; generally a prose speaker, like his girl-friend Jess, he learns to speak verse, perhaps therein blending, with deference to his superiors, some vein of self-creativity. The idea may be in the air that Harry might function, for the all too poetic state of the nation, as an anti-poetic complement, poison and cure at once - despite his reduction, in the play's denouement, to (temporary) subservience to ceremony. But Harry's fate, within the plays' narrative, like that of Charles, is portrayed largely in terms of pathos - an alternative path that fails to be taken. The overall effect, in Bartlett's play, of poetry seems to amount to a sense of dignified but sterile repetition, at the levels at once of public policy, personal project and linguistic self-consciousness; Charles and William, Kate and Harry sleep-walk and dream-talk their way, through villainies channelling Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, in rhythms distantly echoing the sporadic energies and elegiacs of Shakespeare's abdicating Richard II.

Charles Williams's play *Thomas Cranmer of Canterbury* has on the whole been discussed in the context of English twentieth-century revivals of religious drama. Yet for Williams, in this play as in his religious novels, God remains hidden; nor, despite the partial resemblance of the play to the modes of Shakespearean History (Cranmer appears, in fact, as a notable role in Shakespeare and Fletcher's *Henry VIII*), do monarchs male or female occupy more than relatively minor roles in the drama. Williams's action is centred on the dramatic antithesis, and the occasionally conscious theatrical relationship, between his titular protagonist Cranmer (Christian reformer, prayer-book author, Archbishop of Canterbury, and hesitant Protestant martyr) and a role named in speech-prefixes as The Skeleton and self-described as 'Figura Rerum' - a figuring forth of the play of worldly business and earthly

power, and an all-too-accurate prophet of the vacillating infidelities of the rulers of this world.

Cranmer, like Bartlett's Charles, begins from a personal project – the restoration, out of its present sleepy materialism, of the realm of England to a newly vibrant Christian faith:

O that the King, O that God's glory's gust
from heaven would drive the dust of the land, unite
his people with might of doctrine, embodied raise
their subservient matter, set with his fire ablaze
their heavy somnolence of heavenly desire, his word
bid what God said be heard, what God bade be done! (6)
He seeks and prophesies, with this, a renewal of language:
O now
our common English, whereto we were born
...having and meant to have
wealth so great of words, language of power
this hour receives its consummate miracle; the Word
takes the sound heard natively around,
the excelling grace of speech... (19-20)

Cranmer comes, indeed, to embody a role-function familiar in twentieth-century drama – the liberal martyr-genius, seeking constructive reform, serving governments on whose goodwill or consistency he relies too much, and always tempted to trust his own unaided insights and energies; one thinks of Shaw's Joan, Osborne's Luther, Brecht's Galileo. The action of Williams's play shows Cranmer dangerously exposed amidst the openness of the specific historical moment which enables his visionary agency. King Henry promotes, challenges and protects Cranmer by turns. The regents for the young King Edward manipulate and scorn him. Queen Mary, restoring traditional Catholicism, puts him to the torture; he recants, and, fickle and vulnerable himself, recants his recantation.

All this, indeed, is on historical record, and is duly, though rather cursorily, chronicled in the play. But Williams's greater emphasis falls upon his anti-poetic character, *Figura Rerum* – at once a Morality Vice-figure and a reworking of Goethe's and perhaps Marlowe's

Mephistopheles. Like Goethe's devil he befriends and betrays a poetic protagonist, circulating an encyclopaedic profusion of linguistic paradox between the utopian world of Cranmer's poetic vision and the various worlds, of business affairs, unreliable rulers, and ultimately universal death, which reject such poetic vision and language.

- I am the delator of all things to their truth.

- You believe in God; believe also in me;

I am the Judas who betrays men to God.

- I am Christ's back: I without face or breath,

life in death, death in life,

each a strife with, each a socket for, each,

in the twisted rear of good will, backward-running speech,

the derision that issues from doctrines of grace

through the division man makes between himself and his place. (*TCC* 34-35, 54)

The difficulty of poetic language here corresponds to a genuine and inherent complexity in Williams's sense of the play's theme. Human individual genius, however consciously it may be dedicated to the service of a world outside itself, remains - as in Faust, so in Cranmer - ineluctably self-assertive, and, to that extent, treacherous in relation both to those it seeks to serve and to its own preferred self-image ("the division man makes"); it requires the imagination of a larger and less euphorically conceived world, that embodied in *Figura Rerum*, to comprehend and accept this anti-poetic treachery, this "death in life." Such an imagination, and such an anti-poetic drama, may indeed find, as well, and with both "twisting" and "good will", some hope for a worldly "life in death."

T. S. Eliot knew and admired the writing of Williams; Reilly's citation, in *The Cocktail Party*'s last act, of lines from Shelley's *Prometheus Unbound* amounts in effect to a citation of Williams's use of the same passage in his novel *Descent into Hell*. One linkage can be traced through the Skeleton's speech, just quoted - "the division man makes between himself and his place." Where Williams depicts a protagonist over-insistent on the supposed necessity, to God and to his nation, of

his own identity, his 'self,' Eliot's drama works towards an epiphany of strangeness, to others and to oneself – a condition of disillusion with a world perceived as never truly shared:

there had been neither giving nor taking
But we had merely made use of each other
Each for his purpose. That's horrible. Can we only love
Something created by our own imagination? (Eliot 416)

Eliot here approaches, by contraries, lines by Williams in *Thomas Cranmer of Canterbury*:

There is this to be said for my lord of Canterbury,
he dimly believes in something outside himself –
which is more, I can tell you, than most of you do. (Williams 42)

Of the plays under discussion here *The Cocktail Party* seems to me, however, perhaps the most insistent on the virtues, as well as the limits, of worldliness – the most determined to keep together, rather than merely to counterpose, the poetic and the anti-poetic. The point is articulated, perhaps too emphatically, by Edward in the play's final moments:

Sir Henry has been saying,
I think, that every moment is a fresh beginning;
And Julia, that life is only keeping on;
And somehow, the two ideas seem to fit together. (440)

In this spirit Coghill observed that “no other English comedy has linked [...] the quest for love in marriage and the quest for the love of God” (237). More generally the play, discreetly but unmistakably, foregrounds in the course of its action the renewal of marriage between Edward and Lavinia, the achievement by Peter of some measure of adulthood, and the pertinacious efforts, to these ends, engaged in by the three Guardians – all amidst representations of national and imperial culture, from music and theatre and diplomacy to Harley Street psychotherapy and “connections – even in California” (423). Just as (following Eliot's well-known invocation, as dramatic prototype, of Euripides's *Alkestis*) Reilly/Herakles restores Lavinia/Alkestis to the common life of everyday unhappy marriage, so Lavinia, ancestress

(in Virgil's *Aeneid*) of Roman Imperial civilisation, is given renewed life and currency partly through Julia, named after the greatest family dynasty of the Roman Empire.

Yet Eliot's insistence on parallels with *Alkestis* may mask his use, in addition, of a different Euripidean drama, *Andromache*. Basic to both this and *The Cocktail Party* is a pattern of mutually-frustrating worldly desire; 'A loves B loves C loves D' – a pattern from which, in Euripides, there emerges, as physical and emotional survivor, transcending the blind passions around her, the role of 'D'; in Euripides, Andromache, in Eliot, Celia, whose name means 'the heavenly one.' Led but not driven by the searching conversational scrutiny she undergoes from Reilly, she floats free into poetic meditation, religious withdrawal, and upside-down crucifixion on an anthill. If her poetic status is offset by the worldliness, predominant to the end, of the other three lovers, it is her own involvement in their anti-poetic affairs which generates Celia's isolation, ambiguous glorification and martyrdom.

On the basis of this alternative mythic and poetic-dramatic model, the Guardians, Julia, Alex and Reilly, emerge less as other-worldly figures, more as familiar and rather caricatured professionals demonstrably, even irritably, exhausted by self-imposed missions. They suffer almost as much, in the service of a barely-functional social world, as does Celia in her exile from it. Between Celia and all the others, the roles of martyr and saviour seem interchangeable; she dies for them so that their lives-in-death may memorialise her, each the antibody and antipoetic to the other. Eliot's London stands between California and Kinkanja, and his drama is a poetic cocktail in which each, by each, is both shaken and stirred. Yet, despite Peter's "ideas to make a revolution in the cinema", Reilly's reminder stands; "But that world does not take the place of this one" (435, 438). As in Williams so in Eliot, life and death inhabit together one and the same incommensurate site.

Hare's *Plenty*, ostensibly a play of social realism and historical satire, merits further and rather different consideration, I shall suggest, within the conceptual framework of this essay; it is another martyr-drama, another worldly critique of worldliness, another exposé of repetition

and renewal masquerading as each other - and, both metaphorically and technically, a play deploying and even taken over by poetry. It begins, at Easter, with a middle-aged man covered in dried blood. Its heroine's surname, Traherne, is shared with the seventeenth-century English mystical writer and poet. Its staging deploys emblems of national celebration (the 1951 Festival of Britain) and degradation (the Suez debacle, five years later). In a seasonal cycle between spring and autumn it closes on a vision of summer in the liberated France of August 1944 – a final scene which is a flash-back, an imagined utopian fulfilment of the worlds and languages through which, in otherwise more or less linear sequence, have moved Susan the protagonist, her worldly and bohemian friend Alice, and her diplomat husband and defeated lover Brock. The status of these worlds and their languages are shown as, for Susan, provisional; adapting herself to them, she also puts immense and devious energy into subverting their assumptions and professed codes of conduct. Sean Carney well observes that for Susan post-war England is an “ontological fraud” (35).

The chief critical issue in the play's reception has been: does Susan herself embody, seek, or credibly imagine anything more integritous and self-expressive, anything less fraudulent? At the final crisis Brock remarks: “You claim to be protecting some personal ideal, always at the cost of almost infinite pain to everyone around you...” (78) An early scene offers a conceivable shape for such an ideal – a passionate though desolate embrace between a young Susan and another British agent, exposed like her to enemy action and local resentment in occupied wartime France. Five scenes later, amid the demonstration of the lies on which 1950s British foreign policy had based its linguistic practices, Susan reinterprets this ambiguous event in a bold but tenuous claim that “by and large we did make it our business to land in countries where we were wanted” (56). Is she practising a fraud on her listeners or on herself? Consider, in its splendid fusion of social and linguistic critique, self- and other-directed, the exchange that shortly follows this remark:

BROCK Please can you stop, can you stop fucking talking for five fucking minutes on end?

SUSAN I would stop, I would stop, I would stop fucking talking if I ever heard anyone else say anything worth fucking stopping talking for. (57)

As the main linear action of *Plenty* develops, Susan, tiring of her affair with the conventional diplomat Brock, tries to have a baby with her working-class lover Mick, and, this failing, threatens to shoot him. Rescued again by Brock from Pimlico bohemia, on a whim of devotion to a good cause she ruins his career, then makes a threat of suicide, ostensibly for the sake of his frustrated advancement, to his Foreign Office boss. Filled with the 'plenty' of her own manic energies, and living in a house full of the plenty of post-war European and Imperial reconstruction, she gives it away, throws out her husband, and is next found collapsed over a bed, drugged to the eyeballs, in a "sparsely furnished and decaying room", blearily celebrating "comrades who fell" (80, 83). Her companion in the room is Lazar, the former Resistance agent who shared embraces with her long ago in occupied France; he remarks that: "a fine undercover agent will move so that nobody can ever tell that he was there" (84).

Susan (as Lazar's words imply) functions in the play at once as Williams's Cranmer and his Skeleton. They exhort their world to a costly self-renewal – and they undermine all credibility in both their world's and their own attempts to achieve it. Herein Susan in particular is, in relation to the action of Hare's play and to the way of its world, at once protagonist and anti-poetic supplement, poison and cure. To adapt Brecht's famous formulation, unhappy is the land that needs a heroine. Like *Galileo*, Hare's play seeks, through its poetic and infuriatingly (un-)worldly protagonist to educate her, and its, worldly audiences into a sense of the price to be paid for the coexistence of 'anti-poetic' and 'poetic' within a world at once habitable and renewable. The projects of Hare's and of Eliot's dramas thus tend to converge; singularity and sociability, poetic self-isolation and anti-poetic worldliness, irritate and enhance each other.

How far – one may ask, in conclusion – do these plays, in terms of their language as well as their protagonists and their worlds, convincingly establish, alongside their thematic relations to poetry, a sustaina-

ble status? An answer must take into account not only their features of style but also their deployment, within verse styles and forms, of the two central resources and tests of dramatic poetry – the monologue and the voicing of inter-personal conversation. Bartlett's blank verse exhibits many irregularities and awkwardnesses; these might befit his royal protagonist, whose monologues afford some of the play's more convincing occasions of self-expression, but in fact they occur chiefly in conversations, which largely amount to alternate speeches exchanged between unpersuasive and unpersuaded partners. In sharp contrast Williams assembles every available option for verse-lines – Hebrew psalmody, four-stress alliterative verse, pentameter and short-lined rhymes and quatrains, even Prayer-Book prose along with blank verse (often Hopkinsian in its crowded rush of syllables) – a tour-de-force which overrides any sense of consistent difference between the play's increasingly depersonalised voices, and thereby tends to eliminate any sense, from the dramatic action, of feasible conversation. Eliot's writing in *The Cocktail Party*, a play whose superficial realism largely excludes monologue, subtly develops between two extremes; the rapid four-stress-line exchanges of cocktail-party conversation are gradually displaced by the slower blank verse which dominates the crucial conversation between Reilly and Celia. As the play ends, actors, and audiences, find opened to them a world in which choices of pacing, stress and lineation are up for mutual negotiation – a world where motivation is indicated and sensed in line-breaks, and in the relative degrees of emphasis assigned to them.

But it is in Hare's *Plenty*, printed throughout as prose, that ears and bodies, minds and desires of audiences engage with those of actors as they give voice to what amounts to a network of concealed blank-verse lines, couplets and sequences. In the play's final scenes, in particular, these lines and passages assume thematic and structural centrality; the ambiguities latent in the play's normative prose conversation have, by then, established themselves so as to allow any utterance whatever the option of revealing, by its difference – its properties of rhythm and concision and memorability – the survival, or renewal, of power available in all language. Appropriately the final scene is dominated

by blank verse (printed still as prose), as Susan and the French farmer meditate, in mutual disagreement but also in shared fantasy, upon what is old and what may be new, what will be repeated and what might be restored:

- I've only spoken French for months on end.
- The harvest is not good again this year.
- I have to work each moment of the day.
- The English have no feelings, yes? are stiff.
- There will be days and days and days like this. (85-87)

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Sound and Sense in the Adaptation of the Classics on the Anglophone Stage: Bolt's *Cyrano*, Ives's *Liar* and Kane's *Phaedra*, Three Radically Different Poetics

Estelle RIVIER-ARNAUD

Abstract: On the English stage, since the 1980s and even more strongly at the turn of the twenty-first century, the adaptations of French classic drama have flowed. Now as faithful translations of the original text, following the same plot, now as rewritings, these variations modernise the characters' names and include a contemporary vocabulary. But they are nonetheless poetic, keeping the rhyme and the regularity of the decasyllable. In this study, I am focusing on three extracts taken from the contemporary Anglophone theatrical repertoire: *Cyrano de Bergerac* in a version by Ranjit Bolt (1995), *The Liar* "translaptated" by David Ives (2010) and *Phaedra's Love* by Sarah Kane (1996). I am trying to assess the aesthetic shifts in meaning between the source and its rewriting as well as the dramaturgic stakes that these works trigger. I hope to demonstrate how these three poetic revisions of our classics reaffirm the importance of verse drama on the contemporary stage beyond our borders.

Résumé : Sur la scène anglophone, depuis les années 80 et de manière accrue au tournant du millénaire, les adaptations de classiques français ont fleuri. Tantôt sous forme de traductions fidèles au texte-source en suivant un même schéma actantiel, tantôt sous la forme de réécritures, ces variations modernisent le nom des personnages et contiennent un lexique contemporain. Elles n'en demeurent pas moins poétiques, conservant souvent la rime et la rigueur du rythme décasyllabique. Dans le cadre de cette étude, je propose de partir de trois extraits choisis au sein du répertoire théâtral anglophone contemporain : *Cyrano de Bergerac* dans une version de Ranjit Bolt (1995), *The Liar* adapté par David Ives (2010) et *Phaedra's Love* de Sarah Kane (1996). J'y évalue les glissements esthétiques entre le texte-source et sa réécriture, ainsi que les enjeux dramaturgiques que suggèrent ces nouveaux écrits. J'espère ainsi démontrer la façon dont ces trois réécritures poétiques

réaffirment l'importance du théâtre en vers sur la scène contemporaine étrangère.

Keywords: Ranjit Bolt, David Ives, Sarah Kane, adaptation, translation, rewriting, *Cyrano de Bergerac*, *The Liar*, *Phaedra's Love*, verse drama

Mots-clés : Ranjit Bolt, David Ives, Sarah Kane, adaptation, traduction, réécriture, *Cyrano de Bergerac*, *Le menteur*, *Phèdre*, théâtre en vers.

“Verse has been most injurious to the art of drama. A true artist of the stage, whose repertoire is the contemporary drama, should not be willing to let a single verse cross her lips”, Ibsen wrote on 25 May 1883 (quoted in Hinchcliffe 5), which sounds all the more ironical since Ibsen had a facility for writing verse, especially rhymed verse. It is however true that modern verse has been out of favour for a while until recently, on the Anglophone stage, where a renewed taste for poetic drama is accounting for the efficiency of this mode of expression. Poetry is a way for the playwrights to convey the plotline in an often emotionally dense vividness, but it is also a literary device whereby they can adapt a classic work of art on the contemporary stage.

When we consider the popularity of English classic drama – and more particularly of Shakespeare’s theatre – on the French contemporary stage, we are irremediably led to question the interest French classic theatre conversely arouses across the Channel and more widely on the Anglophone stage. How are Molière and Hugo, Racine, and Corneille, who all wrote in verse, translated in English? Are these authors still popular abroad today? As we read and look for recent performances of their plays, we become aware of the numerous ones that have fuelled part of the English current repertoire. Authors like David Ives, Ranjit Bolt, Martin Crimp, Sarah Kane, Patrick Marber, Tony Harrison, David Bryer among others have been inspired by the

classics and have proposed new versions of *Le Misanthrope*, *Tartuffe*, *Don Juan*, *Phèdre*, *Le Cid*. The list is not exhaustive.

In so doing they have tackled important issues about the relationship between verse and drama. For instance, are the latter still compatible in contemporary theatre? Are translators of verse drama to be considered – deservedly so – poets themselves? From a theoretical point of view, how are we supposed to consider their works: as recreations or reinventions? As transpositions or *translaptations*?¹ Or as rewritings and revisions of an earlier text? From an artistic angle, do we attend Molière's, Racine's or Corneille's plays when we go to the theatre or rather Bolt's, Ives's, Crimp's, and Kane's own creations? Finally what do these new versions bring to the stage and to the art of play-writing?

What I have endeavoured to do in this essay is to focus on three plays from the French classic canon: *Cyrano de Bergerac*, *Le menteur* and *Phèdre*. All three of them have been the source of several new scripts composed by Anglophone playwrights and poets, but I have chosen to concentrate on Bolt's, Ives's and Kane's versions to compare the way in which these three generations of authors have adapted the original text, formally and semantically. Sound and sense have often been reshuffled in a daring way, which the French pun “sens dessus dessous” might coin precisely. This essay also tackles the effects produced on stage by these transformations so as to highlight the strong revival verse drama is experiencing abroad thanks to English-speaking playwrights and artists.

Theatrical poetry or poetical theatre?

Over the past decades contemporary British theatre has increasingly resorted to the ancient and classic repertoires to tackle societal issues, to challenge stylistic forms, and to shape new entertainments. When confronting the contemporary playwrights' works, a question immediately arises: how have they revived plays from a remote time? What are the alterations these new versions have encountered? What are the tools their authors have used to manipulate the original material? And, in the end, what aim is their art serving?

In the analysis of a range of plays, including various versions of *Le Misanthrope*, *Tartuffe*, *Le Menteur* (*The Liar*) and *Phèdre* (*Phaedra*), my attention has been caught by Ranjit Bolt's prolific work that combines theatre and poetry.

Bolt comes from a literary family (his uncle and father were both involved in play-writing and criticism while his mother was a teacher). After graduating from the University of Oxford, he soon turned to the artistic field. His publications include numerous translations (and adaptations) of classic plays but also original works. He translated Euripides, Aristophanes, Seneca, Shakespeare, Goldoni, Chekhov, Molière, Corneille, Feydeau, Rostand, La Fontaine, Beaumarchais, Marivaux, Anouilh, and wrote a novel, *Losing it*.

In this rather substantial list, the references to French authors prevail, which necessarily calls for a closer scrutiny. Since they are translations of plays that were originally successful in France, their relevance should principally lie in their adaptability to the contemporary stage. In other words, how can the text suit today's actors' oratorical art as well as the spectators' understanding? However, since Bolt rarely translated as a result of a commission from a given company, we should also consider his translations as poetic compositions *per se*, that are meant for a readership not for an audience.

Comparing a majority of Bolt's adaptations with his contemporaries', we should reach a first conclusion. Bolt favours a regular rhythmic and rhyming scheme. Let us consider the example of the balcony scene in *Cyrano de Bergerac* (Act three in Bolt's version; Act III, scene 7 in Rostand's. Note that cuts have been made below for concision purposes.)

CYRANO

A stone!

CYRANO picks up a few stones and throws them at the balcony window.

ROXANE (*Appearing on the balcony.*)

Who's there?

CHRISTIAN

Me! Christian!

ROXANE (*With audible disappointment.*)

Hugh. I might have known. (*And makes to go back in.*)

CHRISTIAN

I must speak!

She stops, hesitant.

CYRANO (*In a whisper to CHRISTIAN*)

That's the ticket. Deeper, though.

Your voice. Much deeper. [...]

CHRISTIAN

My heart's ... in twice the pain it was before!

The agony is... more than I can stand...

ROXANE

That's better. Well, at least it rhymed and scanned. (2007: 103-105)

This example seems appropriate to highlight the way poetic language – that used to be seen as the quintessence of fair love in 19th century theatre – proves here to be the means to achieve a successful communication, and consequently, the emblem of an efficient language.

Bolt is using here the pentameter, and to regulate the lines, as Rostand does with the alexandrine, resorts to numerous enjambments so that, for instance, Cyrano's "A stone!" continues with Roxane's "Who's there?", then with Christian's answer, and finally ends rhyming with Roxane's "known", two lines further down. The line has been shared by the three characters, which creates both a visual and an oral dynamic.

From a typological angle, the flights of poetry are not visible on the page since the lines are not numbered in Bolt. In addition, the scene is much shorter than in Rostand's play. The rhyming scheme is predominantly AABB ("speak / week"; "peak / beak"; "stand / scanned") with a few exceptions though: "bore / more / more / before") and unrhymed couplets ("vain / again"; "strong" is left alone). But the irregularity is also meaningful since Christian, the faltering lover, does not handle language well at first and his hesitations may be reflected in this defective poetry despite Cyrano's support.

Compared to Rostand's script, Bolt's proves quite close to both lexical and metaphorical networks used by his predecessor even if they are not ordered similarly. For instance the reference to Hercules comes earlier in Rostand's scene:

ROXANE (*s'avançant sur le balcon.*)

C'est mieux ! – Mais, puisqu'il est cruel, vous fûtes sot
De ne pas, cet amour, l'étouffer au berceau !

CHRISTIAN, *même jeu.*

Aussi l'ai-je tenté, mais... tentative nulle.

Ce... nouveau-né, Madame, est un petit... Hercule.

ROXANE. C'est mieux !

CHRISTIAN, *même jeu.*

De sorte qu'il... strangula comme rien...

Les deux serpents... Orgueil et... Douce. (205)

In Bolt's play, Hercules is mentioned four lines after the extract quoted above while he should have been referred to in Christian's cue. Instead we hear: "And though a chick, it's strong." Such a change enables Bolt to develop a new metaphor in Cyrano's aside as well as a pun on the word "beak", thereby alluding to the character's prominent nose: "If I'm a chick, thank god, I only speak – / Imagine to kiss her with *this* beak!" Such an allusion serves the humorous trend of the play, which probably answers the expectations of today's public as we will discuss further down.

Bolt also adds a line which may work as a reflexive tool to provide the meaning and purpose of his rhyming translation. When Roxane says, "That's better. Well, at least it rhymed and scanned", the second half of the line is totally new. It is absent from Rostand's scene where we only read "Tiens ! mais c'est mieux !" which corresponds to Bolt's "That's better." Such a line strengthens the value of poetry: it implies that speaking in verse elevates language, makes it more meaningful and more powerful. It is a reflexive line in so far as Roxane loves Christian only when he speaks good poetry. Such a line also sounds metafictional: isn't Bolt there telling us that verse drama is the best way to convey linguistic meaning and power?

In *The Art of Translation*, Bolt underlined the creative process involved in translation. His choice has always been to maintain the rhymes in his adaptations. A translator, he wrote in the preface, is not a mere “flat, invisible *renderer* of meaning” (unpaginated), especially when he translates a literary text. As there are cultural references that he cannot transpose (for instance the allusion to the “barcelonnette” (a cradle that used to be suspended to be easily rocked) he proposes equivalent images (there the “blackbird’s nest”). Significantly he entitled his essay “The *Art* of Translation” (my emphasis) to express his belief that translating verse drama is a genre, and as such, an artistic one.

However, he rather names his “translations” new “versions of” the original works because of the alterations he feels constrained to impose on the text. In *Cyrano de Bergerac*, the original stage directions partly vanish.² Such factual loss modifies the potential dynamic of the script, whether it is read or performed. The absence of directions deprives the reader – and the stage-director – of key indications enabling each of them to shape the movement of the words in context. Conversely, when trying to keep as close as possible to the original lexicon, the effect may be different. Thus the reference to “Hercule” in Rostand’s play sounds smarter than in Bolt’s where it appears parodic:

CHRISTIAN

It’s like...It’s like... the infant Hercules...

Strangling the serpents... Pride and Drought... Doubt!

This reflects a key feature of the theatrical text which is a living and unstable entity. It also highlights the malleability of the language that, despite its poetic verve, transcends time and can speak to the contemporary ear. Bolt’s versified *Cyrano* is far from being inadequate, incongruous and obscure as was implied in the reviews when the play was performed on stage:

What you expect from Edmond Rostand’s story (...) are some heart-warming moments linked together with gags about his hooter. Simon Reade’s exuberant, engaging production [...] highlights the tale’s moments of poetry and grace. [...] It’s thanks to Ranjit Bolt’s cracking new verse trans-

lation that such moments don't feel forced or indulgent. This rendition of *Cyrano* is thrilling to listen to, line by line, word by word, and there is no resisting its pace, humour and charm. [...] It is also unafraid of sniffing out more jokes on the central theme. [...] A new translation alone couldn't make this into the cheering and genuinely moving entertainment that it is." (Mahoney)

Another review read that Jamie Lloyd's production was "a buoyant, eye-filling delight, benefitting from vigorous staging and a highly playable translation [...]" (Cote).

Although it is too early at this point of analysis to state that all of Bolt's poetic translations can successfully apply to the contemporary stage – if only because not all of them have been produced – they seem to share this similar capacity to bridge the gap between centuries through a language that sounds both classic and contemporary, sensible and emotional, colourful and practical. Thus verse drama, under Bolt's pen at least, stands as the language of the heart *par excellence* as well as of the mind, which is also the metafictional reflection of Roxane's belief and hope.

Should we then brand Bolt's work "theatrical poetry" rather than "poetical theatre"? The transposition of the French language into an English "playable" tool (Cote) appears to serve both ends: to show that verse is not anachronistic, although it is elaborate and formal, and that theatre is not to be always reduced to vernacular speech.

"Translaptating" the classic form

In order to draw a distinction between the two media – i.e. verse and drama – and the two functions – i.e. the poet and the playwright – some writers have coined new words to describe their works. So has David Ives when he named his own adaptations of classic drama "translaptations", a compound noun made of the words "translation" and "adaptation." Such a coinage seems to fit the nature of most of his compositions although Ives has had a very eclectic career so far. A Chicago-born writer, he indeed admits not to have any career plan. He started working on short plays like *All in the Timing* (of an absurdist

and comic style) and then wrote longer compositions like *Polish Joke*. He has also adapted musicals and written narrative fiction. In the field of theatre, he has translated Feydeau, Corneille, Molière, Régnard, all meant for a specific venue. For instance, *A Flea in Her Ear* (Feydeau) was produced at Chicago Shakespeare in 2006, and won the Joseph Jefferson Award for best “new adaptation.” *The Liar* (Corneille) was adapted for the Shakespeare Theatre Company in Washington, D.C. in 2011; it opened at the Classic Stage Company in New York in 2017. His version of Molière’s *The Misanthrope* premiered Off-Broadway at the Classic Stage Company under the title *The School For Lies*. Also in 2011 his adaptation of Jean-Francois Régnard’s *Le Légataire universel* premiered at the Shakespeare Theatre Company in Washington, D.C. under the title *The Heir Apparent*. The same play opened Off-Broadway in March 2014 at the Classic Stage Company, and ran through May 2014.

Undoubtedly, Ives’s theatrical involvement is deeply connected to the practice of Shakespeare companies: he has worked with the STC, the Chicago Shakespeare Theater, the Prague Shakespeare Company, also during various Shakespeare festivals (in Utah; the Great River and the Santa Cruz). His translations also include references to Shakespeare’s plays and their poetic style proves to be strongly influenced by their Elizabethan model.

In the present essay, if we focus on *The Liar* to account for a few characteristic features of Ives’s rendering of the French classic language, it is also because such a play – like *Cyrano de Bergerac* – invites the new readers and audiences of verse drama to reflect precisely upon theatre-making, story-telling and play-writing.

The Liar based on Corneille’s *Le Menteur* (1643) tells the story of Dorante who meets two women in the Tuileries in Paris. They are named Clarice and Lucrece. He impresses them with lies, claiming that he has returned from the wars in Germany where he played a crucial role. Once alone, he decides to court Clarice, mistakenly thinking her name to be that of her friend, Lucrece. Then G ronte, Dorante’s father, announces to his son that he has found a girl for him

to marry (Clarice). Dorante, wrongly believing that the girl that he likes is Lucrece, lies again and says that he is already married and that his wife is pregnant. The play ends happily as the truth is revealed and Dorante is able to marry the one he loves.

The Liar. Act one. Scene one.

(The actor playing CLITON appears before the curtain.)

CLITON ACTOR

Ladies and gentlemen! Mesdames, messieurs!
All cell phones off? All cellophane secure?
Finish your texting now, not during my scene.
"I'm in some theatre. But, like, where's the screen?"
[...] my announcement may be even worse:
Tonight our actors will be speaking verse!
In case you hadn't noticed that small fact.
We'll speak PENTAMETER, to be exact.
And what the blank's pentameter, you say?
It's what I'm speaking now! On with the play!

(He picks up a sign that says: "RENT ME! CLITON. SERVANT FOR HIRE." He raps the staff on stage three times and our scene is revealed.)

The Paris gardens of Les Tuileries –
A fine spring day in 1643. (1)

This introductory monologue directly hints at Shakespeare's theatre: Cliton "actor" echoes the chorus or the prologue in plays like *Romeo and Juliet*, *The Taming of the Shrew* or *Henry V* to name but a few examples. Directly addressing the audience, he sets the decor and gives the rules. He ends the scene picking up a sign by way of transition and in order to lead the audience towards the very performance of the play (i.e. *The Liar*). Unlike Shakespeare's prologues however, Cliton does not extendedly situate the plot or mention the name of the main protagonist except through an allusion ("a lying genius"). Here he stands as the stage-director or as the playwright who prepares the audience to an unusual kind of theatre. And what is indeed unusual in his play? As Cliton says, it will be "in verse."

The italics on the page and the humour of the tone make it obvious that the author is aware of a kind of unease his verse drama will produce on the audience even though, when attending an adaptation of Corneille's play, the latter probably expects to be confronted to this device. Yet, Ives immediately has his actor providing the frame of his composition that, despite its poetry, will use the "pentameter", a more comfortable and better-known rhythmic pattern for an American audience.

However, Ives's poetical rhythm, made of regular decasyllables, distances itself from the original blank verse, precisely because of the rhyming couplets. Cliton refers to his blend of English verse as "blank pentameter." Such a fusion mirrors the union between two approaches of play-writing: Ives indeed places his comedy in the same historical context as Corneille's 17th-century Paris gardens of Les Tuileries, and hardly modifies the plot. But he adds cultural references to his own time ("cell phones"; "cellophane"; (cinema) "screen"; "cab" and "dinner tab"). If the characters are supposed to be dressed and to be acting as their classic homologues, their language however bears the marks of their own time. Fillers abound ("Huh", "uh", "um", "Ah-hem", "Yeah") as well as truncated syllables ("prob'bly", "C'mon") for rhythmic purposes. Later in the play, French words ("Allez!", "à la mode", "mademoiselle", "monsieur", "gazette" rhyming with "buzz-ette", "Chanel perfume", etc.) and references to precise *loci* ("Louvre" spelt with no 's' however, "Poitiers", "Cannes", "Tuileries" (sometimes anglicised as "Twillery") are also recurrent. Because of shorter lines, the rhythm sounds faster. Dialogues efficiently translate the contrasted nature of the characters and the way they are swiftly dragged into imbroglis, which is also a founding feature of theatre-making. Thus like Corneille's *Le Menteur* and Rostand's *Cyrano de Bergerac*, Ives's *Liar* explicitly and plainly reveals the devices necessary to build a plot, for instance when Cliton later announces "the exposition scene" (2). The poetic language also serves the illusion, drawing the characters into believing that they are part of a refined society in which good morals prevail: lying is immoral and should be absent from this society and yet, as it is the foundation of theatre, immorality lies everywhere in

filigree of the script. In a different way, Ives's "translaptation" is also lying to us, the audience, because it is not an accurate word-for-word translation. Not surprisingly then, the introduction to the play uses advice from Dorante's lying lesson, later taught in Act Two, Scene one:

DORANTE

Lying is so simple

First: natural gestures. Keep your gravity low,

And centered [...]

Most vital is the optic nerve. [...]

An easy tone, but with some verve.

Etc. [...].

(81- 82)

In Act One, conviction and eye contact are required ("You, lady with the bean burrito", "This guy looks nervous"). Elsewhere in the play, irrelevant details are key ("It was the tenth of May at six-oh-three..." (82)); so is the poetical pattern ("Let truth be told, but let your lies be sung" (82)). The *mise en abyme* of theatre ("But getting back to plot / On with the play!" (1)), of Shakespeare's theatre precisely ("All the world's a lie, and all the men and women / merely liars" (79)), completes the picture in which words (when they are translated, i.e. transformed into another language)³ and acting are manipulating tools to cheat the ear.

A similar method has been used in *The School for Lies* and *The Heir Apparent* (originally 17th- and early 18th-century plays) where Ives went a step further in the manipulation of drama and poetry. Ives could have written a new play vaguely based on a classic; he could also have built his own play in verse and chosen a contemporary topic independently from any renowned reference. Yet what he did was to fuse both classic and contemporary forms. It led to protean compositions to answer the demands of some new audiences who were eager to be entertained as well as to find resonances of their own concerns. Such compositions put forward the efficiency and relevance of poetic speech that is still able to provide meaning, to delight and to move on today's stage.

Like Bolt, Ives also questions the purpose of verse drama and its role. Not surprisingly he has just adapted – or rather “translaptated” – another French classic, a play by Jean Piron, an 18th-century poet and cabaret artist (named “*goguettier*” in French). Under Ives’s pen, *Métromanie* has become *Metromaniacs*. It was performed at The Duke, from April till May 2018, and was directed by Michael Kahn. In this new version, the confrontation between poetry and theatre is even more flagrant as the plot revolves around poetry crazes and verse-mania. It leads to verbal acrobatics together with mistaken identities (a recurrent Shakespearean and ‘Molierean’ theatrical motif) as well as twists and turns. As Ives intends to show, rhyming poetry does not deprive the stage of its farcical role and if there is a gap in time, it favours witty dialogues and elaborate lexicon (what *Time Out New York* calls “verbal glitter”).

Radical poetical theatre

If verse on the 20th-century Anglophone stage seems to have been partly influenced by the French classics over the recent decades, we however find very iconoclastic approaches such as those of Sarah Kane, Martin Crimp or Patrick Marber. Their adaptations of *Phèdre*, *Le Misanthrope* or *Don Juan* deviate from both the form and the content of their sources. Rhymes may not be maintained (Marber’s *Don Juan in Soho*), the rhythmic pattern may be irregular (Crimp’s *Misanthrope*), the language may not sound refined and polished, which inevitably alters the genre of the classics (see Kane’s vision of *Phaedra* as a comedy). In addition, the *dramatis personae*, the names, the context of the praxis and even the relationship between characters have often little in common with the originals (for example, apart from Alceste, all the characters’ names of Crimp’s *Misanthrope* have been changed). And if we can include in this study Sarah Kane’s version of *Phèdre*, it is probably because her poetic gesture stands as the most radical one within this field.

In 1995 Kane was commissioned by the Gate Theatre to write a play based on a classic and she chose Seneca's adaptation of Euripides's *Phaedra*, also later adapted by Racine. Kane directed the first production, which opened on 15 May 1996. She said she had chosen *Phaedra* because "The world of [...] Seneca's tragedies seems one in which to be human is to suffer, to be alive is to be entrapped in evil, to exist to be located in the midst of a universe conspicuous for its apparent perversity [...] for its dissection of the human spirit, even for its malice" (A. J. Boyle, quoted in Saunders 72).

Phaedra's Love was the second play she wrote (apart from the monologues she produced when she was still a student at Bristol) and, just like the preceding one, *Blasted* (1995), the themes that are developed are far from sounding poetic. In her version of *Phaedra's Love*, she does not focus – as the title suggests – on Phaedra but on Hippolytus, Phaedra's step-son and her object of desire. The story is updated to the world of a contemporary royal family. Hippolytus is no chaste virgin, but an obese and sex-obsessed young man. We see him eat hamburgers, masturbate, watch violent TV programmes and be violent himself. He sees no value in the world and feels that everyone lies. Phaedra who loves him would like to help him but the doctor (who appears in Act one) feels powerless, which makes Phaedra "burn" even more for the young man. Phaedra eventually consummates her desire performing oral sex before Hippolytus informs her that he has gonorrhoea, a venereal disease involving inflammatory discharge from the vagina that will literally burn her. As a consequence, Phaedra commits suicide.

The play ends on the slaughter of Hippolytus whose genitals are barbecued, his body disembowelled and soon coveted by the vultures, which Hippolytus rejoices in since, at last, suffering gives meaning to his life.

The violent themes of rape, torture (both moral and physical), sex and orgy, chaos, even cannibalism (also in *Blasted*) are common to Kane's theatre and yet, in the satirical and deeply appalling picture

they draw of the world, they are not deprived of poetry, though an informal one, nor of some kind of humour.

Despite its crude language, the dialogue in scene three (below) between Phaedra and her daughter Strophe (a character Kane has added) proves rigorously rhythmical, sometimes even echoing blank verse.

Scene Three

Strophe *is working*

Phaedra *enters*.

Strophe Mother.

Phaedra Go away fuck off don't touch me don't talk to me stay with me.

Strophe What's wrong?

Phaedra Nothing. Nothing at all.

Strophe I can tell.

Phaedra Have you ever thought, thought your heart would break?

Strophe No.

Phaedra Wished you could cut open your chest tear it out to stop the pain?

Strophe That would kill you.

Phaedra This is killing me. (7)

The line "Have you ever thought, thought your heart would break?" is a pentameter. The repetition of the word "thought" in the middle of the line is an epizeuxis (or an anadiplosis if we consider the comma as a sign of fragmentation between the two clauses). In this scene, as well as in the whole script, the figures of repetition work as leit-motivs: for instance, anaphora (usually with personal pronouns like "He / I" but also with "no"), epiphora ("him" or "Hippolytus" / "it"), anadiplosis ("Nothing. Nothing at all"); polyptoton ("kill / killing"). They strengthen key words and create a kind of music (or refrain) that may, rather paradoxically, also reverberate the obsessional nature of the characters (as for example in Act one, the doctor: "Does he have

sex with you?” or “Does he have friends” repeated three times (4-5)). Monosyllabic lines like “A spear in my side, burning” (7) may serve as metaphorical anticipations of Phaedra’s doom (since contracting gonorrhoea out of oral sex – “spear” being a phallic device – with Hippolytus will indeed “burn” her “inside”).

The typography which sometimes presents only monosyllabic lines, as well as the absence of punctuation (e.g. “Wished you could cut open your chest tear it out to stop the pain?”) complete the poetic structure. These short lines give space to breathe while highlighting the longer lines that may suddenly jut out on the almost blank page: “Can feel him through the walls. Sense him. Feel his heartbeat from a mile” (8). Impressions of rhymes like “him / in” (8) and alliterations like “obsessed / obvious” (7) or “can’t / crush / crack” (9) reinforce the poetic momentum of the whole piece.

Of course, although these various examples (the list is not exhaustive) do highlight the poetic background and structural pattern of *Phaedra’s Love*, the play cannot be considered as a conventional sample of verse drama. Kane based her narrative on Seneca’s version, for reasons of perspective, to involve the themes of violence, cruelty and suffering. Euripides’s and Racine’s plays, respectively earlier and later versions, were not considered effective enough in this case. It is true that there is apparently neither a canonical nor a regular rhythmic pattern, and that rhyme is scarce in Kane’s adaptation. Yet, the young and provocative author referred to *Phaedra’s Love* as poetical “comedy” – which is at least one reason why her play is included in this essay – since, according to her, *Phaedra* focuses on the body and its grotesque truths.⁴ So much so that, back in the 1990s, Kane invited her audience to rethink the language of drama. Kane’s adaptation of a classic proved to what extent contemporary drama did not require rhymes only, nor a regular scansion to be poetical indeed, but rather “sound and sense” which codified the sentence differently, with another kind of rhythm. As a forerunner of the in-yer-face movement, Kane engendered a new way of apprehending classic plays and offered the contemporary stage a more radical understanding of their meaning.

Conclusion

Violence on stage as much as lexical violence *violate* formal devices, thereby questioning the meaning of our classics. Verse drama seems and sounds dislocated (just as classic drama is), at least in the case of Kane's rewriting of *Phaedra*. The classics are turned upside down ("sens dessus dessous"), which is another way to engender new inspirations, and to explore the relationship between theatre and poetry further.

Authors like Kane, Ives and Bolt have adapted famous classic plays to invite their readership and audiences to re-interpret the essence of myths. To begin with, for these authors, the purpose may have been aesthetic: they have manipulated a foreign language through translation, have reinvented its music, resorting to a more contemporary language and a different versification. Yet, they have also aimed at highlighting a new meaning that would enhance them as authors, not merely rewriters. Just as revising mythology, adapting the classics gets the writers to "be taken seriously (...), get something very deep in [themselves]", and "release an imprisoned meaning", as Alicia Ostriker wrote (*in* Kritzer: 172). More often than not, such revisions of the classics appear to be radical ones insofar as they depart from the formalism of their sources while claiming to owe allegiance to them. Such a phenomenon partly explains the plurality of labels used to identify the authors' purpose: "new versions" (Bolt), "translaptations" (Ives), "rewritings" (Kane). The gap between the source and its avatar is such that we are often inclined to consider the latter as an independent piece of work, and yet, their title invites us to think that they remain a new reading of classic drama, poetical and challenging, intrinsically linked to an older version, as Crimp acknowledges in his preface:

if, three hundred years later, reflecting the contemporary world has meant taking certain 'liberties' with the text, this is only in the belief that – at this distance in time – reinvention, rewriting of one writer's work by another, is 'fidelity' of the truest and most passionate kind. (vi)

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¹ The term "translaptation" is used by Ives to define his own adaptations.

² For example, the lines "CHRISTIAN, à qui Cyrano souffle ses mots / ROXANE, qui allait refermer sa fenêtre, s'arrêtant. / CHRISTIAN, même jeu" (referring to "à qui Cyrano souffle ses mots") have no equivalent in Bolt's version.

³ Let us remember that the word “translate” meaning “to move from one place or condition to another” clearly referred to the metamorphosis of the face and body in Shakespeare’s theatre: “Bless thee, Bottom, bless thee. Thou art translated” (321).

⁴ “In the world of this royal family, Hippolytus’s corporeality points out society’s hypocrisy”, Kane said (Middeke 310).

“Clear[ing] a Space for a New Verse Drama”: Harrison, Prosody, and Theatricality

Cécile MARSHALL

Abstract: Harrison is often presented as a hyphenated poet: poet-dramatist, poet-translator, poet-adaptor, poet-librettist, poet-(stage) director who resists traditional categories. Many critics have indeed underlined Harrison’s uniqueness among contemporary writers. “[U]ndoubtedly the most prolific and ambitious [of] contemporary poet-dramatists” (Morra: 209), his fascination for verse drama is the product of paradoxical influences. Thus, in his adaptations from French or Greek classics, Harrison reinterprets canonical texts as well as dramatic conventions, often walking on a tight rope between iconoclasm and elitism. If “the imitation of the great masters” (Astley: 33) has been a starting point in his career and has legitimised his use of verse on the stage, he has also imprinted his own originality in the canon, combining modernisation and traditional prosody. Far from being gratuitous, rhymes and verse are enlisted in the socio-political and cultural debates Harrison’s plays generally tackle. At the core of these plays is the author’s faith in an aesthetic and ideological continuum between high and low culture: Harrison’s use of verse might be seen as rebellious but it also craves for social, linguistic and historical reconciliation.

Résumé : Harrison est souvent présenté comme le poète aux multiples traits d’union qui défie les catégories traditionnelles : poète-dramaturge, poète-traducteur, poète-adaptateur, poète-librettiste, ou encore poète-réalisateur ou poète-metteur en scène. De nombreux critiques ont d’ailleurs souligné sa singularité parmi les auteurs contemporains et en particulier parmi les auteurs de théâtre en vers. La fascination de Harrison pour ce genre est le fruit d’influences paradoxales. Ainsi, dans ses adaptations des classiques français ou grecs, l’auteur réinterprète les textes canoniques, ainsi que les conventions dramatiques, œuvrant souvent en funambule entre iconoclasme et élitisme. Tandis que l’imitation des anciens par le biais de la traduction lui a permis dans un

premier temps de faire ses armes et de légitimer l'emploi du vers au théâtre, Harrison a également imposé son propre style en combinant la modernisation des textes avec une prosodie traditionnelle. Les vers et les rimes ne sont pourtant jamais pur ornement formel mais sont toujours convoqués dans les débats sociopolitiques et culturels soulevés par ses pièces. L'auteur a en effet une foi inébranlable dans la complémentarité des cultures savante et populaire : si son emploi du vers au théâtre peut être perçu comme idéologiquement subversif, il se veut pourtant outil de réconciliation sociale, linguistique et historique.

Keywords: verse drama, Tony Harrison, dramatic adaptation, poet-dramatist, high and low culture

Mots-clés: théâtre en vers, Tony Harrison, adaptation dramatique, poète-dramaturge, culture savante et culture populaire

In her 2016 book entitled *Verse Drama in England*, Irene Morra considers Harrison as “undoubtedly the most prolific and ambitious [of] contemporary poet-dramatists” (209). From his first published verse play in 1966 to his last in 2017, Harrison wrote some 20 plays, exclusively in verse. His fascination for verse drama is the product of paradoxical influences. It owes as much to the “slow-burning revenge” (Astley 437) of the scholarship boy who wanted to make his mark amongst the literati as to his faith in an aesthetic and ideological continuum between the popular theatre of his childhood and Greek tragedy. Because he famously claimed “Poetry is all I write” (Astley 9), Harrison is often presented as a hyphenated poet who resists traditional categories: poet-dramatist, poet-translator, poet-adaptor, poet-librettist, poet-(stage) director. His plays indeed range from the translation of the classics (Euripides, Aeschylus, Aristophanes, Molière, Racine, Hugo) to original creations in which the use of “unnatural verse” cannot be taken for granted in an age of prose (Hinchliffe 2). In this essay, I propose to explore the influences that led Harrison to consider

verse and prosody as a vital dimension of his plays. This will then allow me to analyse the development of Harrison's poetics throughout his dramatic career, from verse adaptations to original creations.

Harrison's influences and formative years

In his youth during the 1940s and 1950s, Harrison was fascinated by music hall theatre.

He particularly admired the storytelling techniques of comedians who could captivate their audience and create a feeling of shared intimacy:

The kind of theatre I saw most often was late music hall, or 'variety', and panto, and though it was in proscenium theatres like the Empire, the fourth wall was broken down by the direct address of the comics I saw there: Norman Evans, Frank Randle, Old Mother Riley, Albert Modley, Robb Wilton, and even Laurel and Hardy live on stage (Harrison 2007: ix).

These comedians had a great influence over Harrison who considered them as his theatrical mentors. He even gratified one of them, Leon Cortez, with the title of "Professor" in the dedication of his poem "Them & [uz]" (*SP* 122), the other dedicatee, Professor Richard Hoggart, being a real academic whose seminal work on the British working-class, *The Uses of Literacy* (1962), vindicated Harrison in his crusade to reconcile popular and elitist cultures.

Deeply ingrained in the popular culture of the North of England, pantomime plays gave Harrison his first taste for verse in the theatre. At Leeds Grammar School, the young scholarship boy also discovered the classics and he developed "a voracious appetite for language", to use the words of Harold Pinter on the back cover of *Selected Poems*.¹ He later studied Latin and Greek at Leeds University, and started a doctoral dissertation on the verse translations of Virgil's *Aeneid* in the early 1960s. At the same time, translation allowed Harrison to discover international drama often performed in English for the first time, thanks to the new campus theatre. He was very active in the bustling local cultural life,² as a spectator, an actor, a critic, and even

an author. With Barry Cryer, he wrote successful *rag revues*, i.e. comic pieces that included music, songs and dance routines.³ Harrison then broadened his dramatic horizons in Nigeria. Teaching English literature at Ahmadu Bello University, he grew aware of the absurdity of the colonialist education system that imposed British classics upon young Africans. He consequently set up an African literature seminar which led to a collaboration with Irish poet James Simmons, and the creation in 1965 of *Aikin Mata*, a Nigerian adaptation of Aristophanes's comedy, *Lysistrata*. In 1966, Harrison moved to Prague where he went to the theatre almost every night for a year, rediscovering the subversive potential of the classics in a context of political oppression. The following year, at the age of 29, he was the recipient of a joint Fellowship at the Universities of Durham and Newcastle, which allowed him to stop teaching and devote his whole life to writing.

Although he felt drawn towards the style and subject matter of Joyce's *Dubliners*, Harrison decided to earn a living by writing exclusively in verse. He ascribed this choice to "the whole weight of the Protestant Ethic in its death agonies, a monstrous North of England millstone grit, that made [him] pit [himself] against the most difficult traditional verse forms" (Astley 33). This was partly out of filial loyalty to his father, a baker "worn out on poor pay" (*SP* 126), partly as the result of the influence of W.B. Yeats, his spiritual father: "I learned by what Yeats called 'sedentary toil and the imitation of great masters'. I still find it almost impossibly difficult, but the difference is now that, again in the words of Yeats, 'difficulty is our plough'" (Astley 33). Nonetheless, Harrison's experience of the theatre (whether as an author in Leeds or Nigeria or as a spectator in Prague) taught him that verse should not be restricted to the printed page. On the contrary, he viewed verse as giving the theatre its highest form of eloquence.

"Sedentary toil / And [...] the imitation of great masters" (Yeats 158): Harrison's adaptations

Indeed, Harrison "always had the idea that the best poetry [...] was in the theatre" (Astley 237). After the critical success of his

second collection of poems, *The Loiners* (1970), which was awarded the Geoffrey Memorial Prize, Harrison was commissioned to write a verse translation of Molière's *Le Misanthrope* for the Royal National Theatre. This marked the start of a fruitful collaboration between the Royal National Theatre and the poet-translator. Irene Morra notes that today the use of verse for the adaptation of the classics is generally accepted and acclaimed. However, in the early 1970s, when Harrison took his first tentative steps on the London stage, verse drama presented two major challenges: firstly, previous translations of Molière in rhyming verse on the English stage had been received unfavourably;⁴ secondly, Harrison himself was very critical of Eliot's and Fry's verse drama. Harrison therefore had to question the intrinsic *raison d'être* of Molière's rhyming verse. He concluded that it should be approached as dramatic potential.

In his own version of 1973, *The Misanthrope*, Harrison accommodated Molière's French alexandrine (12-syllable lines or hexameters) into traditional English pentameters. He gave great flexibility to this form and found a characteristic rhythm for each protagonist.

For example, Célimène's satirical repartees are conveyed by end-stopped lines that highlight the couplet rhymes:

Am I to blame if men can't keep away?
 I'm not the one who's leading them astray.
 They're sweet. They visit. What do you suggest?
 A mounted sentry, or an entrance test? (*Plays* 2: 49)

On the contrary, Arsinoé speaks long sentences with frequent enjambments that make her sound long-winded:

I've always thought true friendship shows up best
 and puts sincerity to the surest test
 in matters of most importance, such as things
 touching on a friend's good name, which brings
 me here in haste and genuine concern
 to do you and your honour a good turn. (*Plays* 2: 71)

Whereas some protagonists appear as dramatic types, characterised by an idiosyncratic style, Alceste's complex character is expressed by

a greater prosodic range that varies according to his different moods. The protagonist's rhythmical inflexions make him sound more natural than the others. Sometimes, enjambments subdue the rhyming couplets so that the lines sound conversational and modern; at other times, the couplet is emphasised by the end-stopped lines to create a comic epigrammatic tone for a particular speech, as in the following example: "Glittering praise can lose its brilliance / when we see it shared with half of France" (*Plays* 2: 29). Verbal contractions abound to create the impression of orality as in the following lines: "No! No! Not one right-thinking man, not one / 'd want such ten-a-penny honours done" (*Plays* 2: 29). Although "would" at the beginning of the second line would have made this line a perfect iambic pentameter, the text was finally published with the verbal contraction, thus reflecting how the line was actually spoken by the actor (Alec McCowen played Alceste in the original production of *The Misanthrope* at the Old Vic in 1973). Indeed, Harrison repeatedly explained that the stage came first, and publication of dramatic texts came second: "The 'text', as Tarkovsky said of the film script, gets 'smelted' into performance" (*Plays* 4: 197). It did not matter to him in the least if his dramatic text looked "messy on the page" as the *Times Literary Supplement* critic noted on March 16, 1973, commenting on the line "Surely I'd've thought it wouldn't've mattered" (*Plays* 2: 51). It may seem challenging for the reader to speak this line as a trochaic pentameter; however, it worked well on the stage when Célimène (alias Diana Rigg), delivered the line. The accumulation of consonants and elisions on the page only mirrored everyday common speech. The style of Harrison's *Misanthrope* is therefore characterised by a mixture of formal prosody and flexibility, thanks to the poet's natural gifts for oral language and conversational diction. *The Misanthrope* was very successful and led to other commissions for verse drama.

Two years later, Harrison again used rhyming pentameters, or heroic couplets, in his second adaptation of a French classic for the National Theatre. Unlike in *The Misanthrope*, the rhyming pentameters in

Phaedra Britannica (Harrison's version of Racine's *Phèdre*) produce a heavy, serious tone:

My hell is India, always at high noon,
with no relief of night, and no monsoon,
and under that red sun's remorseless stare
mankind's grossest secrets are laid bare. (*Plays* 2: 194)

Harrison's adaptation worked as an exegesis of Racine's text. By transferring the Greek myth to 19th century India in the British Raj, Harrison clarified mythological references and sexual tensions in a cultural context that was closer to the British public. *Phaedra Britannica* was a critical success: "together he and Miss Rigg have brought *Phaedra* back from the living death of French classical drama to an accessible theatrical reality – an achievement roughly comparable to that of animating all the statues in the Louvre", as Sheridan Morley wrote in *Punch* 1975 (quoted in Astley 194). It established Harrison's reputation in the theatre, secured him a position as resident dramatist at the National Theatre between 1977 and 1979, and ensured several international collaborations.

While this verse adaptation of Racine led to another National Theatre commission for a tragedy (Aeschylus's *Oresteia* created in 1981), Harrison concomitantly started working on a modern adaptation of the medieval Mystery plays, which gave him yet another opportunity of perfecting his verse techniques for the stage. Harrison drew on his native Yorkshire dialect to pay tribute to the Northern, vernacular origins of a genre that came to prominence towards the middle of the 14th century. Mystery plays were dramatizations of biblical episodes often produced by the cities' guilds and performed in vernacular language by craftsmen on the streets.⁵ He also recreated a medieval atmosphere by resorting to an alliterative style reminiscent of Anglo-Saxon poetry:

Ego sum alpha et omega,
Vita, via, veritas
Primus et novissimus.
(*Fanfare*)

I am gracious and great, God withouten beginning;
I am maker unmade, all might is with me.
I am life and way unto wealth winning;
I am foremost and first; als I bid shall it be.

Since I am maker unmade, and most high in might,
And aye shall be endless, and nought is but I,
Unto my dignity dear shall duly be dight
A bliss all-abundant about me. (*Plays 1*: 11)

In Harrison's *The Mysteries*, God's Biblical Latin is rewritten into a variety of English reminiscent of the Middle English of the original text.⁶ Yet, the resulting style is a hybrid of different aesthetic traditions: Anglo-Saxon alliterative poetry mixed with quatrains in alternate rhymes. In his own version, Harrison uses dialectal words (such as "als", "aye", "nought", "dight") borrowed from the Wakefield Cycle.⁷ His semantic choices again show a superposition of different time periods and cultural references. Although "nought" is still in current use in Yorkshire, archaic words such as "als" (unknown origin) and "dight" (from the Old English, meaning to equip or adorn, especially for battle) contribute to creating the illusion of the medieval atmosphere. The expletive "aye" conjures up the popular theatre of Leon Cortez in the 1930s and 1940s, an idiosyncratic feature that Harrison reprised in the first line of "Them & [uz]" – αἰαί, ay, ay! ... stutterer Demosthenes / gob full of pebbles outshouting seas" (*SP* 122) – but only for the reader, the theatre audience probably hears it as the pronoun "I". Nonetheless, even if this is lost on the stage, the end-stopped quatrains in alternate rhymes evoke the comic atmosphere of the pantomime.

Harrison was thus more than "a Yorkshire poet who came to read the metre", as he claimed to be in the preface to *Plays 1*. He also reminded the audience and critics that verse drama was once a popular genre that fused linguistic registers and performed a social function of paramount importance. The actors were dressed as workers in overalls performing Mystery plays, and Hell was represented as a gloomy, silent space only lit by miners' lamps. Right in the middle of the Miners' Strike, in 1985, the reference to Thatcher's industrial policies

needed no commentary. Another, more subtle way of stepping into the political arena relied on a juxtaposition between the sacred and the profane, poetry and the demotic. Indeed, Harrison made creative use of a form borrowed from the Wakefield pageants, consisting of four lines rhyming together with an additional rhyme at the hemistich (ab ab ab ab), followed by five lines rhyming cdddc:

GOD

I repent full sore that ever I made man;
 By me he sets no store, and I am his sovereign.
 I will destroy therefore both beast, man and woman:
 All shall perish, less and more. Their bargain may they ban
 That ill did do.
 On earth I see right nought
 But sin that is unsought;
 Of those that well ha' wrought
 Find I but a few. (*Plays 1*: 32)

The apparent restrictive constraints of this form paradoxically allowed for some flexibility as the rhyme scheme was also distributed over the speeches of several protagonists. Harrison even inserted Latin and made it rhyme with English. This exacting verse form was coupled with a sung interlude for Noah's tableau using Bob Dylan's "When My Ship Comes In". Thus, Harrison proved that the national dramatic tradition had once accommodated vernacular language and popular culture on an equal footing with poetry and the sacred. *The Mysteries* ironically circumvented the limitations usually associated with verse drama, according to Irene Morra:

[Verse plays] also implicitly liberate the modern poet-dramatist from any direct engagement with the social, political and aesthetic expectations of the contemporary naturalist stage. [...] In adapting or invoking earlier dramatic traditions, today's mainstream verse dramatists are more likely to eschew such settings entirely – along with their social connotations – in favour of dramatic forms and traditions whose "natural" nonrealism mirrors that of poetry itself. (204-205)

To a certain extent, Harrison managed to combine his rejection of naturalism with his social, political and aesthetic agenda.

As a dramatist, Harrison foregrounds the performance as a privileged medium of communication between actors and audience. Regardless of the distinction between verse and prose, Harrison eschews naturalistic drama and the fourth wall. In his essay “Fire & Poetry”, he comes close to formulating his definition of theatricality as “a live exchange” between actors and public:

When I first saw a play in a proscenium theatre like the old Theatre Royal in Leeds, with actors only addressing each other and pouring drinks and smoking cigarettes, I felt bored and excluded. But I could enter the realism of cinema because it was not a live exchange. The actors didn't know I was there. (2007: ix)

In “Egil and Eagle-Bark”, his introduction to the text of *The Oresteia*, Harrison elaborates on his conception of theatricality:

One of the things that attracted me to the Olivier space was that it was inhospitable to the clichés of naturalistic drama that have become the norm on TV and in most theatrically anaemic modern drama. It seemed a space ready for poetry, a verse drama that was public and presentational and owed nothing to that of T. S. Eliot, who, perhaps apart from *Murder in the Cathedral*, forced verse theatre into anorexia in order to squeeze it into the proscenium drawing-room, and made it so discreet and well bred in its metrical gentility you wondered why it bothered to go public at all. (*Plays 4*, 3-4)

For Harrison, the vitality of drama lies in its ability to communicate directly with the audience. Otherwise, its theatricality is weakened (“anaemic”, “anorexia”), its “public” dimension denied by the pretence that the audience is eavesdropping on a “drawing-room” scene. In this definition, Harrison implicitly associates “naturalistic drama” with prose, and “verse drama” with theatricality. Besides, “naturalistic” and “theatrical” are mutually exclusive. However, verse alone does not guarantee theatricality. Further on in his essay, Harrison becomes more specific: “In the unashamed coupling of ‘high’ and ‘low’ the theatrical poet finds his most persuasive voice” (*Plays 4*: 5). The emphasis is no longer on “verse” but on “theatricality”. The focus shifts from form to effect: theatricality is something to be achieved, verse only a possible medium. By defining himself as a “theatrical poet” rather

than a verse dramatist, he reiterates this idea: verse is but a medium, a mere form that can be used without necessarily achieving aesthetic value. Likewise, the dramatist writes for the stage, but his/her text may not necessarily be theatrical. By contrast, the “theatrical poet” would be, according to Harrison, the *poiētēs* (ποιητής) or maker of theatricality. Although Harrison’s definition remains vague, it points into two directions: Greek tragedy and Shakespeare (as the paragon of “the unashamed coupling of ‘high’ and ‘low’”) in whose plays the use of verse is rarely accused of being “naturally unrealistic” to paraphrase Irene Morra’s words (quoted above).

Verse on the stage becomes “naturally unrealistic” only when it strays from natural speech. Everyday conversation provides numerous examples showing that verse can be as realistic as prose. As the persona ironically notes in “Confessional Poetry”:

*But your father was a simple working man,
they’ll say, and didn’t speak in those full rhymes.
His words when they came would scarcely scan.*

Mi dad’s did scan, like yours do, many times! (SP 128)

Here, the use of italics signals the presence of ordinary (prose) language. The spoken words are incorporated into the poet’s own verse so that his voice, in Roman type, is almost superseded by natural speech. The ordinary language in italics is representative of the verse praised by John Dennis as “nearer to common use, [...] more fit for action and dialogue. Such verse we make when we are writing prose; we make such verse in common conversation” (Southern 307). Incidentally, John Dennis was describing Shakespeare’s blank verse and praising it for what Harrison would call its “built-in *performability*” (Astley 444). So, when Harrison adapts Molière, Racine, or the medieval Mystery Plays, he “invoke[s] earlier dramatic tradition” in which the use of verse was no less “natural” than prose (Morra 204-205). Like Molière and Shakespeare, Harrison embraces the “direct engagement with the social, political and aesthetic expectations”, giving the lie to the general assumption that “nonrealism mirrors that of poetry itself” (ibid.).

Harrison, theatricality and metadrama

At the same time as he was working on *The Mysteries*, he used alliterative verse and Northern voices for a very different production, also commissioned by the National Theatre: a version of Aeschylus's *Oresteia*. Working from the original Greek text, Harrison noted that Aeschylus's Greek was highly alliterative. Thus, the style he had developed for *The Mysteries* seemed well suited for a modern rendition of Aeschylus in English. Moreover, the short vowels and percussive consonants of the Northern dialect proved to be the appropriate medium to convey speech clearly through the tragic masks that director Peter Hall intended for the performance. During workshops, the actors and director noticed that the masks designed by Jocelyn Herbert and worn by actors on the stage tended to blur the words. Vowels especially resonated too much behind the masks, whereas consonants helped the words reach the audience clearly. With its strong aspiration of plosives and many shortened vowels (compared to Received Pronunciation), the accent of Northerners allowed the text to sound distinctly through the masks:

The <u>clans</u> and the <u>clanchiefs</u>	<u>clamour</u> for <u>sea</u> -calm
The <u>god</u> -sop that <u>gets</u> it	makes their <u>guts</u> <u>sicken</u>
The <u>cure</u> for the <u>storm</u> blast	makes <u>strong</u> men <u>cra</u> ven (<i>Plays</i> 2: 47) ⁸

Here, the [æ] that chimes after the consonantal cluster in “clan”, “clanchiefs”, and “clamour” is also heard in “calm”, and “blast” when spoken with the Yorkshire accent in which the trap-bath split does not exist. The blank space separating the lines into two parts stands for the silent break in the actors' delivery (made necessary for the intelligibility of the text through the mask). Each line is rhythmically marked by strong alliterative consonantal clusters (2+2 beats). The possibilities of phonemic repetitions are multiplied by the frequent use of hyphenated words and compounds, a device Harrison borrowed from Robert Browning's translation (*Agamemnon*, 1877), as it is in keeping with the structure of the Greek original. Harrison's choice of diction results in a very rhythmic text that is close to oratorio, half-way between spoken speech and singing. Indeed, it was accompanied by music

composed by Harrison Birtwistle for percussions, wood instruments, and the harp, and performed at 92 beats per minute. The use of an isochronic beat (each beat has the same duration, regardless of the number of unstressed syllables it contains) stands for the irresistible motion of tragedy. Clearly, this type of delivery takes away any impression of natural conversation, and Harrison's verse does not claim to be naturalistic in effect. On the contrary, it is highly stylised, like the actors' choreographed movements.

In his definition of *The Oresteia* as "a rhythmic libretto" (Harrison 1986: 187), Harrison underlines the theatrical dimension of his version, its performability. To understand the impact of Harrison's strong, relentless verse on the stage, one may compare it with MacNeice's version:

But the money-changer War, changer of bodies,
Holding his balance in the battle
Home from Troy reined by fire
Sends back to friends the dust
That is heavy with tears, stowing
A man's worth of ashes
In an easily handled jar.
And they wail speaking well of the men how that one
Was expert in battle, and one fell well in the carnage –
But for another man's wife.
Muffled and muttered words;
And resentful grief creeps up against the sons
Of Atreus and their cause.
But others there by the wall
Entombed on Trojan ground
Lie, handsome of limb,
Holding and hidden in enemy soil. (MacNeice: 27)

MacNeice's verse translation in modern English is very close to Aeschylus's text. There are alliterations reminiscent of Aeschylus's style. The elaborate syntax (with an accumulation of clauses that delay the delivery of information for the spectator) make it, however, a literary

translation rather than a theatrical one. Its style is narrative rather than theatrical. Harrison's version of the same passage is very different:

Geldshark Ares god of War
broker of men's bodies
usurer of living flesh
corpse-trafficker that god is –

give to WAR your men's fleshgold
and what are your returns?
kilos of cold clinker packed
in army-issue urns

wives mothers sisters each one scans
the dogtags on the amphorae
which grey ashes are my man's?
they sift the jumbled names and cry:

my husband sacrificed his life
my brother's a battle martyr
aye, for someone else's wife –
Helen, whore of Sparta!

whisper mutter belly-aching
the people's beef and bile: *this war's*
been Agamemnon's our clanchief's making,
the sons of Atreus and their 'cause'.

Where's my father husband boy?
where do all our loved ones lie?
six feet under near the Troy
they died to occupy. (*Plays 4, 54-5*)

These words call for a direct audience to whom they must be spoken, almost thrown at. They are the collective voice of the chorus. Here, the speech starts with the energetic reiteration of the apostrophe (four lines, four different definitions of Ares). This is followed by rhetorical questions and the insertion of reported speech to suggest female confusion and despair. Moreover, the many blank spaces and dashes in the text function as rhythmical annotations guiding the actor's delivery, while the use of italics indicate a change of tone or

voice. Harrison's text is less rewarding for the reader than MacNeice's since it requires public performance. This extract was however published in 1981 as "The Ballad of the Geldshark" and later included in *Selected Poems* (104) as one of the three ballads of "The Bonebard Ballads", positioned just before Harrison's major sequence of sonnets. This illustrates the impact working in the theatre had for Harrison, allowing him to find a dramatic language to use in his poetry for the page. This extract announces the heteroglossic combination of Roman characters and italics, so crucial in the sonnets. In Harrison's version of Aeschylus's *Oresteia*, the text's raw energy itself becomes meaningful, so that the prosody participates in the play's message, i.e. the critique of patriarchal society. The play was performed by an all-male company. Originally, Harrison had thought of dividing the audience between men and women in order to exacerbate the tragedy's tensions, but the idea was later abandoned. However, he invited many feminist groups to debate with the actors during workshops. Irene Morra opposes Harrison's apparent formal conservatism to the progressive content voiced in his plays "where – as in Jane Arden's play" – the contemporary presence of Furies, masks and choruses could be associated as much with social argumentation and political statement as could the more naturalist tirades of the Angry Young Men" (Morra 205-206). I would add that, by foregrounding the verse form in *The Oresteia*, Harrison makes it the locus of socio-political and aesthetic debates.

For Harrison, verse is the very embodiment of the tragic principle. It is as if he endowed the verse form with cratylic potential: the prosody conjures up the relentless motion of the play towards the tragic peripeteia. It suggests, or even signifies, the sense of tragic inexorability. Paradoxically, the other crucial function of verse is to conjure up the heartbeat, the sense of life and hope overcoming despair at the end of the tragedy. Verse should help the imagination (of the poet and the audience) cope with horrors (on the stage and in real life). This is Harrison's radical reaffirmation of the necessity of poetry after the Holocaust.

When Harrison later moved away from the translation of the classics (in which the use of verse is generally accepted and acclaimed) to the creation of original modern verse plays (in which verse is not historically legitimised and is consequently greeted less favourably), the idea that verse encapsulated the life instinct remained strong with him. In *Square Rounds*, a verse play about the development of military weapons throughout the 20th century, Harrison combined verse pantomime and magic with a tragic theme. He felt justified to use verse because one of the main protagonists, Hudson Maxim, was in real life a poetry enthusiast.¹⁰ Besides, at the Imperial War Museum in London, Harrison discovered an advertisement in verse singing the praises of a new machine gun invented by Mikhail Kalashnikov. Then, an article from the *New York Post* dated March 18, 1981 mentioned Luciano Pavarotti's attributing his sense of rhythm to the sound of automatic weapons in his childhood. This led Harrison to the conclusion that "Meter, rhythm and ballistics seemed ineluctably bonded" (*Plays 5*: 157-8).

In *Square Rounds*, verse is used to create pathos. Its rhythms denote the coughing of World War I soldiers, as well as the fire of machine guns:

He invented an inhaler hailed (pun! pun!)
 though never quite as much as was his gun,
 by Harley Street, and inhaled by those who'd been
 gassed at Ypres by lung-ravishing chlorine. (*Plays 5*: 159)¹¹

The alliterations and consonances in [h] echo the protagonist's struggle for breath, and, more generally, that of World War I veterans. The self-referential mention of the wordplay on "inhaler" / "hailed" at the end of the first line brings together the comic ("(pun! pun!)") and the tragic (sound of machine guns, evocation of the ravages caused by gas in the trenches). Black humour is also present in the rhyme ("pun" / "gun"). The meter alternates trochaic and iambic lines. The trochees of lines 1 and 4 that seem to jar against the iambs of lines 2 and 3 also evoke the puffing delivery of the gassed soldier. I would argue that such prosodic gesticulations draw the attention to the verse form. It is

as if the verse form itself was centre-stage. In fact, this is announced right at the beginning of the play in a metadramatic prologue:

HUDSON

Just to show you that versified speech
is within every competent man's reach
I shall address the audience, impromptu,
in poetry the entire night through. (*Plays 5: 157*)

As in his feature-length film *Prometheus* (1998), verse is both a medium and the subject of *Square Rounds*. It participates in the play's metatheatrical dimension.

Sometimes, it seems that the metatheatrical dimension takes over the progress of the plot. In such instances, the dramatic action is suspended while the protagonists discuss aesthetic form. Although such verbal duels make for comic interludes that defuse the play's tragic tension, they nevertheless bring forth ethical questions. When Fritz Haber, the German scientist who was instrumental in helping the Nazis build their bombing arsenal, insists on everyone having to "obey the rules", there emerges an ambiguous metaphor bringing art (here the versified form of the play) and totalitarianism together. Although spectators may admire Sweeper Mawes' witty repartees, they may feel uncomfortable with his idiom when he claims that "No *Bosch* defeats heirs of Byron and Keats" (my italics):

SWEEPER MAWES

Just cos' my bronchia get wonkier and wonkier
don't think that I can't recite.
For a poetical scrap you've picked the right chap...
Once I've got enough wind for the fight.
No Bosch defeats heirs of Byron and Keats
Shakespeare makes us all Prosperos.
So square up for rounds of metrical sounds –
How about that? That's not prose! (*Plays 5: 186-187*)

Paradoxically, in these apparently light, comic interludes that foreground form rather than content, Harrison raises serious socio-political issues. As in the rest of his works, he questions cultural prejudice.

Obsessed with what he perceives as a division between popular and elitist culture in contemporary arts, Harrison seeks to reconcile different cultural traditions in *Square Rounds*. He plays with language and images, like the conjurer on the stage: the role of Sweeper Mawes was performed by Arturo Brachetti in the original 1995 National Theatre production. Rhymes and rhythm are reminiscent of the almost naïve simplicity of nursery rhymes while biographical anecdotes tragically collide with history. In his reply to Fritz Haber (quoted above), Sweeper Mawes complies with the stylistic requirements of the play and devises one of the meters that dominate *Square Rounds*. It is a quatrain rhyming abcb where an internal rhyme on the first and third lines makes the stanza sound like a sestet rhyming aabccb. This intricate rhyming scheme is recited isochronically, i.e. with a regular beat, regardless of the number of unstressed syllables. This makes the verse form very conspicuous, unlike natural conversation. For Harrison, this is a major advantage in a tragedy: verse is cathartic. It maintains a distance between the audience and the disturbing content of the play. Furthermore, verse and its relentless beat throughout the play embody the heartbeat, the life instinct that carries the audience across the tragedy being performed, as well as across the tragedies of our own age that the play echoes. Therefore, verse becomes more than an aesthetic peculiarity; it is granted metaphysical significance because, for Harrison, writing and dramatic performance especially are means of resisting nihilism and entropy. Indeed, Harrison has an acute awareness of the transience of the theatrical performance, as opposed to the cinema: "Theatre can only celebrate its presented moments by embracing its own ephemerality. In that is the glory of performance" (*Plays 4*: 187). For him, the regular beat of the verse on the stage is in itself an affirmation of the triumph of life over death and tyranny. In his attempt to create "a new poetic theatre" (*Plays 5*: 170), however, Harrison disconcerted the audience. The baroque style resulting from the mixture of magic, music hall comedy, song, tragic chorus and metadrama in *Square Rounds* proved too exuberant and the play faced hostile reviews.

“[V]ery much his own man in contemporary British poetry, having little in common with any recognizable school or movement” (Riggs 443), Harrison reinterprets canonical dramatic texts as well as dramatic conventions, often walking on a tight-rope between iconoclasm and elitism. Amongst contemporary verse dramatists, “Harrison is relatively alone [...] in his critique and creative engagement with a diversity of poetic forms and traditions” (Morra 210). If “the imitation of the great masters” (Astley 33) was a starting point in his career as a playwright and legitimised his use of verse on the stage, he imprinted his own originality in the canon, combining modernisation and traditional prosody. Far from being gratuitous, rhymes and verse are enlisted in the socio-political and cultural debates Harrison’s plays generally tackle. The very use of verse in an age of prose draws attention to the ideological nature of language. Harrison’s verse may be seen as rebellious, but it also calls for social, linguistic and historical reconciliation. Although his plays often defy categorisation, Harrison has nonetheless paved the way for other artists, such as Glyn Maxwell, who are willing to embrace verse drama on the contemporary stage.

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¹ Throughout this article, Harrison's *Selected Poems* is referred to as *SP, Plays. Volume 1* as *Plays 1, Plays. Volume 2* as *Plays 2, Plays. Volume 4* as *Plays 4,* and *Plays. Volume 5* as *Plays 5.*

² Romana Huk has termed this period "The Leeds Renaissance" (Astley 75-83) due to the flourishing of the arts in this industrial working-class Northern city.

³ In fact, they were so successful that Barry Cryer (who later became a script-writer for comic duo Morecambe and Wise) invited Harrison to do stand-up comedy with him.

⁴ In his introduction "Molière Nationalised", Harrison notably alludes to a review of the Royal National Theatre's production of *Tartuffe* in 1968 which claimed that "Molière rarely works in English" (*Plays 2: 6*).

⁵ Originally, clergymen performed biblical episodes in Latin but they supported the performance of Mystery plays in everyday English.

⁶ Of course, all this was spoken in a broad Yorkshire accent.

⁷ Of the different cycles of Mystery plays that have survived, the York cycle is one of the longest and most exhaustive, consisting of 48 plays. The Wakefield cycle (also known as Towneley) could be an earlier version of the York cycle with which it has some plays in common. It is mostly known for its six plays written in Yorkshire dialect in a highly elaborate rhyming style that Harrison chose to reproduce.

⁸ I have underlined the stressed syllables.

⁹ Irene Morra here refers to Jane Arden's play, *Vagina Rex and the Gas Oven*, 1969.

¹⁰ Hudson Maxim is the author of two books: *The Science of Poetry* (1940) in which he criticises the pacifism, sentimentalism and lack of scientific culture of poets, and *Hudson Maxim: Reminiscences and Comments* (1924) in which he reveals his interest in poetry. His brother, Sir Hiram Maxim, is the inventor of the "Maxim Gun" (a type of machine gun).

¹¹ These lines are quoted in the introduction to the play in the Faber edition but they are omitted from the published play.

“We are Folk / Who Understand Unhampered Language Best”: Peter Oswald, T. S. Eliot, and The Possibilities of (Contemporary) Poetic Drama at Shakespeare’s Globe

Richard O’BRIEN

Abstract: In 1998, artistic director Mark Rylance commissioned verse dramatist Peter Oswald as the first contemporary writer-in-residence for Shakespeare’s Globe. Oswald’s verse seemed on paper to suit what Rylance described as “a space... made for verse-speaking”, but the three verse plays he produced in this setting repeatedly, and consciously, confronted the challenges of negotiating the venue’s, and the form’s, Shakespearean history. In producing verse drama in contemporary English, Oswald had to engage not only with the overbearing presence of Shakespeare as primary comparison point, but also with T. S. Eliot’s earlier explorations of the possibilities of poetic drama. Oswald’s three Globe verse plays – *Augustine’s Oak*, *The Golden Ass*, and *The Storm* — thus situate themselves in dialogue with Eliotic, as well as Shakespearean, ideas about what verse drama should be, engaging in debates around spirituality, historical distance, and the formation of audience-as-community. This essay offers close readings of each of these works as self-conscious investigations of the presence, purpose, and effect of verse in contemporary English theatre, drawing on contemporary reviews, formalist Shakespearean criticism, and a new, unpublished interview with Tim Carroll, director of all three plays.

Résumé : En 1998, Marc Rylance, directeur artistique au Théâtre du Globe, a proposé la première résidence d’écrivain contemporain au dramaturge et poète Peter Oswald. Sur la page, les vers d’Oswald semblent correspondre à ce que Rylance a décrit comme « un espace... fait pour déclamer des vers », mais les trois pièces en vers qu’il a produites dans ce décor se sont heurtées, de manière répétée et délibérée, aux défis que pose l’histoire du lieu et de la forme, tous deux intimement liés à Shakespeare. En produisant des pièces en vers en anglais contemporain, Oswald a dû entrer en compétition avec la présence

très forte de Shakespeare, mais aussi avec la manière dont T.S. Eliot a exploré les possibilités du théâtre poétique. Les trois pièces de Oswald jouées au Globe – *Augustine's Oak*, *The Golden Ass* et *The Storm* – se positionnent ainsi comme des dialogues avec des idées eliotiennes et shakespeariennes, sur ce que le théâtre en vers devrait être, prenant sa part dans le débat autour de la spiritualité, de la distance historique, et de la façon dont les spectateurs deviennent une communauté. Cet essai offre des micro-lectures de chacune de ces œuvres qui se veulent des enquêtes sur la présence, le but et l'effet des vers dans le théâtre contemporain anglais, puisant dans des critiques contemporaines, la critique shakespearienne formaliste et un nouvel entretien, non publié, avec Tim Carroll, le metteur en scène de ces trois pièces.

Keywords: verse drama, Shakespeare's Globe, T.S. Eliot, Christopher Fry, poetic theatre

Mots-clés : théâtre en vers, Théâtre du Globe, T.S. Eliot, Christopher Fry, théâtre poétique

Shakespeare's Globe is a space built for plays in which “verse is always at the centre of the dramatic argument” (Cantoni 43). This was the case made by Mark Rylance, the London venue's first artistic director, in his application for funding to commission verse dramatist Peter Oswald as the theatre's first contemporary playwright-in-residence in 1998. Since its inception, the Globe has programmed a number of contemporary productions foregrounding the use of verse, including texts by Glyn Maxwell and Tony Harrison. This essay will, however, concern itself with identifying the particular challenges and questions which faced the first three verse plays commissioned by the new Globe, all by Peter Oswald. Together the three form a group of texts which, by definition, are centrally self-conscious about the presence, purpose, and effect of verse in contemporary English theatre.

Here I argue that because Oswald's three Globe plays cannot ignore the fundamental strangeness of their form – even in a venue defined

in large part by its namesake's use of iambic pentameter blank verse – they engage not only with Shakespeare but, more implicitly but no less seriously, with one of the other most famous proponents of dramatic verse in English, a writer with comparatively little association with the Bankside theatre space: T. S. Eliot.

This second comparison is one invoked by Oswald himself, who “sorrowfully” told *Guardian* journalist Lyn Gardner that “even T. S. Eliot admitted that verse drama was damned hard and said he thought you had to give your life to it”; in her phrase, in an article primarily focused on his Globe work, he “has become resigned” to “plugging away at a type of drama that everyone believed had expired sometime in the late 1950s, when Christopher Fry fell from grace and T. S. Eliot’s unfortunate Celia Copplestone suffered a grisly if memorable martyrdom by killer ants in *The Cocktail Party*.” Michael J. Sidnell noted the negative impact for future verse dramatists of Eliot’s use of the form: “Under Eliot’s influence, ‘poetic drama’, as it was so infelicitously called, acquired utterly un-Brechtian connotations and an odour of sanctity” (151). Oswald’s plays call attention to verse’s value for twenty-first century theatre while showing themselves pre-emptively aware of many objections the form faces as a result of the overbearing, though distinct, cultural legacies of plays both by Shakespeare and Eliot, thus performing a kind of evolving creative advocacy balanced between optimism (about the possibilities of poetic drama in the modern world, in Eliot’s terms) and pessimism (about the reception of poetic drama, in a post-Shakespearean *and* post-Eliotic age).

I will first present some wider biographical and cultural context for the problems facing Oswald as the first verse dramatist to step into the bright shared light of that Shakespearean space – across which, I will demonstrate, a more subtle Eliotic shadow also falls. I will then trace Oswald’s responses to both these playwrights’ models of verse by describing some of the ways in which meaning is made from, and value assigned to, the use of verse and prose across the three texts: the 1999 *Augustine’s Oak*, 2002’s *The Golden Ass*, and *The Storm*, first produced in 2005.

Between Eliot and Shakespeare

An interview for Oswald's local paper, the Torquay *Herald Express*, suggests that the anxiety of influence might even impact on a verse dramatist's decision over where to live. "Down here there isn't so much of a feeling of working in the shadow of the great verse dramatists", he comments appreciatively to a journalist who goes on to marvel at Oswald's bravery in the face of a kind of haunting: "You might think that with Shakespeare hovering like a massy presence at your shoulder, not to mention T. S. Eliot, it would be hard to find the gall to write in verse" (Clamp 10). An account of Oswald's Globe plays thus requires a detailed assessment of how a contemporary verse dramatist finds his gall in direct dialogue with these two overpowering examples.

Rylance, according to an interview I conducted with Tim Carroll who directed all three productions, became aware of Oswald's writing through an early success which Carroll had originally commissioned – the 1996 National Theatre production of Oswald's adaptation of a Japanese puppet play, *Fair Ladies at a Game of Poem Cards*.¹ One reviewer at the time already described how Oswald had, somewhat pitifully, allotted himself "the thankless task of keeping verse drama going as a living theatrical form" (Curtis 48). While largely praising the production, the *Evening Standard's* Nick Curtis was keen to note its fundamental abnormality and identify what for him was an implicit elitism: *Fair Ladies* should be as "just the kind of bizarre one-off that will earn you respect as a culturally varied and adventurous theatregoer when you mention it at a dinner party" (48).

In such a context of reception, Oswald's implicit "task" as a playwright therefore becomes the creation of a "living" verse drama which is *not* inherently "bizarre", "adventurous", or confined to discussion purely in bourgeois circles (the fatuous world, perhaps of Eliot's *Cocktail Party*); a challenge which his Globe trilogy partly acknowledges and partly refutes. But if the Globe itself, in selecting Oswald for their own experimental commission, viewed his work as an adventure, they initially seemed to see it as a necessary one: when the theatre's producers formally "listed seven key artistic strategies that

were deemed essential to Rylance's vision for the Globe in the coming years", the last on the list was a commitment "[t]o experiment with new verse writing" (Fallow 91).

Oswald's experience at the Globe, however, was not one of unmitigated support for his aesthetic practice in this experiment, because in his account, and in the argument of Catriona Fallow, the pull towards the venue's eponymous dead icon was greater than that towards "living" verse drama. This Shakespeare-centrism had consequences for his ability to develop an independent voice, free from the paranoia of self-justification, in writing for that space:

Shakespeare just dominated the place and all the thinking about it so much that you couldn't have a script discussion without everything being compared to Shakespeare in some way or another which is really, for a writer, very atrophying and very hard. (93)

Unlike an Elizabethan playwright experimenting within an accepted tradition, perhaps working for years with the same company, Oswald seems to have suffered primarily for the sense that the most important writer in the English language became his sole comparison point for verse use. This was certainly the view of some reviewers who engaged with the first play he produced: Terri Paddock, eliding the entire post-1616 tradition of verse drama in the Jacobean and Caroline theatres, described *Augustine's Oak* as "the first new play for Shakespeare's Globe since, um, Shakespeare", whose writing, the reader is encouraged to presume, rendered the entire subsequent course of verse drama obsolete. Paddock's reference to Oswald's use of "traditional Elizabethan verse", despite his modern diction, indicates that for some audiences, a metre can have an expiry date, and that its appropriateness for present theatrical usage might need to be directly addressed.

This is exactly what Eliot, one of the last verse dramatists to achieve mainstream success in England, believed when he lamented that audiences in the 1940s and 50s were "prepared to put up with verse from the lips of personages dressed in the fashion of some distant age" (141), but were unused to hearing poetry spoken by their own contemporar-

ies. Oswald thus seems to align himself at least theoretically with Eliot in the many interviews he has given where he confronts how, with regard to dramatic verse, his self-perception as a writer working *in the present day* seems to require particular emphasis. The playwright told Lyn Gardner in 2005 that “People often seem to think that what I am trying to do is re-create Shakespeare, which would be the worst thing imaginable. I am not. I am trying to write contemporary plays that use iambic pentameter because to me it seems like the most natural form to use.”

What to make, in this context, of Oswald’s choice to adapt three stories from the distant past rather than offering contemporary narratives at the Globe? Oswald’s director Tim Carroll disagreed with Eliot, making the case that “the fiction of another period” can “open up” verse plays to “lift off into heightened language”: far from making a historical play a “museum piece” or exercise in nostalgia, “it immediately engages our imagination and therefore we are in the right kind of mood to listen to verse.” He also argued that Oswald pursued a conscious formal dialogue with Eliot and his successful contemporary, Christopher Fry (who was once a popular enough verse dramatist to appear on the cover of *Time* magazine): his work engaged with these authors “more than with Shakespeare, in that it was saying ‘no, you guys have got it wrong, what we need to do is go back to something which is more regular, more clearly verse, isn’t just calling itself verse by hitting the Return key before you get to the right-hand side of the page.’”

Oswald’s practice, in using iambic pentameter rather than a freer twentieth-century line, thus comes to seem like a direct refutation of Eliot’s insistence that in writing modern drama verse “the essential was to avoid any echo of Shakespeare”, and particularly to avoid “too much iambic” (Eliot 139). Curiously, despite his own comparatively free and Eliotic prosody, Fry had himself offered a similar riposte: he praised the “advantage” of the “five foot line” in its “being there already ... in our blood”, and challenged his friend Eliot’s own metrical techniques as being no “nearer to our present-day speech rhythms, or

easier to speak” than the most famous lines from *Hamlet*: “if I were outside a door listening to the fearful buzz of a cocktail party, I should be at least as little surprised to hear the voices speaking the speech-rhythm of Shakespeare as that of Eliot” (150).

In primarily using historical settings himself, Fry may perhaps have partly aimed to avoid this very same conundrum. And indeed, Irene Morra suggests that Oswald’s focus on the past was specifically an attempt to advocate for the value of poetic drama while at the same time recognising and allowing for the resistance it experiences from modern audiences in the wake, in part, of more recent perceptions of Eliot’s ‘contemporary’ verse drama as a failed experiment. While it has never been entirely true that, as E. Martin Browne – founder of the Pilgrim Players, and the foremost director of Eliot’s verse plays – claimed in 1976, “the whole verse-drama movement, as we spent our lives on it, has come to an end” (Wahl 68), Morra nonetheless views Oswald’s turn towards the past as fundamentally post-Eliotic, impelled by a resistance to the now-outdated claims to present relevance made by and about Eliot’s “decidedly unfashionable work” (204). Oswald’s choice of historical settings instead argues “implicitly for the contemporary resonance of earlier theatrical traditions in which poetic expression was a more dominant, natural idiom”, but in the process frees their author from “any direct engagement with the social, political and aesthetic expectations of the contemporary naturalist stage” (204).

“No tribute to the past”?: Oswald’s dramatic verse in practice

Oswald’s experimental trilogy for the Globe demonstrates a complex engagement with inherited ideas around the role and effect of stage verse familiar from both Shakespeare and Eliot. It is particularly pertinent to begin by considering how these negotiations function with regard to the distribution of verse and prose lines. For comparison, one enduring view of the resonance of prose in a largely-versified stage world is as an indicator of class and status, associated (often somewhat simplistically) with Shakespeare’s treatment of these social factors. This also bears upon questions of genre: as Tony Harrison memorably puts

it in “Them & [uz]”: “You’re one of those / Shakespeare gives the comic bits to: prose” (133). When asked how transitions between prose and verse were to be understood in Oswald’s plays, Carroll identified the issue as primarily a question of register rather than motivated by social class and position. Prose, for the director, lends itself better to quickfire comic dialogue or long, absurd monologues, but the fact prose-speakers are often disempowered ironically offers them a verbal gift: “it’s mostly ... lower class characters ... who are allowed to do showy-off verbal pyrotechnics and so on, because they’re not busy with affairs of state.”

Eliot largely avoided this issue in determining for his own work that “a mixture of prose and verse is generally to be avoided” because “each transition makes the auditor aware, with a jolt of the medium” and thus “in verse drama prose should be used very sparingly indeed” (133-4); Oswald, by contrast, not only follows a more Shakespearean model in using such transitions, but consciously draws attention to their use. His Globe writing across all three plays thus continually troubles the question of who verse belongs to, and in what situations it is appropriate, but in ways which touch on the spiritual as much as the social. Some fifty years earlier, Eliot wrote of a religiously-inflected desire to communicate in poetry what he held to be impossible in prose: the numinous “fringe of indefinite extent, of feeling which we can only detect, so to speak, out of the corner of the eye and can never completely focus” (145). These comments on the realms of feeling to which verse allows access illuminate a crucial moment where verse and prose are self-reflexively scrutinised in Oswald’s 1999 *Augustine’s Oak*.

The play’s plot concerns the arrival of the Christian bishop Augustine in a politically- and spiritually-fragmented post-Roman Britain, and religious affiliation seems at first to be the prime formal divider. King Ethelbert of Kent, along with his pagan retainers, stubbornly speaks prose to his wife and daughter; the Roman delegation led by Augustine speak only verse, as do the Christian Celts in Wales. The fact that even Kings speak prose indicates how little social rank relates to verse in this first Globe outing. Bertha, Ethelbert’s Christian

queen, is however able to code-switch to verse when conversing with other Christian characters.

The clash of cultures and imperatives that takes place when Ethelbert and Augustine meet is thus presented through a kind of formal incompatibility; like Mortimer and his wife in Shakespeare's *1 Henry IV* ("My wife can speak no English, I no Welsh", 3.1.188), neither is able to speak the other's 'tongue' until Ethelbert converts and adopts verse. This linguistic shift seems to bring in its wake an attempt at national unification, heralded by a "thunderstorm / Of baptisms":

BERTHA. Augustine, God is sitting on your shoulder,
If you can spread throughout this fighting island
The light you have set up in one small corner,
You will have saved four peoples from destruction. (52)

Despite being implicitly associated with this unifying impulse, however, Oswald's use of verse also suggests more divisive discourses. Prose here represents the 'pagan' tongue of the ancient Britons, and verse the formal Latin of the 'civilised' Roman visitors, which the Celtic Christians have retained. Augustine and his associates arrive speaking in tones of pride, if not arrogance: the bishop's first line, "Laurence, this place is not like Italy" (21) is an implicit denigration of Britain and its inferiority to the climate he is used to. Verse does not *have* to be spoken in a high-handed, ceremonial manner: as one Welsh religious leader comments, "We owe no tribute to the past, Augustine" (68). But given the play's general progress towards "Christ's throne" (95) and the triumph of Christianity – a pattern noted as central to Eliot's "sacramental aesthetic" by William V. Spanos, who explores how Eliot brings each protagonist "into awareness of the paradoxically benign nature of his condition" (194) whereby, thanks to Christ's sacrifice, "man and nature are reunited with the transcendent from which they had been separated" (26) – there is an implicit association between prose and barbarism, with verse as the bright new hope which will save the backward Britons from their bad old ways.

This transitional encounter does not read as simply or unambiguously progressive. The agents of change arrive speaking a form the audience is predisposed to hear as dated: “traditional Elizabethan verse” (Paddock) “from the lips of personages dressed in the fashion of some distant age” (Eliot 141). Oswald thus poses the question of whether, politically and socially as well as aesthetically, we might sometimes need to look back in order to go forward. Verse also arrives (as it did to a large extent for Eliot’s audiences, but did not for Shakespeare’s) as a foreign imposition on Ethelbert’s kingdom. A passage of ‘translation’ between the two leaders, Ethelbert and Augustine, allows Oswald firstly to seem to mock the high-handed prolixity of this imported language (as when Polonius, having announced that “brevity is the soul of wit” (2.2.90), is firmly instructed to provide “more matter, with less art” (2.2.96)):

ETHELBERT. Why have you come here? What do you want to talk about? Speak plainly.

OSBERT. What is the reason for your presence here?

What are the teachings you have brought to us?

Feel free to speak directly, we are folk

Who understand unhampered language best. (25)

Verse here threatens not only a sense of regional insularity, but also the “plain” prose style in which it is expressed: to fill up the metre, the language of the outsider seems to demand a verbose *indirectness* which is potentially politically suspect. As the language of Rome, it carries with it the threat of elitism and imperialism. Seventeen years before the Brexit referendum, Osbert’s strained speech implies that European influence “hampers” the island community with a stuffy formality which the locals’ bathetic responses comically puncture. Poetry seems, in Eliot’s phrasing, to have become irrevocably out of touch with the “ordinary everyday [English] world” (146).

Later in the scene, however, Oswald reverses the process in defence of poetry, showing the spiritual insight and articulacy – Eliot’s “fringe of indefinite extent, of feeling” (145) – which his characters are forced to sacrifice in the paraphrase from verse into prose:

AUGUSTINE. We do not say that your beliefs are evil,
But that they are a sieve through which the spirit
Leaks away slowly to be lost in darkness.

.....

OSBERT. He commiserates with our beliefs, King. He says they are not
wicked, but utterly useless and that we are lost. (27)

The development of Oswald's writing across these three pieces shows an acknowledgement that verse can indeed connote both unity – the “worldview of continuing reciprocal engagement and mutual responsibility” which formalist critic George T. Wright viewed as inherent to Shakespeare's use of shared iambic pentameter (259) – and the risk of a Polonius-like pomposity which must be carefully handled. Wright also emphasised the somatic power of iambic verse, asserting that “if the actors will keep the meter, our nervous systems can register the continuing metrical pattern” (92), a point taken up by Carroll in his earnest defence of the verse form Oswald flirts with undermining in the translation scene. For the director, the “simultaneous and communal experience” of performance in the Globe space “does really benefit from good attention to the verse, because like all the best theatre, what you want is the sense that we're all starting to breathe together, and if that breathing is regular and not choppy, then you actually do get that feeling of an organism in the Globe, far more than in most other theatres.”

Carroll ascribed a quality of stillness in the audience directly to the use of the “hypnotic” rhythms of verse, but also noted that Oswald gradually “became more disciplined about poetry for its own sake” as the verse dramatist learnt “how to make sure that purple passages didn't just tread water dramatically.” In so doing, he followed two strictures laid down in Eliot's assessment of his own experimental stage verse, arrived at once the earlier writer had declared it “deplorable” for an audience to be “attracted by verse ... if that means that they are prepared to enjoy the play and the language of the play as two separate things” (133): that poetry must not merely “giv[e] people of literary tastes the pleasure of listening to poetry at the same time that they

are witnessing a play”, but “must justify itself dramatically, and not merely be fine poetry shaped into a dramatic form” (132), and that “in a play, from time to time, something should happen” (144).

Mark Rylance, according to Carroll, argued during rehearsals for Oswald’s second Globe play, *The Golden Ass*, for the need at that theatre “for a *ludus* as they called it in Rome – if you didn’t wrap up what you were doing in something fun, you would immediately alienate half the audience that you could otherwise reach.” We might call this poetry justifying itself comically, and indeed Oswald’s three plays for this particular space became “increasingly irreverent”: from *Augustine’s Oak*, which started with “simply an episode of history, and therefore the template you have is of the [Shakespearean] chronicle play, so any sort of naughtiness really stands out”, Oswald’s writing evolved towards the Plautus-inspired *The Storm*, a mode in which “the whole point is to be naughty all the time” (Carroll).

The director identified *The Golden Ass* in particular as inhabiting a kind of golden mean, as “the one where the audience felt the most truly Oswaldian combination of really intensely intoxicating poetry, and really intensely silly, hilarious comedy” (Carroll). Indeed, its opening couplet harnesses verse and antiquity to an explicitly comic mode: “Now let me tell you an old joke I know / That happened far away and long ago” (11). In being ‘truly Oswaldian’ it also, perhaps, strikes a middle ground between Shakespearean and Eliotic models of how verse and prose can or should operate.

This shift towards more overt comedy may have seemed necessary, when even a largely sympathetic audience member, the *Guardian*’s Lyn Gardner, seemed committed to hearing what she wanted to hear in Oswald’s previous production. Criticising *Augustine’s Oak* for reinforcing the idea that “verse drama is old-fashioned, its backward-looking historical narratives set in some distant olde worlde England where everyone rants in rhyming couplets”, Gardner seemed to overlook the fact that there is only one such couplet in the text of the entire play. Verse in *The Golden Ass* is not a reverential, separate space, but a medium in which, as Eliot advocated, “everything can be said that has to

be said" (134) and thus capable of communicating a unified world of the sacred and profane where "slips, exceptions, and monstrosities, / That can explain the rest, they form the key / To the whole code" (13).

At least, this is what the protagonist Lucius sees: the comic and tragic side by side, the large in the small, and in terms which recall Wright's description of Shakespeare's shared metre representing in microcosm "that condition of being bound together in a common action that the play as a whole affirms [...] an aesthetic and an ethic of mutual dependence and obligation" (138, 258). James Woodfield has noted how in Fry's work, too, each of the characters, in a characteristically comic pattern, move "from isolation to integration with society" and further, "towards a recognition of the interrelatedness of all life" (149-51). For Oswald's protagonist here, a woman stirring a pot thus becomes the subject of a rhapsody of interwovenness, "Everything following the revolving motion / Of her firm hand, she stands and stirs forever / The planets and my atoms in their polka" (25).

The woman, Photis, has a more down-to-earth view of her life which might conventionally be called prosaic – "I've got to sweep the master's dandruff up off the street, I've got to boil my lady's giblets for the blithering cats" (29) – were it not that elsewhere in the script she herself speaks verse. But this relaxing of formal boundaries does not render any less effective the more conventional shift in another scene wherein Lucius's totalising, Faustian poetic dreams – "I want a girl more lovely than the moon / I want more gold than any man has seen, / And lastly, this: I want to know all things" – are immediately brought down to a commercialised reality: "Do you want a flake with that?" (17).

Overall, verse in this second script seems a form with "so wide a range" (Eliot 134) as to be capable of serving the needs of a range of registers, from courtroom testimony to erotic reverie. Lucius's transformation into an ass might be expected to be the point at which prose is assumed, but does not in fact lead to any loss of eloquence in the speech to which we, the audience, attend, even though his onstage auditors no longer perceive his utterances as human language: "Now

I am dying in a donkey's skin! / And who will know there was a man within?" (79).

Prose is, nonetheless, still present, and not always where we might expect it: even the goddess Isis, when she appears to save Lucius, is a prose speaker. There is a sense, therefore, that all human life is here: each transition between verse and prose (and the frequency of these suggests the fear of an Eliotic "jolt" is largely absent) offers Oswald more in the way of comic variety than in claims to status, truth, or beauty. Carroll's comment that, for Oswald, "prose is a bit more about mental display of intelligence and brilliance, whereas verse tends to be more spontaneous and working it out as you go and speaking from the heart" suggests a view of prose and verse particularly in this second piece which has more to do with momentary strategy than any external schema. The play's reception also indicates the greater success of this more malleable approach: Oswald's "gloriously bawdy romp [...] was a huge hit with critics and audiences alike" which reportedly was even mooted for a transfer to London's National Theatre, an unusual feat indeed for a modern verse play (Gardner).

One might therefore expect Oswald's third Globe commission, *The Storm*, to continue with this more malleable approach – but in fact, this production which, as Cantoni notes, exposes and mocks "almost all theatrical conventions" (45), as part of this strategy also manifests a renewed self-consciousness around its form. Oswald's Plautine comedy is one in which the prose-verse divide conveys a serious social message: "free characters can choose to employ verse, according to the tone and subject of the conversation, while slaves are expected to stick to prose" (Cantoni 46). We might compare this convention to its appearance in Shakespeare's own Plautus-derived *The Comedy of Errors*, wherein the masters, Antipholus, use verse and their servants, the Dromios, are prose speakers.

The relative sparsity of verse in this text was explained by Tim Carroll as a concession to a certain frivolousness of genre: *The Storm* "by its nature was much of an after-dinner mint and [so] had a lot less of the intense poetry." The enslaved Sceparnio is at one point

briefly versified after a significant blow to the head: the paradoxical liberation of moving into the constraints of iambic pentameter makes him feel the delirious freedom of “a leaf in love with falling” (Oswald 2005: 86). Despite these desirable associations, however, in this more comic mode the weight of spiritual solemnity associated with verse can once again be understood as something of a burden: “Oh good, I’m back to prose again” (91) says Sceparnio, apparently relieved to return to his normal speech medium and, implicitly, his subservient position (though in a final dizzying twist, he is freed five lines later). This strand of Oswald’s humour, which foregrounds a self-ironising distaste for verse, suggests that verse drama cannot be written today without some degree of potentially destabilising self-reflection.

The attitude of Jaques to the lovelorn Orlando in *As You Like It* – “Nay then, God b’ wi’ you, an you talk in blank verse” (4.1.24) – reminds us, however, that such self-awareness is not a new development, and a sense that blank verse might in some situations be undesirable does not ultimately diminish Oswald’s poetic advocacy in his final work for this verse-centred space. One particularly resonant passage returns to the association sketched in *Augustine’s Oak* between godlessness, fragmentation and isolation, and the deeper connection possible through faith:

DAEMONES. I was an almost-atheist, a barrel
Of emptiness, a cracked and leaking ocean.
Now I am wine in a gold cup reflecting
The kindness of the sky and of the sea. (77)

As in Eliot’s plays, verse here carries the promise of a deeper, spiritual unity which can be understood and developed in interpersonal communication. It seems to bring with it the imperative felt towards the end of Oswald’s first Globe script by the young King Edwin, a prince tipped for greatness, who opens a versified conversation about Christianity with his wife by stating “So we must try to speak to one another” (Oswald 1999: 93). Though occasionally mocked for its pomposity, verse for Oswald’s characters here seems again to present the conduit to greater human connection in a fallen world.

This integration and interrelation – “Everything following the revolving motion [...] The planets and my atoms in their polka” (Oswald 2002: 25) – underpins Wright’s description of Shakespeare’s verse, and Eliot’s account of his own practice. Eliot had aimed in his own words for his verse plays to “appeal to “as large and miscellaneous an audience as possible”” (Morra 117), of the kind he associated with Shakespeare’s own Globe, describing the broad “Elizabethan audience [...] to whose ears both prose and verse came naturally” (Eliot 133) as a lost, organic community of the kind he wanted to address and create, having “identified verse drama as uniquely capable of both expressing and manifesting an essential communal identity” (Morra 117).

Unfortunately, *The Storm* did not meet with as positive a critical reception as *The Golden Ass*: in purely commercial terms, therefore, it did not inspire the sense of broad integration invoked, in and through verse, as desirable not only by Shakespeare (in Wright’s account) and Eliot, but by Oswaldian figures such as Edwin and Lucius. Oswald therefore ruefully noted the unlikelihood of making such an impact in his own career, given his experiences with contemporary theatre programmers as a post-Shakespeare, post-Eliot verse dramatist: “Perhaps naively [...] I thought that, after the success of *The Golden Ass*, theatres would be more interested in what I am doing. I was wrong” (Gardner).

It is, nonetheless, worth tentatively noting that the play of Oswald’s Globe trilogy which paying audiences and its director alike seem to have seen as his most successful production was the one for which it is hardest to prescribe any set external meaning behind the use of verse, and that in which the verse form itself is the most integrated and the least self-conscious. Rather than pursuing a path of anxious self-reflection, in *The Golden Ass* a mingled tapestry of prose and verse writing passes without self-analytical comment in a portrayal of a truly mingled world.

Did the Globe itself, however, agree with reviewer Terri Paddock’s assessment that Oswald’s playwriting constituted not a viable contemporary experiment, but “traditional Elizabethan verse”, or with Sidnell’s suggestion that dramatic verse in the shadow of Eliot carried an unshakeable “odour of sanctity” (151), despite the playwright-in-resi-

dence's attempts to reject some elements of both the Shakespearean and the Eliotic models? Oswald's career has yet to recapture the heights of his public profile at the Globe – no verse play of his has received a professional production in Britain in the current decade.

As for the Globe, though verse productions by Harrison and Maxwell have appeared at the venue under Dominic Dromgoole's directorship, and under Emma Rice's tenure, *Boudica* by Tristan Bernays, the three Oswald productions seem to me to have been the theatre's most sustained and committed engagement to dramatic verse as a contemporary literary practice. The venue's current artistic director, Michelle Terry, has promised to "reclaim and rediscover not only Shakespeare, but the work of his contemporaries, alongside new work from our current writers" (Brown). It remains to be seen if she will revisit Globe founder Mark Rylance's commitment, in 1998, to make "experiment[s] with new verse writing" a central piece of the theatre's strategy (Fallow 91).

If she does, however, Oswald's experiences in the course of producing his trilogy of new verse plays at Shakespeare's Globe suggests that any verse dramatist approaching the space will have lessons to learn not only from the venue's namesake – who, at the time, "dominated the place" and every "script discussion" in which Oswald was involved (Fallow 93) – but also from an earlier generation of commercially-successful verse dramatists in England, among them T. S. Eliot and Christopher Fry, and from Oswald himself, who summarised his nine years developing contemporary verse drama for the Globe as "a mostly pretty desperate and grinding apprenticeship which apprenticed me to write plays that no other theatre wants to stage" (Fallow 94).

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¹ All subsequent quotations from Tim Carroll are taken from this unpublished interview, which I conducted via telephone on 18 Jun. 2018.

Reimagined Historiographies on a Mnemonic Stage: Derek Walcott's *Drums and Colours*

Kerry-Jane WALLART

Abstract: The essay contends that in the post-plantation context of the Caribbean, verse drama is endowed with a mnemonic function aimed at retrieving the voices silenced by centuries of colonialism and slavery. With *Drums and Colours*, written to celebrate the Independence of the Federation of the West Indies, Derek Walcott pens a drama encompassing the whole post-Columbian History of the Caribbean. Far from reactivating nationalistic patterns of dominant historiography, the play deploys forms of dramatic memory challenging past forgetfulness with the progressive futurity of ritual and collective remembering.

Résumé : Cet essai défend l'idée que, dans le contexte post-plantationnaire de la Caraïbe, le théâtre en vers acquiert une fonction mnémotique permettant de faire entendre les voix réduites au silence par des siècles de colonisation et d'esclavage. Dans *Drums and Colours*, pièce écrite à l'occasion des célébrations de l'Indépendance de la Fédération des Indes Occidentales, Derek Walcott embrasse toute l'Histoire des Caraïbes à partir de 1492. Il ne s'agit pas, tant s'en faut, de réactiver des gestes nationalistes et d'encourager une historiographie dominante, mais bien de déployer des formes de mémoire théâtrale à même de résister à l'oubli. Cette écriture en vers vise un avenir paradoxal et en chantier, dont la clé se trouve du côté d'un art collectif du ressouvenir.

Keywords: Walcott, Black Atlantic, postcolonial, decolonial, memory

Mots-clés : Walcott, Atlantique Noir, postcolonial, décolonial, mémoire

Ce n'est pas, comme je l'ai longtemps avancé, l'effet d'une alternative sans fin entre la sincérité d'une parole à trouver et l'artifice d'une écriture exclusivement préoccupée de dresser ses remparts : c'est lié à la chose écrite elle-même, au projet de l'écriture comme au projet du souvenir. (Perec 62-63)

Decolonising the stage? The odd newness of verse

Often associated with an elitist European culture and the prevalence of written forms of literature rather than of performative and improvisational experiments, verse drama is actually fraught with emancipatory promises of political and social progress in the post-colonial world. Yeats's major contribution to the Celtic revival movement is a case-in-point. The Irish playwright's forays into a foundational drama for the independent nation have resonated outside Europe in the following decades, when decolonisation was both a political and a cultural concern. Such figures as Wole Soyinka in Nigeria, Athol Fugard in South Africa, Louis Esson and Jack Davis in Australia, Mohan Rakesh or Girish Karnad in India, have all associated freedom from the English yoke with renewed theatrical practices; but they have all included forms of epic, of poetry, and of mysticism (Carlson 46), in their respective experimentations. A marked return to ancient forms of drama, traceable both in extra-European and European cultures, has led them to including verse in their textual creations.

The fact that a large number of these postcolonial playwrights should have resorted to verse drama, as did Derek Walcott in the Caribbean, seems paradoxical at a time when agendas were focused on inventing new cultural forms for the independences. As a point of fact, "[m]any of the performance traditions outside the Western norms did not place the literary text at the centre of their experience" (Carlson 93). Part of the present endeavour is to formulate hypotheses around the fact but also the modalities of such a choice. This first

section lays the foundations of a tension between notions of the old and the new, and of the ways in which they might be reshuffled into a non-linear temporality which makes verse drama both an outdated form, and a promise of newness.

One lens through which to examine the re-emergence of verse drama in a postcolonial context is presented by Eugenio Barba's "theatre of roots", where modernity encounters tradition through the spatio-temporal distortions induced by colonialism. The linearity promoted by European reason has long hidden the accidents of cultural encounters but the latter have been exposed by such studies as Bhabha's *The Location of Culture*¹ and Appadurai's work on *scapes* and the ruptures of globalism (32 *seq.*). Verse could be associated with the civilising mission which the colonial propaganda, promoting the Bible and canonical English poetry, imposed – but from a non-Eurocentric point of view verse drama had appeared in a number of places, at a number of times and eras, without corresponding to any sort of (retrospective) teleology. A dialectic form pulled apart between the old and the new, Barba's theatre of roots "represents the force which causes us to change our horizons precisely because it roots us to a center" (Barba 128). The concept could usefully map out Derek Walcott's own dialectical relation to tradition and invention in the Caribbean and Walcott did comment on the importance of the art of Jerzy Grotowski,² whose *Towards a Poor Theatre* was not published before 1968 but who was already one of the key names in Western theatre in the late 1950s, when *Drums and Colours* was written and first performed. However, the comparison is bound to be limited by the distinct distrust which Barba had inherited from his collaborator and mentor, Grotowski, towards drama written by a single author. The "theatre of roots" inherently promotes non-text-based drama, or textual montage (Schechner 12-13).

Another option would be not to scale down the European element in verse drama and to see it instead as an element of creolisation among many others, in the context of the Black Atlantic negotiations of diverse literary and linguistic elements. Indeed, the specificities of

Caribbean cultural forms, be they colonial, postcolonial or decolonial, include the almost complete disappearance of pre-Columbian cultural forms³ and a resulting combination between African, European, and South East Asian languages and practices. This does not mean a lesser resistance to colonial forms of oppression, as pinpointed by Mignolo:

one crucial difference between decolonisation in the second half of the twentieth century and the same phenomenon in the Americas, but called instead “revolutions” and “independences”, is that in Asia and Africa the natives or indigenous were the ones who fought and managed to build their own nation-states. In the Americas, instead and with the exception of Haiti, all the revolutions and independences were in the hands of people of European descent (Creoles rather than Natives or Indigenous). (Mignolo 231)

The emphasis in *Drums and Colours* on subaltern European characters (Spanish sailors and women, a Jew fleeing the Inquisition, Pauline Leclerc and Madame de Rouvray, whose gendered submission echoes and re-casts the racial one endured by Haitian slaves and rebels) would corroborate such creolised take on the History of the Caribbean and account for Walcott’s borrowings from “high” forms of European culture, including the iambic pentameter. This creolisation is visible for example in a cue where Pauline mentions her having “toured the compounds” and tells Calixte-Breda: “So if I reek a little of the *parfum d’Afrique*” (DC 221).⁴ What starts like an iambic pentameter becomes, as soon as English turns into French, an alexandrine, while the internal rhyme (reek / *Afrique*) contributes to welding the two parts of the line, the English and the French prosodies, together.

I do not contend that either hypothesis is misleading but will pursue a less explored and somewhat less obvious line of investigation. Building upon Lars Eckstein’s work on the re-membling of a lost past in the Black Atlantic, this essay will connect verse drama and memory. Such, after all, has often been put forward by critics as the obvious origin of verse: the necessity to commit a text to memory was bound to be favoured by repetitions, rhymes, and a regular metrical pattern. The contention behind Eckstein’s book (concerned with the literary oeuvre of Caryl Phillips, David Dabydeen and Toni Morrison)

is that literature does remember and allows us, readers and spectators, to remember as well – especially when, as is the case for descendants of deported Africans and East Indians, no archival documents are there to bear witness to the past. The works of the writerly and readerly imagination then take over the voids of historiography. In *Drums and Colours*, memorisation is at stake on two grounds: a literal one (whereby the human mind is required to commit a text to memory) and a figurative one (through which figures and facts erased from a Eurocentric historiography can be excavated).

At the moment when the West Indies declare themselves independent they also reclaim their right to a site of anamnesis, or “rememory” to borrow Toni Morrison’s phrase (43). The necessity to create sites of togetherness beyond the trauma of four centuries of oppression, domination and, in most cases, enslavement, meant that drama was going to be foregrounded. Derek Walcott, who identified Homer, Dante, Shakespeare and Whitman as his literary mentors, was well aware of the necessity to open new forays into the practice of performative textualities when it came to founding a national, or regional, literature. In terms of genre, as is the case with the Martiniquan Aimé Césaire, one notices in his production a clear prevalence of poetry and drama, and of poetic drama; he also wrote essays but never any fiction. One reason might have to do with the possibilities of reception on an island where people’s ears are much more educated than their eyes and where culture survived orally despite the century-long ban on writing, reading, and literacy, for the enslaved. Another reason might derive from the prestige of poetic drama in terms of nation-building, and with its connection with the epic. These agendas are both fed by the ambition to invent a regional (or national) tradition.

Although I would like mostly to discuss *Drums and Colours* I will actually begin with a short discussion of another, later play, entitled *A Branch of the Blue Nile* (first performed 1983, published 1985), where verse is deployed in opposition to prose in a true Elizabethan fashion. The plot hinges on a troupe of actors who, in Port-of-Spain, Trinidad, are rehearsing *Antony and Cleopatra*: a play about the ‘Oriental’ other, also cast as the African, or the gypsy, as she was de-

scribed in Shakespeare (for an excellent overview of these stereotypical representations, see Ania Loomba's Norton edition). In this respect, Walcott's play can be seen as a postcolonial re-writing aligned with Césaire's *Une Tempête* (1969), where the Shakespearian verse drama corresponds to the hegemonic take on a difference construed by the West and whose constructedness can only be resisted from within, including formally.

Walcott's play is both writing back and with *Antony and Cleopatra*. *A Branch of the Blue Nile* displays the ambivalence about Europe which tore the playwright ever since his early poem entitled "A Far Cry from Africa" (CP 17-18). Chris, one of the actors, exclaims in exasperation:

You know I taught English as an ass, as an ass, an assistant master, with jacket and tie in them hot rooms? You know I did French? You know what they call this in Racine, Gavin? A *tirade*! *Tirade*! Well, I got fucking tired of all them Racinian and Corneillian tirades, when I would look outside over the boys' heads and see the hot sun, the glare, the dust, the traffic, the trees half dead with dust. (BBN 246-247)

The mention of Racinian and Corneillian tirades can function as an allusion to the plays which famously epitomised the rivalry between the two playwrights who brought seventeenth-century tragedy in French to perfection: Corneille's *Titus and Berenice* and Racine's *Berenice* (both first performed within a week's time in November 1670). The body of verse drama attached to the impossible marriage between a Roman conqueror and an Oriental queen addresses questions of political domination and cultural stereotypes not at all unlike those staged in *Antony and Cleopatra*, all of which echo Walcott's own reflection around the Haitian Revolution – which gets the lion's share of History re-writing in *Drums and Colours*.

The director of *A Branch of the Blue Nile* mocks those European conventions and constraints which were contemporary to the beginnings of English colonisation. On the other hand, he imbues some of Shakespeare's quotes with a new life, replacing the lines of low characters with a Trinidadian dialect and attitude of pride and carelessness, of protest and pretence. While Shakespeare's clown says, in prose,

“Truly I have him; but I would not be the party that should desire you to touch him, for his biting is immortal. Those that do die of it do seldom or never recover” (5.2.111), his Walcottian counterpart expresses the same ideas in the Trinidadian dialect which corresponds to the “low” characters of Shakespeare’s subplots: “Madam, I have him, but ‘tain’t go be me who go ask you handle him, because one nip from this small fellow and Basil your husband; this little person will make the marriage, in poison and in person, but the brides who go to that bed don’t ever get up” (*BBN* 262). As the director explains himself, “since in old Willy’s day the clowns spoke dialect, and since our dialect is so Jacobean, I felt quite justified” (*BBN* 268). I shall return to this perceived proximity between the Bard’s language and the West Indian idiolect but would like to insist here that the verse remains, in Walcott’s play, under the authority and authorship of the English canon; only the prose parts are rewritten. A tension emerges between the original version and the Caribbean re-writing, in an apparently clear case of the periphery writing back to the centre, righting its own past, in an unapologetically antagonistic fashion but from the marginal position of prose, not verse.

Verse versus nationalism

Due to its circumstantial programming during the festivities of Independence, *Drums and Colours* corresponds to a political agenda of nation-building. The play was commissioned and staged on the occasion of the creation of the Federation of the West Indies (1958-1962) – a short-lived nation, although no one knew it at the time, and while there was an immense hope in the capacity of the two larger islands, Jamaica and Trinidad, to integrate the smaller islands into an Anglophone Caribbean state. The play was performed as an official event during the inauguration. The question of nation-building became prominent after WWII and *Drums and Colours* was indeed tasked with initiating a national literary tradition, a cultural landmark. Its versified form would then recall the epic thrust of a Homer, a Virgil, a Chaucer, and a Whitman, in establishing a liter-

ary precedent which would be both prestigious and memorable, in all senses of the term. Seen in this light, Walcott's own attempt at historiography would appear as compromised with a repetition of a European gesture of foundational poetry. I contend in this section that the choice of verse drama corresponds instead to a radically anti-realistic, anti-naturalistic manoeuvre.

The play was first performed with more than a hundred actors, most of them unprofessional. This device reactivated the Greek sense that drama is an essentially collective art, gathering the city on stage in a performative art of togetherness. The play starts with Trinidadians wishing to put together a pageant for Carnival, so that what unfolds throughout seventeen scenes, an epilogue and a prologue, is an imaginative representation of the History of the Caribbean told by them: a play-within-the-play of 'Mas' (or Carnival). There is a number of Brechtian *tableaux* through which the drama gleans key moments: the first colonial encounters with the pre-Columbian population, the horrors of the Atlantic Slave Trade, the Haitian Revolution, the Morant Bay rebellion in 1865, in Jamaica, amidst a flurry of subplots staging maroon slaves in the island hills, or *mornes*.

Clearly, the attempt was to reclaim one's own past and to decolonise historiography. As Frantz Fanon pointed out, the hold of Empire is discursively retroactive: "Colonisation is not satisfied merely with holding a people in its grip and emptying the native's brain of all form and content. By a kind of perverted logic, it turns to the past of oppressed people, and distorts, disfigures and destroys it" (Fanon 210). A few years later, Chatterjee deconstructed the double movement of European nation-building, and its confiscation of such tenets (self-rule, modernity, secularity), in front of cultures construed as "other":

Nationalism sought to demonstrate the falsity of the colonial claim that the backward peoples were culturally incapable of ruling themselves in the conditions of the modern world. Nationalism denied the alleged inferiority of the colonised people; it also asserted that a backward nation could 'modernise' itself while retaining its cultural identity. It thus produced a discourse in which, even as it challenged the colonial claim to political

domination, it also accepted the very intellectual premises of ‘modernity’ on which colonial domination was based. (30)

Neil Lazarus’s landmark study, entitled *The Postcolonial Unconscious* (2011), actually argued that a large number of post-colonial states did nothing but mimic this nationalistic discourse. A side-line of Lazarus’s argument is that the imposed model of the West thwarted such collective political moments as the Bandung conference, producing an urge towards nationalism in the newly built nations. Seen in this light, verse drama might be seen as a distance taken from the colonial propaganda, its apparent realism, its discourse of seeming rationality – all of these being preferably translated through prose. I wish to suggest that in *Drums and Colours*, verse corresponds to a veering away from the pitfalls of nationalistic enterprises and their realistic illusion. Watching *Drums and Colours* throws the reader / spectator into a vortex of formal combinations and possible interpretations which recall / re-member but also redirect the historical episode of the Haitian revolution, the representation of which constitutes the most important part of Walcott’s own play.

In ways that echo James Baldwin’s *Blues for Mister Charlie*, where Richard is dead when the play opens but performs moments of his life throughout the action in moments of showing, not telling, *Drums and Colours* instantiates the destiny of characters whom we know are dead. This is made possible through other characters’ evoking and convoking them: the actors become figures both of the playwright, and of the audience, and all join in a space of unforgetting which abolishes the fourth wall. In the same ways in which Richard appears in flesh and blood on Baldwin’s stage, the mnemonic strategies deployed in *Drums and Colours*, through sonorities, orality, the presence of the chorus, contribute to the excavating of historical moments which had been left out of, or minimised in, the master narratives of colonial Caribbean History.

Drums and Colours allows silenced voices to emerge again through the incantation of verse. In the prologue, the chorus convokes Spanish sailors who, “fished from a drowned age, / Were simple men, obscure, anonymous” (123). This comes as the second part of a quatrain (ABAB)

where “age” rhymes with “stages” and “anonymous” with “course”: the retrieving of these ghostly presences goes hand in hand with the progress of a dramaturgical action. In this sense, the play is mnemonic and convokes a History of the Caribbean which runs against the grain of a Eurocentric modernity based upon power relations. Such reversal is also at play in this quote:

The fire’s shadows, magnified into myth, were those of the Jacobins of Haiti. They were Jacobean too because they flared from a mind drenched in Elizabethan literature out of the same darkness as Webster’s *Flaméino*, from a flickering world of mutilation and heresy. (Walcott 1998: 11)

The process of national unification, the Saint Lucian playwright’s desire to initiate a literature for his people, are operated through a time of carnival. Such literally “preposterous” (or non-chronological) periodicities were outlined by another Caribbean author, David Dabydeen, when he discovered English alliterative poetry:

Reading *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* was a startling moment. The sheer naked energy and brutality of the language, its ‘thew & sinew’, reminded me immediately of the Creole of my childhood. John of Trevisa, a fourteenth-century translator, described the alliterative poetry of the North of England as ‘harsh, piercing and formless.’ This quality of lawlessness and the primarily oral form of delivery bore a curious resemblance to Guyanese Creole. I began to see, albeit naively, the ancient divide between north and south in Britain, the Gawain poet standing in opposition to Chaucer in terms of a native idiom versus an educated, relaxed poetic line tending towards the form of the iambic pentameter. The north / south divide is of course evocative of the divide between the so-called Caribbean periphery and the metropolitan centre of London. (4)

For Dabydeen and Walcott, there is no perceived abnormality of verse. The natural tone of any regional brand of English will produce its own poetry, be it through the resistance of meters or the insistence of sounds. Derek Walcott has often contended that the diction of verse was spontaneous in the Caribbean – and *Omeros* (1991) would prove him right. What has been hailed as a *tour de force* has also been described by its author as a transcription of the Saint Lucian idiolect in its most congenial form: the rhymed hexameter. In an interview

he gave at the Sorbonne Nouvelle in 2006, Walcott explained how “A lot of the Caribbean Englishes are basically Elizabethan” (Dvorák 105).⁵ The mnemonic function of verse is therefore poised between Europeanness and Caribbeanness, not geared towards the fixity of an identity but on the contrary towards a process, which turns nation-building into something to experiment with and destabilise as one goes, performance after performance. The line break can be read as a rupture, a diversion from Europeanness, but also as a breath ensuring the return of the same, one line down.

Turning back: verse as re-membering

In my analysis of *Drums and Colours* I would like to “detour” through a possibly outdated dimension of the performativity of literature, that is to say, its ability to remember. It is no secret that verse finds its roots in orality and the need to commit stories to memory. Such a function takes on a distinctive meaning when deployed in islands where the long-standing and protracted up-rootedness provoked by the Middle Passage has all but erased personal and collective memory. Orality looms large in post-plantation cultures, and rhythm has been seen by critics as one of the ruling and overarching patterns in the Caribbean. Thus, the notions of entropy and of the machine have yielded together, in Benítez-Rojo’s landmark *The Repeating Island*, to the idea of polyrhythm. This entry into verse, and into memorisation, is visible in the Allegory of Memory convoked at the very beginning of *Drums and Colours*, in the prologue:

Before our actors praise his triumph, Time
Shows his twin faces, farce and tragedy;
Before they march with drums and colours by
He sends me, his mace bearer, Memory. (*DC* 122)

The rhyming of tragedy with memory might not be as significant as the fact that the first and third lines are regular iambic pentameters while lines two and four are metrically irregular. Their piling up of monosyllables call for a different diction, and call attention to the final dactyl, a meter retrieved from Ancient Greece. Here, Walcott

goes beyond the epitome of regularity in English verse to invent a new, more elemental, prosody. This was expressed by Césaire's own rejection of formal conventions in the name of authenticity:

Lire les poètes martiniquais, c'était comme compter sur vos doigts jusqu'à douze, et vous obteniez un alexandrin. Ils écrivaient des choses charmantes, qu'on appelle le *doudouisme*. Le surréalisme manifestait justement un refus de cette littérature. Ce mouvement nous intéressait, parce qu'il nous permettait de rompre avec la raison, avec la civilisation artificielle, et de faire appel aux forces profondes de l'homme. (27)

The conventions of verse drama are not only Shakespearian, they take us back to far earlier, to the Trojan cycle whose stories gave birth to Greek drama, centuries after Homer, who had already started dramatising his own epic material. Let us compare for instance scenes 1 and 2 in *Drums and Colours*.

COLUMBUS (*Rises, distracted*)

Oh, all the cruel patience of the long years,
The fawning humiliation before great princes,
The fears and terrors of the whale-threshed seas
Broke through my cloud now, with his cry of light! (144-145)

JEW (*Apart, praying*)

O God, rib me with Thy strength
As I embark across the whale-threshed water,
Because my days are swifter than a weaver's shuttle
And are spent without hope. (155)

The lines rely on formulaic set phrases which are strikingly reminiscent of Homer's own verse, and tie in with the intertextual dimension of mnemonic literature which Eckstein deemed central (43) in his discussion of re-membering across the Black Atlantic.⁶ The fact that the low and the powerful, the haves and the have-nots, the dominated and the dominating, Columbus and the Jew, should express the same whale / wail, speaks volumes about the collective dimension of the undertaken process of remembering. What is left for the community to hold as a common denominator is a sea, the very symbol of change and the flimsiness of human fate.

The sea becomes a stage for the drama to unfold, or be unremembered, in a number of passages, starting with this monologue uttered by Columbus:

I had hoped to open the green page of this sea
To be a book cartographers could read,
Let me be buried in the backwash of oblivion,
My bones unmarked, my grave a mystery
And some unlettered seastone be my tomb (145)

One seems to be taking things the wrong way around here, since literature is remembered more than it remembers.

While postcolonial theory attached itself to undermining the representations of the Other as an other, recent decolonial thought has concluded that any type of representation was doomed to be biased, and borrowed. Instead, the concept of enunciation has been favoured by such critics as Walter Dignolo in order to elaborate the means of language production which would be fully disengaged from power relations. A full-fledged adaptation of such a distinction still needs to be produced around issues of performance and drama but I would suggest here that the language of the stage is much closer to the 'enunciation' gesture, since the playwright's voice is never to be heard as such.

A form of collective enunciation is operated in the play, as when Yette works against the grain of the Afrocentric conception of creolisation which prevailed immediately after the independence of Caribbean islands, and recalls that the ethnic spectre is much wider:

Mano! Is Yette. I bring you more recruits. We got a Chinese cook, an East Indian tactician; now we have a preacher and a ruined planter. Attention, recruits. In about five minutes, if the Maroon commander like you, you might promote to the rank of generals, for that's the way things devise here, equal powers. (*Mano and the others emerge*) Your commander, Emmanuel Mano, sometimes known as Cudjoe, sometimes John Orr, sometimes Fedon, and various multicoloured aliases. They call he Calico; all he have left in his name is an antique Spanish coin that ain't worth much. And you there, put down the breadfruit and salute. (266-7)

The quote belongs to the “low” characters, the maroon slaves, and is therefore written in prose. However, both a rhyming and a metrical pattern appears in the musicality of Yette’s speech. The rhythm is clearly iambic, with entire phrases scanned as half-pentameters (“I bring you more recruits”, “We got a Chinese cook”, “They call he Calico”) or even entire pentameters (“an antique Spanish coin that ain’t worth much”, “And you there, put down the breadfruit and salute”). The sounds of the quote allow a number of internal rhymes to create a sense of echo in the passage (“preacher” / “planter”; “generals” / “powers”; “breadfruit” / “salute”). This act of remembering is no longer isolated or private. It becomes collective and ritualistic. What is remembered? The fact that descendants of African slaves do not constitute the entire Caribbean.

In *Drums and Colours*, Walcott proved to be visionary; like Wilson Harris, the Guyanese, although with very different aesthetics, the playwright suggests that the Caribbean is a truly global laboratory where Amerindians, Europeans (including Jews, often fleeing the Spanish and Portuguese inquisition), Africans, Asians, have formed a population and a culture. None of this means that there is a necessary consensus, quite the contrary – dissensus traverses the play. The language coined by Walcott here circulates, his lines are shared, in communal and formulaic blocks of textuality. I will now sketch some thoughts about how the play actually turns its back on all historiographies in order to sketch the future of the region, as a space, a stage, a time and a landscape.

Shaping the future: the invocations of verse

I would like here to go back to the question which Fanon’s previously quoted observation poses. What is the nature of his “profound research” which drives the new forms of visual and cinematic representation? Is it only a matter of unearthing that which the colonial experience buried and overlaid, bringing to light the hidden continuities it suppressed? Or is a quite different practice entailed - not the

rediscovery but the *production* of identity; not an identity grounded in the archaeology, but in the *re-telling* of the past?

As previously suggested, verse drama inevitably connotes a return to previous forms and texts, to a certain tradition of Anglophone theatre which goes back to Shakespeare at least. In other words, it is bound to be posited as a sign of, and gesture towards, European modernity. I will contend in this last section that the form of verse drama also shapes a future for the Caribbean, in *Drums and Colours*. This sense of futurity functions in the play as a line of flight in relation to entrenched linearities. This is operated in two different ways at least. The first one has to do with what Lars Eckstein calls “multi-directional memory”; the other one, with what Gilbert and Tompkins have written about, namely “metamorphic bodies” (231-217).

In this last part of the argumentation I would like to insist first upon the protracted and fragmented structure of the play *Drums and Colours*. The playwright indicates this himself in his initial note to the published version:

The play, fully performed, runs well over three hours; however, the scenes are so arranged that interested producers can excise shorter, self-contained plays from the main work, for example, the story of Paco, the El Dorado theme in the Raleigh scenes, the betrayal of Toussaint, the relationships with M. Calixte-Breda (in which the young Anton becomes the central figure), and the escapades of Pompey. (113)

Although this is not at all unusual on stage – how many spectators, for instance, have seen a full production of *Hamlet*? – I would suggest that it comes at cross-purposes with the very idea of rewriting History. In the nineteenth-century European tradition of national and nationalistic History-telling which largely derived from Hegelian thinking, linearity was required. It warranted consistency, rationality, and provided hints of teleology into the bargain. The fragmentation that Derek Walcott premises and promises corresponds instead to a choice of multi-directional memory whereby some episodes can be discarded without imperilling the overall structure and purpose. By openly addressing the unstable duration of plays, the author engages

with rhythmical effects that can be compared to how a line, in a poem or a play, invites either protraction and deferral, or precipitation and curtailing.

The other point I want to make about the futurities actually projected in *Drums and Colours* functions through the mutability of the characters on the stage. Far from characterising the historical figures, the playwright toys with a wide range of blurring strategies. One of them is the recourse to the trickster figure, a ubiquitous device in Caribbean cultures at the crossroads between the European carnivalesque and the West African Ananse / Anancy. It is precisely this figure, this 'empty' value which can mutate and morph, which Gilbert and Tompkins use as the paradigm of bodily mutability and character metamorphosis:

Shape-shifting, unbounded, timeless, and indestructible, the trickster is an ideal character through which to present the theatricalised body of the post-colonial subject. In performance, trickster transformations often structure the renewal of both the fictional community, and, potentially, the audience. Moreover, such transformations challenge conventional paradigms of spectatorship as the appearing and disappearing trickster traverses the stage, occupying all areas physically and psychically, in order to elude visual reification. (235)

What is engineered here is a recreation of something lost, not the period before the Middle Passage, but the round but open shape of the barrack-yard, where people would gather in the evening in order to tell, and listen to, stories. In this respect, verse operates like a physical space of togetherness which ruptures linearity, a visible shape of the community gathered not in the round, trapped as in a hold, but in a baroque fold where a nation, or nations, could indeed be born and endlessly reinvented.

As a form, verse drama takes us away from nostalgia and closer to futurity. What Lars Eckstein allows us to hear is the repetition heard in 'remembering', a repetition of something which never happened. In fact, the Atlantic Slave Trade is the epitome of the event which cannot be remembered: slaves lost their names because they were considered

“things” or property; they were chosen young so that they might work better and longer; they were snatched from areas where social turmoil was prevailing; they were bought by masters keen on not gathering slaves from the same region, speaking the same language, belonging to the same religion. Families were torn apart, social ties were frowned upon, and few archives were constituted, in other words everything was done for forgetfulness to rule.

The form of verse drama may be the most extreme site of ambiguity, as it necessarily conjures the Shakespearian tradition, and as it constitutes a form of collective remembering; it asserts and subverts legacy at once. We should not underestimate the importance of the act of imaginative rediscovery which this dialectical conception of a rediscovered, existential identity entails. Hidden histories have played a critical role in the emergence of many of the most important social movements of our time - feminist, anti-colonial and anti-racist, and the historiography offered up by Derek Walcott gleans such micro-histories. The European archetype of selfhood is, I argue, radically shunned in favour of a collective agency within the expanding and fluctuating Caribbean spaces described in *Drums and Colours*. Any historiographic essentialism is re-cast by the postcolonial and the transcultural, replacing being with becoming and enunciating the ethical mandate of decolonial playwrights. In *Drums and Colours*, Derek Walcott disposes of the realistic conventions which were still largely attached to the Anglophone stage at a date when the likes of Samuel Beckett were only starting to hack at the mid-century “well-made-play.” This ought not to be relegated to a subversive writing back of “prosaic” colonial narratives but must be connected also to the ethical predicament of the slave-master dialectics which was going to be recast by Homi Bhabha’s theories. This reversibility bears the future of any literary form: “We talking Shakespeare like ‘rangatang’ people... And vice versa” (*BBN* 244).

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¹ See "Articulating the Archaic: Cultural Difference and Colonial Nonsense", 175-198.

² See "The tradition that is very strong in the theater gets its vitality not from the finish and reality of Realism, it gets it out of another source: a primal source. And a lot of Western directors return to that source, people like Peter Brook or Jerzy Grotowski, they go back to that power of narration that is there in the

presence of the storyteller or the story being told by the dance and the bodies and the music that's happening. The theater that is poor has a greater chance of being imaginative than the theater that is rich." (Walcott 1996: 276-277).

³ "The invasion of Europeans in the Americas resulted in a massive genocide of the indigenous population, leading to a decline from 54 million people in the Americas in 1492 to approximately 6 million in 1650, a result of murder, enslavement, famine, and disease" (Yusoff 31).

⁴ *Drums and Colours* will hereafter be abbreviated as *DC*; *A Branch of the Blue Nile* as *BBN*; *Collected Poems* as *CP*.

⁵ He made this comment about his own translation of a passage in Césaire's *Cahier d'un Retour au Pays Natal*, "Au bout du petit matin", translated by him as "Fore day morning."

⁶ For the echoes of Homer, see Wallart.

The “Roughening Up of the Utterance” or “It’s Not All Mountains and Sheep and Emily Dickinson”: How Contemporary Practitioners Test Boundaries of Verse Drama

Kasia LECH

Abstract: The start of a new millennium has brought about a resumed interest in verse as a theatrical language through which to engage with contemporary audiences. This essay engages with works in verse and hybrid forms created between 2009 and 2019 and presented predominantly in Ireland and the UK. The discussion stretches across a wide selection of dramatic texts and theatrical performances that test the boundaries of verse drama and its traditions in English-language theatre. These works use verse and verse-like forms, mixing them with crude language, slam-poetry, Hip-Hop, and opera to create a platform for individual, generational, and class stories as well as responses to local and global politics. Verse also appeals to artists engaged in trans-media and intermedia practices that exceed the boundaries of theatre. The works presented draw from opportunities that have arisen from English as a global language in the context of its histories, increased mobility of people, tensions between local and global, digital media, and various cultural traditions. Through text and performance analysis, the essay argues for abandoning the exclusivity of verse drama and looking at verse drama in the broader context of the revived interest of contemporary theatre in verse and its hybrid forms.

Résumé : Le début du nouveau millénaire a été accompagné d’un regain d’intérêt pour le vers comme langue théâtrale qui permet d’impliquer les spectateurs d’aujourd’hui. Cet essai s’intéresse à des œuvres en vers et des formes hybrides créées entre 2009 et 2019 et présentées principalement en Irlande et au Royaume-Uni. La discussion inclut une large sélection de textes dramatiques et de performances théâtrales qui testent les limites du théâtre en vers et ses traditions sur la scène anglophone. Ces œuvres utilisent le vers et des formes qui s’en rapprochent, les mélangeant avec une langue crue, le slam, le

Hip-Hop, et l'opéra pour créer une plateforme propice aux histoires individuelles, générationnelles et de classe, et offrir des réponses aux politiques locales et mondiales. Le vers attire aussi les artistes engagés dans des pratiques transmédiales et intermédiales qui dépassent les frontières du théâtre. Les œuvres présentées s'inspirent d'opportunités apparues grâce à l'anglais comme langue mondiale dans le contexte de ses histoires, de la mobilité accrue de son peuple, de tensions entre le local et le global, des média numériques et de diverses traditions culturelles. A travers l'analyse de pièces et de performances, l'essai suggère qu'il faut abandonner l'usage exclusif du vers au théâtre et regarder le théâtre en vers dans le contexte plus large du regain d'intérêt pour le théâtre contemporain en vers et ses formes hybrides.

Keywords: verse, theatre, Hip-Hop, transmedia, global English

Mots-clés : Vers, théâtre, Hip-Hop, transmédia, anglais mondial

Theatre in its early days existed in a strong relationship with verse, and this bond bore much fruit in the form of verse dramas – the plays in which most of the dialogue is written in verse. This cultural tie between verse and theatre survived for hundreds of years until, as pointed out by Dennis Donoghue, the eighteenth-century “rationals” started weakening it by prioritising the flexibility, freedom, and naturalness of prose (11). With the Romantic poets isolating their “closet drama” or “dramatic poems” from the theatre while the stylistic offspring of technological development, realism and naturalism, banned verse as the “language of the Gods” (Ibsen 269) from the stage, the nineteenth century strained the tie between verse and theatre further. Many of the twentieth century’s theatre practitioners seemed to adhere to Ibsen’s idea that “verse has been most injurious to the art of drama” (374) and a theatre artist “should be unwilling to take a verse into his [sic] mouth” (367). For many English-language

stages, verse drama became “an anomaly” (Morra 1) or even a dead language for theatre (Donoghue 13-14).

However, the start of a new millennium has brought about a resumed interest in verse as a theatrical language through which to engage with contemporary audiences. This essay discusses how a new generation of theatre practitioners uses verse and hybrid forms in a wide selection of dramatic texts and theatrical performances that test the boundaries of verse drama and its traditions in English-language theatre. My focus is on works created between 2009 and 2019, presented predominantly in Ireland and the UK, to show the density of innovation. This new theatre uses verse and verse-like forms, mixing them with crude language, slam-poetry, hip-hop, rap, and opera to create a platform for individual, generational, and class stories as well as responses to local and global politics. These works, often written by the same person who performs them, embrace the vernacular through formal language, bringing about various cultural tensions carried by English as a global language. Verse also appeals to artists engaged in transmedia and intermedia practices that exceed the boundaries of theatre. The works presented in the current essay make an exciting case for abandoning the exclusivity of verse drama, and looking at verse drama in the broader context of the revived interest of contemporary theatre in verse and in verse and its hybrid forms.

The two quotes in the title come from Seamus Heaney and Stefanie Preissner, respectively. Heaney needs no introduction. The context of his comment is the criticism he encountered for his playing with iambic patterns in *Death of Naturalist* and *Door into the Dark* (Morrison 18-19; Mathias 19) in order to explore tensions between the metrical and rhetoric stress (Hall 48-54) and, as Heaney himself described it, the “roughening up of the utterance” (Heaney 40). Preissner is an Irish writer and performer known for representing Corkonian millennial female experiences of post-Celtic Tiger Ireland in her hip-hop and rap-derived verse-plays and acclaimed TV series *Can't Cope, Won't Cope*. Her statement (2015: 163) is about the damaging association of verse and poetry with high culture. Together these quotes highlight

a need to challenge ideas on verse drama in English-language theatre that, for a long time, was dominated by Anglo-English traditions and by interlinks between verse and poetry. The next two paragraphs, perhaps not unproblematically, bring together different cultural, historical, and discipline-specific issues that verse drama connotes and that the practices discussed in the current essay challenge.

There has been a lot of confusion and tension concerning the terminology used to describe plays written in verse. Such categorising terms include: poetic drama, dramatic poetry, dramatic verse, and so on. The tensions keep reappearing in critical works on verse drama in English (Donoghue 3; Hinchliffe 192; Leeming 19-22; Morra 1-6). Arguably, they partly arise from the complex relationship between verse and poetry itself and from the conflicted formalist and essentialist perspectives on verse, prose, and poetry underlain by the question “whether all verse is poetry or all poetry is in verse” (Brogan 1346-1347). Verse drama’s “identity problem” causes it to be often perceived as something “slowly woven from pastel shades of twee” (Haydon 2011) and as distinct from contemporary practices and experiences (Morra 5-6).

Another issue with verse drama’s identity in English-language theatre is the historical domination of Anglo-English traditions and their consequences. In this case, they include William Shakespeare and Elizabethan blank verse as a frame through which verse dramas are interpreted and experienced (Morra 6; Thacker 18; Boyle and Johnston 12). This link with the iambic metre – “the most pervasive” of the metres in English literature (Adams 37) – is presented as the most natural rhythm for English language or even human speech (e.g. Gibson 4; Berry 53; Aughterson 1; Maxwell). However, even if one considers only the English language, its global status and the diversity of accents that thereby exist within it, it is very difficult to uphold such a claim. It is equally difficult not to link it with certain ethno-linguistic perspectives that the standard British-English (in particular) or American-English are norms from which other Englishes derive or which they abuse (Kachru and Nelson 14-20).

A first example of a theatre artist testing the context explained above can be found in the afore-mentioned Preissner who structures her verse plays like a hip-hop or rap song. Her *Our Father* (2011) and *Solpadeine is My Boyfriend* (2012) focus on millennial responses to socio-political and personal changes: the economic crisis, emigration, and death. In performances of *Our Father*, the beat of drums by Josephine Linehan highlights and intensifies the rhythm of rap-verse and performs the heartbeats of the characters (2015: 164). In both plays, rhymes perform the complex relationship between the past and present: they are “a sign of escapism (into drugs, denial, emigration), but also a result of this escapism” facilitating “the performance of the pain that goes beyond any form of verbal expression” (Lech 2015: 161). Preissner performed in both plays. In *Our Father*, she adopts the role of Ellie who struggles to start the story of her mother’s death because, apparently, it is difficult to rhyme “purple”: “If I had dyed them [socks] blue or green or red, I could say true or seen or dead but I didn’t. I fucking dyed them purple!” (2011a). In *Solpadeine*, the unnamed character says that “happiness never rhymes” (2012a) and, as the story unravels, the audience catches on that the rhyming structures link to addiction and to painkillers and, in both plays, shield from the pain.

The mixture of formal structures and crude language as a platform on which to perform painful stories also characterises the slam-poetry inspired works by the Irish Neil Watkins and the English Kate Tempest. In his semi-autobiographical *The Year of Magical Wanking* (2011), Watkins, paraphrasing both René Descartes and Hamlet, confesses: “I wank, therefore I slam” (2012: 293). This frames what starts as a performative confession and becomes an interrogation of his identity in the context of abuse, sexuality, porn addiction, HIV, and the Catholic Church:

Great Spirit and Great Mystery hear my prayer.
 Bless all the beings gathered in this room.
 I bid your tastebuds welcome to my womb.
 This is my truth. I bare my fruit. Let’s share. (2012: 293)
 (...)

You're not supposed to touch a kid down there.
I trusted him and I looked up to him.
I liked him touching me. Now that's the sin.
I liked it. And I wanted more. So there. (2012: 310)

In the first section, verse highlights the convention of the prayer and, through the womb-room rhyme, queers one's perception of Watkins as the reference to his womb contrasts his looks that connote patriarchal masculinity. Watkins wears a beard and is dressed in a suit; he has two warrior streaks on his cheeks. In the second quote, the inaccurate rhyming pattern links "sin" with "him" – an unnamed oppressor – and repeats "there", highlighting the inability to name both the perpetrator and male sex organs that the first "there" signifies. This is particularly striking in a piece that, on other occasions, embraces blasphemy and bluntness of vulgar vocabulary, which highlights here the sense of shame that the victim of sexual violence carries.

Tempest, one of the Poetry Book Society's Next Generation Poets 2014, mixes the Greek tragedy conventions of Chorus and unity of time in *Wasted* (2011) with hip-hop rhythms and several "fuck it" exclamations to express the fear of decision-making and the pain of wasted dreams of three South-Londoners in their twenties. The final Chorus confronts the audience with its call: "Life wants you – it beckons – makes itself immense – / Respect it – take it in your arms, / Connect and face it" (2013: 56); in the show the lines are directed at the spectators. In performances of *Wasted*, the presence of microphones emphasises that text and its rhythms are the main carriers of meaning; the scenography is minimal: cardboard boxes and projections. The microphones and minimal scenography also appear in Tempest's more recent play *Hopelessly Devoted* (2013). Here verse-poetry is performed to beat music as a platform for voices of young female prisoners who have "nothing / But locked doors" (2015: 3). In *Hopelessly Devoted*, a young female prisoner signs up for a singing and song writing course and through it finds her way towards personal freedom.

Unknown, I live with you by The Airport Society (2018) presents parallel stories of journeys through writing towards empowerment.

This mix-media installation directed by Krystian Lada is based on poems in verse by Afghan female writers: Freshta, Fattemah AH, Meena Z., and Roya. The poets created these works during clandestine (under the regime of the Taliban) creative writing workshops organised by the Afghan Women's Writing Project; the participants of the workshop translated them from Dari into English. Lada decided to leave the "linguistic awkwardness" (2019) of these translations that bring a foreignising effect to the production. In *Unknown*, the verse-poems are spoken and sung – to music by Katarzyna Głowicka – by opera singers including international star Małgorzata Walewska and transgender singer Lucia Lucas. They also physically perform acts of violence. For example, Lucas, while singing, performs a series of movements that suggest she is raping a female body lying on a table. The unnamed body later gains the voice of a victim of a landmine explosion as Raehann Bryce-Davis – standing next to the table – speaks Freshta's poem:

In the hospital I asked my mom:
Is it possible
That my legs and my hands will grow again? (2018)

The political activism of *Unknown* emerges in the stories of oppression and resistance that the poems and voices carry, begging: "Before I'm forced to / Bury my work. / Let me write my last poem" (Roya 2018). It also arises from *Unknown*'s comment on the present through, as Agata Araszkiewicz reflects, "(c)onfronting a typically Western 'high-art' music form with the power of resistance to the fundamentalist, religious retrotopia – which literally realises the fundamental patriarchal idea of inferiority and serfdom of women" (2019). A similar tension arises from the verse form, associated with high art, and the "linguistic awkwardness" of the poems' Englishes, to quote Lada. In doing so, *Unknown* significantly contributes to the works that, as Lisa Fitzpatrick puts it, dismantle "a set of culturally embedded beliefs about women, men, and sexuality" shifting our understanding of oppression against women (253).

Connecting verse with different media and juxtaposing verse forms with global Englishes is a significant trend in contemporary verse

works for theatre. I will first focus on the latter. In 2007, Irish theatre company Gúna Nua worked with actors based in Ireland but originating from Nigeria, Slovakia, India, Moldova, France, and Ireland itself. The aim was to devise the verse drama *Urban Poems* by giving voice to “the new generation of immigrants who have decided to make Ireland their home” (48). In 2011, Polish Theatre Ireland, formed to intertwine Polish and Irish theatre traditions, devised *Chesslaugh Mewash* composed of Czesław Miłosz’s verse poetry in Polish, English, Lithuanian, French, Irish, and Slovak. Miłosz’s verse was a platform to explore transnational identities in relation to globalisation and social networks.

Another example of verse expressing identities that escape simple geographical or cultural boundaries is Inua Ellams’s *The 14th Tale* directed by Thierry Lawson and first presented at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival in 2009 and in 2010 at the UK’s National Theatre. The one-man show performed by Ellams is written in free verse and tells about Ellams’s growing up in Nigeria, UK, and Ireland but also links Ellams to his ancestors:

I’m from a long line of trouble makers,
of ash skinned Africans, born with clenched fists
and a natural thirst for battle, only quenched by
breast milk. They’d suckle as if the white silk sliding
between gums were liquid peace treaties written
from mums. Their small thumbs would dimple
soft mounds of brown flesh, goose-pimpling chests
till the ceasefire of sleep would creep into eyes. (2015: 7)

The same lines open Ellams’s later performance *An Evening with an Immigrant*, that premiered in July 2016 at the Soho Theatre in London. This production – made from poetry in verse accompanied by Ellams’s transnational memories connected to each poem – was performed just after the Brexit referendum. In it, Ellams challenges the dichotomy of native versus foreign and broadens the geopolitical and cultural boundaries of the UK (Lech 2019).

It is not only new verse works that explore issues of transnationalism but also innovative adaptations of classical texts. *The Other Solos*,

directed and produced by Spanish-British actor Paula Rodriguez and presented on YouTube in 2017, is a case in point. And it also highlights the appeal verse has for transmedia and intermedia practices. The project was developed “in response to recent world events and the increasing sentiment against migration in the media and Western society” (*The Other Solos* 2017). While the artists do not place their work in a specific country, performers are all UK-based and the project premiered in June 2017, the first anniversary of the Brexit referendum. Therefore, it is difficult not to read this as its immediate context. *The Other Solos* consists of six Shakespearean monologues from *The Tempest*, *Henry VIII* (a play in collaboration with John Fletcher), *Coriolanus*, *The Merchant of Venice*, *Sir Thomas More* (a play believed to have been written by Anthony Munday and Henry Chettle and revised by Shakespeare),¹ delivered by actors born in Spain, France, Israel, Denmark, Greece, and Argentina. All monologues are in iambic pentameter, raise the issues of migration and power, and speak to contemporary politics. Many are public speeches, for example, Coriolanus’s and Thomas More’s addresses to the citizens of Rome (Act III, Scene III) and the Londoners (Act II, Scene IV) respectively, or Katherine of Aragon’s speech (Act II, Scene IV). The actors do not neutralise their accents but stick to the iambic pattern and, in general, to the verse line divisions. By doing so, they highlight different linguistic and political layers and tensions by performing “the most pervasive” (Adams 37) rhythm of the English language with foreign accents, including the immediate political context of the project. This is particularly striking in the case of Katherine’s monologue by Rodriguez.

Katherine in the play insists on speaking English (Act III, Scene I) rather than Latin as a “good foreigner” who fulfilled her “primary civic responsibility” and learned English (Pennycook 82). When performed by a native English-speaker, her foreignness disappears even further, and her learning of English becomes a tool for “naturalising” her in the process fuelled by assumptions that native cultures have nothing to learn from foreign cultures (Pennycook 82). In contrast, Rodriguez’s performance highlights the foreignness of Katherine and the global

quality of English-language, shifting contexts of Katherine's agency. Katherine, as Hero Chalmers argues, champions open politics and is central to *Henry VIII* revealing the manipulation of facts that serves the private gain over the law and the country (Chalmers 264-265). Rodriguez's Katherine by marking tensions between foreign and native brings these issues closer to the Brexit debate on foreignness and Western debate on migrants in general. To paraphrase Peter Stallybrass and Allon White (5), the immigrants' voices have been "peripheral" in the Brexit referendum and discourses surrounding it, however their foreignness was "symbolically central".² Rodriguez's Katherine is an example of how in *The Other Solos* performers use verse to claim their right to speak about migration on the public stage, their agency over shaping the culture of the UK, and their co-ownership of English language and its traditions. This is enhanced by verse rhythm marking the public quality of the speech (Attridge 12), further emphasised here by the medium of social networks. Almost two years after its premiere, *The Other Solos* has reached over 17,000 viewers.

Australian Omar Musa and Irish Emmet Kirwan are other artists who work in verse across a variety of media. Their work is also connected through their exploration of young masculinities. Musa's *Since Ali Died*, in hip-hop and rap verse, looks at his growing up as a boy with Malaysian and Muslim heritage in Queanbeyan, challenging Australia's image as a welcoming, equal society: "all need not apply / if you're black, brown, Muslim, woman, queer, smart, proud." The one-man-show was adapted in 2018 from his 2017 music album under the same title. Kirwan's *Heartbreak*, recipient of the Irish Film and Television Academy's Best Short Film Award of 2017, tells the story of a teenage mother. Kirwan wrote it and performed it exclusively in verse. *Heartbreak* started as a theatrical project, and when it was released on YouTube, it attracted almost a million views in the first two days (McNeice). Kirwan writes in slang in rap and spoken-word form, and arranges this into verse lines; as he says, the format of lines is to "help the actor or reader [...] reproduce the prosody and performance style of the play's spoken-word and rap elements" (2016b: 4). His 2014 *Dublin Oldschool* is a two-hander play focused on Jason

and Daniel: two brothers from Tallaght, an area commonly associated with the working class and home to one of the highest crime rates in Dublin. It premiered at the Dublin Fringe Festival, in 2017 was invited to the National Theatre in London, and in 2018 released as a movie that largely adopted its verse form.

In *Dublin Oldschool*, verse rhythm is a platform for underrepresented experiences of Dublin's working-class, their city, its stories and soundscape. The rhythm changes, as I argued elsewhere (Lech 2018: 604-606), when Jason's experience becomes more heightened, mostly through drugs; and in doing so verse highlights Jason's drug-fuelled escape from reality and seeing himself as just one of the "fucking ejits" with "nothing going for [them]" (Kirwan 2016a: 61). In the performance by Emmet Kirwan and Ian Lloyd Anderson, verse also evokes the spaces and soundscape of Dublin since from the start the performers make a reference to Dublin street rappers through the rhythm, the actors' accents, and their movements and manner of "rapping". At the beginning of the performance standing on a black stage with two microphones and torches directed at the audience, they say they must first "check the vernacular" (instead of sound-check) and their "Dublin diction", testing the audience's ability to understand and tuning them into Dublin accent and slang.

Escapism links Kirwan's work to Preissner, but its use of verse as an urban rhythm and the voice of young working-class males brings it close to Hull's Niall Ransome. Ransome developed *FCUK'D* (2017) from a monologue he wrote for his drama school performance where he trained as an actor (2017c). It tells the story of two brothers in the care system running away from their council estate. Ransome's verse not only carries their story but also creates the soundscape of Hull:

These are the streets of young mams,
Pushing prams.
Fourteen's the dream for the new wave pregnancy plan.
Tight tracksuits and tops we nick from shops.
Zip ups and Reeboks.
Can you lend us 20p?

You looking at me for?
Cans of Stella and bags of Quavers litter the floor from misbehaviors [sic].
Lend us a cig,
Be a mate.
Flags remind us why Britain's so Great. (2017b: 11)

Ransome directed the production in a performance in which Will Mytum (later replaced by George Edwards) delivers this speeding up with every line, creating an overwhelming effect of a busy street and its noise. The rhyming scheme, connecting words and senses, is the main point of orientation for the audience, especially given that the play is performed on a bare stage. The tendency to use minimal scenography in new verse works (Ransome, Kirwan, Tempest, Preissner, Watkins, Ellams, *The Other Solos*) on the one hand reveals the power of verse to create a soundscape that fills the space. On the other hand, it strengthens the links between verse and underprivileged voices as it is an aesthetic tool for the artists working in precarious contexts of low-funded projects.

The majority of the works discussed so far, to different degrees, explore the connection between music and verse challenging Western traditions of “jealousies and rivalries” between the two genres (Black 10). This is of course not a new phenomenon. The singing and dancing Choruses of Attic tragedy, the theatre of W.B. Yeats or, inspired by Yeats, the theatre of Ted Hughes (Leeming 197-198) are probably the most obvious examples. However, the new verse works interact with music through multiple and diverse cultural references that they play on, juxtapose, and confront. Rap and hip-hop as tools for exploring Irish identity in Preissner's and Kirwan's works is one example. Another is the 2018 collaboration between artists Lady Sanity and Stanza Divan and UK-based academics Noah Birksted-Breen and Rajinder Dudrah aimed at developing a hip-hop theatre version of Ivan Viripaev's *Oxygen*, translated from Russian by Sasha Dugdale. *Ancient Rain*, on the other hand, is the 2016 collaboration between Australian artist Paul Kelly and Irish singer-actress Camille O'Sullivan that mixes rhythms of Irish poetry in verse (from W.B. Yeats and Seamus Heaney to Enda Wyley) with their Irish and Australian accents, and music to

perform multiple characters and search for “new music theatre work” (Dublin Theatre Festival 9).

In these new works, rather than being a phenomenon tied to past experiences (Morra 6; Aston and Savona 26), verse offers opportunities to revisit distant and recent history to challenge its discourses. Verse musicals excel in that, showcasing their political potential for which Warren Hoffman argues (12-13). The most obvious example here is Lin-Manuel Miranda’s 2015 *Hamilton* (another actor for whom verse became a platform towards writing plays). While Miranda’s aim to tell “a story about America then, told by America now” (Weinert-Kendt) does not achieve its full potential due to his stereotypical portrayal of females (Wolf 167), it does manage to deconstruct the WASP-ness of the mainstream discourses of the United States’ history. To do that, Miranda uses the audiences’ familiarity with “racially biased history” and challenges it through a radical choice to re-tell it in hip-hop verse and with a cross-racial cast (Styrt 14).

In Ireland, Arthur Riordan’s works are another example of musicals in verse and their political application. Riordan’s works facilitate the dialogue between the past and present. From 2004, *Improbable Frequency* explores the complexities of Irish neutrality during World War II and its relations and attitudes towards both the UK and Germany. *The Train* – that premiered in September 2015 just a few months after the Marriage Equality Referendum – looked at Ireland’s journey to equality. It told the story of the 1971 protest by forty-seven women who embarked on a journey from Dublin to Belfast to buy contraceptives, not fully legal in Ireland until 1993 (Ranelagh 296).

This essay discussed how contemporary theatre practitioners apply verse and its hybrid forms to new theatrical works that test the boundaries of verse drama and its traditions in English-language theatre. The works presented here drew from opportunities that had arisen from English as a global language in the context of its histories, increased mobility of people, tensions between local and global, digital media, and various cultural traditions. The latter underlay their search for closer creative links between verse drama and music drama through hip-hop,

rap, opera, and musical theatre. Many works discussed were written and performed by the same person. They might be actors turning to writing plays to take control over their creative destiny, explore their own complex identity, or give voice to a larger – and often underrepresented – community. However, the performers might also be music artists or poets reaching through hip-hop or rap to theatre as a new platform for their artistic voice. Arising from it is the fact that the verse works performed in theatre are adapted from or into other media or even exist across different platforms (like *Dublin Oldschool*), reaching broader audiences. In this sense, the practitioners that the essay discussed test boundaries not only of verse drama but also of theatre and, at the same time, make a compelling case for the potential of both.

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¹ It is Thomas More's monologue from ACT II, SCENE IV which is attributed to Shakespeare.

² See also Lech 2019.

Verse Drama Elsewhere: *Páncreas*

Patxo TELLERÍA (translated from Spanish by Claire Hélié¹)

Abstract: Are the questions raised by verse drama specific to British productions? To answer this question, I asked a few playwrights from other cultural areas to tell me about their experience, and this text by Patxo Tellería was the most stimulating. Patxo Tellería is a Basque playwright, actor, director who wrote *Páncreas* in 2015, a verse play about three friends, one of whom is to receive a pancreas transplant, another who has planned to commit suicide to escape from the decrepitude of old age, and the last one who wants to play the role of the go-between. The play was first performed in Basque at the Teatro Arriaga in Bilbao by the TARTEAN Teatrao Company, before being translated into Castilian by Tellería and played at the Centro Dramático Nacional in Madrid. Among the 30 plays written by Tellería, *Páncreas* is the only one in verse. This text, especially written for this issue of *Coup de Théâtre*, sheds light on the differences and similitudes in the treatment of verse drama in two different cultures.

Résumé : Les problématiques soulevées par le théâtre en vers sont-elles spécifiques à la production britannique ? Pour répondre à cette question, nous nous sommes tournés vers des dramaturges d'autres aires culturelles pour recueillir leur retour d'expérience, et nous avons retenu cette proposition de Patxo Tellería. Patxo Tellería est un dramaturge, acteur, metteur en scène basque qui a écrit en 2015 *Páncreas*, une pièce en vers sur trois amis, l'un qui doit recevoir une greffe de pancréas au plus vite, un autre qui veut se suicider pour échapper à la décrépitude de l'âge, le dernier qui joue les entremetteurs. La pièce a d'abord été jouée en basque au Teatro Arriaga de Bilbao et interprétée par la compagnie TARTEAN teatroya, avant d'être traduite par Tellería en castillan et d'être jouée au Centro Dramático Nacional de Madrid. Parmi la trentaine de pièces qu'il a écrites, *Páncreas* est la seule en vers. Cette proposition, rédigée spécialement pour ce numéro de *Coup de Théâtre*, nous a paru intéressante en ce qu'elle montrait les différences

et les ressemblances dans le traitement du théâtre en vers dans deux cultures différentes.

Keywords: Patxo Tellería, *Páncreas*, verse drama, Basque, Castilian

Mots-clés : Patxo Tellería, *Páncreas*, théâtre en vers, basque, castillan

I started wondering why theatre is not always written in verse a while ago. I thought of some reasons, but all unsatisfactory.

First reason: “*Verse drama sounds old-fashioned.*” It is natural that this should be the case, since all the verse plays that are staged belong to another time, it is theatrical archaeology. However, such an idea can be dismantled. Verse, on the contrary, as the language expressed with rhythm and rhyme, is not outdated at all. In fact, many of the songs we sing and love, whether in Basque, Castilian or English, are written in verse, a literary means that, when used well, brings beauty to the language, or as any business management coach would say, “added value”. Verse is a rising value in many cultural environments. Of course, that is the case in the Basque-speaking culture. And nobody can ignore the fascination that rhymed language provokes in new urban generations around the world in the wake of the emerging phenomenon of rap. Verse is not old-fashioned. What is outdated is the theatrical repertoire. For the simple reason that no one writes theatre in verse anymore. It is like going round in circles.

Second reason: “*Verse drama is difficult to understand.*” And to argue for this, we just have to read or listen to theatrical texts in verse, whether by Tirso, Lope or Calderón. Such an idea can also be dismantled. And with similar arguments. It is not so much verse that makes it difficult to understand the text (although it cannot be forgotten that it is a language which is more elaborate and further from colloquial speech, therefore requiring more attention), but the very language used in those lines of verse, from another era, with words, expressions and references that are no longer in use. The theatrical event requires

complicity with the audience, and this is difficult to achieve when the context is unknown to us. And that is going round in circles again.

Third reason: “*Verse drama is disconnected from reality.*” And that is the case. It is an irrefutable truth, no one goes down the street talking in verse, and if they do, they should have their head examined. But let me retort with a new question, *should theatre look like reality?* Undoubtedly, theatre has to tell us about reality, assimilate it, influence it. But look like it? All art is a reinterpretation of life. And therefore, it is artificial.

However, a contemporary audience does not want the aesthetic canon to be restricted to the theatre of olden days, and it is true that during the last two centuries we have lived an enriching process of authenticity, both in the texts and in the acting style. We have much to thank this process for, because it has generated many masterpieces. But it so happens that this authenticity, this approach to reality, has been adopted in the audiovisual language (whether it is, cinema, television or any of the new formats to come...), practically superseding it. Competing in realism and plausibility with constantly fewer means is a difficult challenge that theatre has to face. That is why I believe that, far from being a flaw, this “formal estrangement” from reality is a virtue that strengthens the dramatic event. A signature piece. As long as the estrangement does not mean ignoring or living on the margins of reality itself, which is our source of inspiration.

Theatre must seek its own expressive means. And now, I circle back to the first question I raised, which I asked myself a few years ago. Why should I not also use verse for contemporary, understandable and aesthetically elaborate theatre?

And since I could not find any reason not to do so, I decided to write *Páncreas*. Obviously, I didn’t just do it because I couldn’t find any reason not to. It was also because I found one specific reason to do so, which has to do with the play’s own dramaturgy: *Páncreas* deals with an unrealistic situation. The characters do not speak to us from this world, but from beyond the grave. Spoiler alert, the audience discovers this only at the end of the play. In fact, shortly after the performance begins, the characters give some explanation to the

public, without revealing more than that which the author wants to be known:

*By the way, surely, more than one will have noticed
we speak strangely, rhythmically and with ABBA rhymes.
This is how, in this “new abode”, things are discussed.
At first it sounds unusual, but then come the good times.*

It seemed to me that using verse was appropriate to imagine how the dead speak in that “new abode”, that unreal limbo. If I were a 17th-century author, I wouldn’t have felt the slightest need to explain why I make my characters speak in verse. In the 21st century (and even more so in the context of the theatre in Basque), I deemed it necessary.

Páncreas is a contemporary tragicomedy in verse. An unusual renewal of the genre. Unusual not only because it is written in verse today, but also because it has the audacity to do so (and represent it) in two different, very different, languages: Basque and Castilian.

First, I wrote a version in Basque, the language in which I write most of my works, it was performed by the theatrical company I usually work with, TARTEAN, and revolved around the geographical area in which this language is alive, that is to say, the autonomous community of the Basque Country, Navarra, and the French Basque Country.

I suppose the reader is completely unaware of the history of Basque-language theatre. I don’t want to stray too far from our topic here, so I will just say it has a relatively recent history. Except for performances of popular theater in the French Basque provinces, mainly the Pastorals of Zuberoa (in the Soule region) and some other *autos sacramentales* (translator’s note: a Spanish dramatic genre that is close to the English Morality plays), it can be said that it was only at the end of the nineteenth century that the first dramas timidly began to appear, mostly performed by amateurs, far removed from the commercial circuits. In the 1970s and 1980s, at the end of the Francoist dictatorship, in the context of the renaissance of the Basque culture, and promoted by independent theatre companies, theatre in Basque really started

to emerge. Today there are many professional theatre companies that work in the two languages (Basque and Castilian), and no fewer than half a dozen do so exclusively in Basque.

Pankreas (in the Basque version) was a real innovation, as there was no tradition of Basque theatre in verse (except for the pastoral songs of the French Basque Country mentioned before). In the absence of direct theatrical references, I used the usual metrics of *bertsolaris* (improvisers, troubadours who improvise sung lines, a genre whose roots can be found in the popular culture of oral transmission, and that today benefits from a huge presence and popularity in the Basque Country) and I also resorted to the models of the Spanish Golden Age (Lope de Vega, Calderón...) adapting the metrics to the specificities of Basque. The reference to classical Spanish theatre did not only help me choose models for stanzas and rhymes. I also adopted more general criteria, suitably filtered by time, many of which had been artistically created by Lope de Vega in his original *The New Art of Writing Plays in This Time*: what kind of metrics suits each genre (comedy, tragedy...); how and why should a playwright combine different metrics into one piece...

In this version in Basque I used different types of stanza: couplets, tercets, quatrains, quintets, ten-line stanzas... As for prosody, from 8 syllables for the lightest lines to 14 for the densest, to 10 and 11, one of the most common line lengths in Basque.

For the Spanish version, I could benefit from a large number of references, and from an ear that was both educated and used to listening to classical theatre in verse. But that did not make the job any easier. One of my main concerns was precisely to avoid succumbing to the temptation of using an old-fashioned language, which my own sensory memory sometimes threatened me with.

For both versions, there was the added difficulty of my own lack of experience. It was the first time (I don't know if I will repeat the experience again) that I wrote in verse. But I think I can say without sounding too boastful that I have an innate gift to play with the language and its sounds, and in many of my previous works, especially in

Basque, I was used to manipulating words and sounds, using language as if it were modelling clay to my liking and convenience.

In the Castilian version, I used the same stanzaic forms as in the Basque version: couplets, *terza rima*, quatrains, quintets, real octaves, ten-line stanzas (all with different combinations of rhymes and metrics) and Manriquean stanzas. All of which have a long theatrical tradition.

Obviously, writing in verse adds some extra difficulty, but this difficulty only concerns the volume of work. The process is slower and more laborious. Not necessarily harder. The real difficulty of any theatrical text is to get the idea right, it is to find a topic that will elicit the audience's interest, passion, amusement, surprise, emotions and / or make them think. The rest is effort, professionalism and dedication. Whether in prose or in verse.

With regard to the impact of each version, I have to say that the original, in Basque, because it was so new, provoked positive, and sometimes negative, reactions. The spectators who were eager to discover a new form and had no prejudice were enthused by the proposal; but there were also spectators who were not looking for experiments and renewals, and others who were prejudiced against theatre in verse, and they did not appreciate the proposal.

The Castilian version had, of course, a longer life. The potential audience was larger by far. In the country, there are more than forty million Castilian speakers, while the number of Basque speakers does not reach one million. On the other hand, it is clear that the Spanish-speaking audience is perfectly accustomed to listening to theatre in verse, although there are also a large number of spectators who reject it for the reasons (more or less founded) that I explained above: because it sounds old-fashioned, difficult to understand and artificial.

With regard to the reaction of cultural institutions, I must separate the two experiences again, because they did not travel along the same paths. For the Basque version we received financial aid from the Basque Government, which helped to finance 40% of the total budget. I do not believe that the fact that it is a text in verse had any leverage on

the decision of the financial committee. The company's trajectory, its history and its artistic reliability (as is usual in such cases) were much more decisive factors.

The Castilian version, although it was supported by the Centro Dramático Nacional, was essentially a private initiative. The play competed for two years in the “jungle” of commercial theater, and managed to come out with flying colours, which is no small feat.

Páncreas is a work that is still performed to this day. There are two semi-professional theatre companies that have it on their repertoire today. In addition, a production is being rehearsed in Buenos Aires, which will be performed shortly. And there are other Ibero-American producers interested in staging it.

The work, in addition to Basque and Castilian, has been translated into Slovenian, and soon the Japanese translation will be published.

It has been almost five years since *Páncreas* premiered. Since then I have written and produced a few more works. I haven't used verse again.

¹ I would like to thank Clara Escoda, from Barcelona University, for proof-reading this translation.

Glyn Maxwell: The Rhythm of Theatre

Claire HÉLIE

Abstract: Glyn Maxwell has written and adapted over 25 plays in the last 30 years. He has also published some 10 poetry collections. His training in the two arts, under the aegis of Derek Walcott, has made him one of the masters of verse drama. This short introduction to Maxwell's oeuvre and to the translation of his 2014 *Best Man Speech* evinces the idea that, for him, poetic devices are dramatic devices in so far as they help create the voice, the rhythm, the breath of a character speaking – they are listening devices in the sense that they engage the audience.

Résumé : Glyn Maxwell a écrit et adapté plus de 25 pièces ces trente dernières années. Il a aussi publié une dizaine de recueils de poèmes. Sa formation dans les deux arts, sous l'égide de Derek Walcott, a fait de lui l'un des maîtres du théâtre en vers. Cette brève introduction à l'œuvre de Maxwell et à la traduction de son *Best Man Speech* (2014) souligne l'idée que, pour lui, les techniques poétiques sont des techniques théâtrales dans la mesure où elles aident à créer la voix, le rythme, le souffle d'un personnage qui parle – ce sont des dispositifs d'écoute dans le sens où elles impliquent l'audience.

Keywords: Glyn Maxwell, verse drama, voice, breath, translation

Mots-clés : Glyn Maxwell, théâtre en vers, voix, respiration, traduction

Glyn Maxwell writes in verse

Glyn Maxwell writes in verse. And when he does not (as in a couple of novels and essays), he still writes about verse with the appreciation of an experienced wordsmith and the humour of a caring instructor. His novel *Drinks with Dead Poets*, published in 2016, is a series of twelve fantasy meetings between newly appointed Professor Maxwell, some

ten students who took a poetry class for mostly unpoetic reasons, and English and American poets from the 19th to the early 20th century you would find in any 21st century anthology (Keats, Dickinson, the Brontës... they even take a “field trip” to meet the First World War Poets). Except that these poets are here, in flesh and blood, very much alive in the diegesis and living up to their cultural reputations while telling some truths about their arts (Byron slams a version of “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner” for instance). This unclassifiable piece of writing, which offers insight into Maxwell’s own oeuvre, is a rather inventive sequel to his reader *On Poetry* (2012), meant for a general readership, in which he develops what we could term, after Derrida’s *Spectres de Marx* (1993), a “hauntological” poetics, an understanding of poetry as a site of cultural and aural memory that testifies to the presence of the past in contemporary forms. He strongly advises budding writers today to let themselves be haunted by poets and poems from the past: “A ghost takes shape in your room, it stills time as ghosts do, and, when it departs, with its soul and yours in eerie union, work has been done” (2012: 76). The whole essay is geared towards explaining why verse is not limited to the page but haunts the stage too.

Glyn Maxwell writes in verse, for the stage indeed. Apart from his 2019 *Dr Jekyll & Mr Hyde*, all his stage productions (he has written and adapted well over 25 plays in the last 30 years, besides poetry collections, operas, and radio dramas) are in verse. Some of his plays are based on legends like *Wolfpit*, about two green children said to have appeared in Suffolk in the 12th century (1996, dir. Sally Moss, Edinburgh Fringe Festival); others on myths, like *The Black Remote*, a play adapting the figure of Pandora for young audiences and published in the National Theatre Connections Series (2016); others on historical characters, like his tragedy *The Lifeblood* (2004, dir. Guy Retallack, Edinburgh Fringe Festival), which is about the last days of Mary, Queen of Scots. Some of his plays are based on classical plays, like *After Troy* (2011, dir. Alex Clifton, Playhouse Theatre Oxford), a retelling of Euripides’s *Women of Troy* and *Hecuba*, or *Lily Jones’s Birthday* (2009, RADA), a satyr-play based on Aristophanes’s *Lysistrata*;

others have moved from the page to the radio to the stage, like *The Gambler*, after Dostoevsky's novella (2016, dir. Karen Lordi-Kirkham, The Wild Project); others still have moved from stage to screen like his verse monologue, *The Best Man*, starring Danny Swanson (2004, dir. Jon Croker, Edinburgh). Some of his characters speak from beyond the grave, like his modern-day Orpheus and Eurydice in *The Forever Waltz* (2005, dir. Elysa Marden and Timothy Scott Harris, Workshop Theatre); others from the fringe of death, like *The Only Girl in the World* (2001, dir. Robert Horwell, Hoxton Hall) which features another pair of doomed lovers, Mary and Joe, set in the London of Jack the Ripper. A poet and a dramatist, Maxwell is also a sort of spectrograph, regularly commissioned to write anew our cultural icons, to allow the ghosts of the past to be heard on the contemporary stage.

Glyn Maxwell writes in verse, for many different types of theatre venues. In the early 1990s, he staged his first plays, fairy tales with a political agenda, in his parents' garden in Welwyn Garden City (2017a: 6) with parts taken up by relatives and friends (his mother, Buddug-Mair Powell had played in *Under Milk Wood* in 1957 on Broadway). Three of these large-cast plays were collected under the title *Gnyss the Magnificent* in 1993. His more mature plays were designed for institutional venues. For instance, *Liberty* (dir. Guy Retallack), which is about the French Revolution and based on Anatole France's novel *Les Dieux ont soif* (1912), premiered at Shakespeare's Globe in 2008, and then toured the UK at the Almeida, Arcola, RADA and Southwark Playhouse, before moving to New York. He also has a long-lasting collaboration with the Grosvenor Park Open-Air Theatre in Chester, an outdoor venue outside of London, which has scheduled many of his plays like *Merlin and the Woods of Time* (2011, dir. Alex Clifton), his rewriting of *Twelfth Night* as *Masters, Are you Mad?* (2012, dir. Robin Norton-Hale), his adaptation of *Cyrano De Bergerac* (2013, dir. Lucy Pitman-Wallace), and his adaptations of the children's novels *The Secret Seven* (2014, dir. Alex Clifton) and *Wind in the Willows* (2015, dir. Alex Clifton).

Glyn Maxwell writes verse, in spite of the terrible reputation it has for theatre-goers and theatre-critics. In his *Guardian* article entitled

“The Rhythm of Theatre”, he writes: “Verse drama. There’s an effective way to shed a thousand readers at a stroke. It’s the one phrase I beg producers of my plays to omit from the publicity material”. Indeed, he sides with those who doubt poets have anything to offer the stage, since he believes metaphors and obscurities run against story-telling, which should be at the heart of theatre practice for him. He claims that verse drama has a “unique burden to bear – the weight of the great ones and the almost total failure of everyone since...” (Mazzocchi Alemanni). He adds that it is almost impossible to lay the ghost of Shakespeare, a formidable story-teller, but that there is a lot to learn from him, especially the idea that verse on stage was no more natural in his time than it is today. This idea that Shakespeare “discovered, or invented, a ‘natural’ English metrics” (Blank 59) is debunked in Paula Blank’s *Shakespeare and the Mismeasure of Renaissance Man* (2009). Still, metre is a symbolic order, a moral order, a literary order, one a poet should not do away with.

Glyn Maxwell writes in verse, and that is actually what led him to write plays. In his early 20s, after publishing a few poems in national journals, he took a creative writing class on poetry and drama at Boston University with Derek Walcott, who became his friend and mentor (he even edited his *Selected Poems* in 2014). This simultaneous training in two disciplines has enabled him to create innovative work across genres. That is where he learnt to “scan that deep black space” (2005). He advises poets to “go and find a space and some actors. Test your verse on the lungs and throats and tongues and lips of creatures trained to know utterance from nonsense, trained in the best English written, trained a hundred times harder than you” (Mackenzie). Putting his verse in an actor’s mouth is a way to “get away with inauthenticity” (Iyengar). What he is striving for is to “render persuasively the distinct voice of an actual breathing person”, because, for him, the key element to “make a human sound (where human can be both adjective and noun, sound both noun and verb)” is “breath” (2005), which is etymologically connected to inspiration (2012: 22).

Glyn Maxwell writes in verse, and it taints his playscripts and stage work. He is self-labelled “the poet stuck in the chaos of theatre” (2012:

130). The techniques he uses combine devices that are central to both drama and poetry, like the shared, split, and stolen lines, or the direct address, or the way a deviation from regular metre will emphasize a change in the character's intention. Besides, his verse plays usually show no strict end-rhyme pattern but a subtle engineering of poetic sounds that include alliterations, assonances, internal rhymes... and what he calls "loose pentameters" (2005). His author's notes to *Plays One* and *Plays Two* read: "These plays are written in blank verse, so most of the lines are five-beat lines (or pentameters)" (9). Indeed the "ghost of a meter" lurking "behind the arras" (Eliot 34),¹ to take up T.S. Eliot's beautiful phrase, haunts most of the lines in his plays. He definitely writes within this Eliotic theatrical tradition, whose history he is well aware of. Indeed, he is very critical about the plays of the Romantic poets, because they were "comfy with tradition. It's why, for example, their verse-plays don't work. It's why T.S. Eliot, sharp thinker on tradition, eschewed the pentameter when he came to write his. Why I *uneschewed* it when I came to write mine" (2012: 286).

Glyn Maxwell writes verse, because he wants verse to sound just as natural as prose on stage. "All I can do is keep trying to show that verse on stage can make the sound we make now on the street, in the pub, in the bedroom, in Parliament. Ancient Greeks didn't talk in hexameters but if you master the line you can make anyone talk like it's today" (Mazzocchi Alemanni). In other words, he does not write to the metronome but gives form to the rhythm of everyday speech, so that all his characters speak "a demotic sort of pentameter" (DeStefano). They come to life because of the sounds they make on the page, and some of these characters are eloquent, others are so "deeply uneloquent and inarticulate" that "they become eloquent in their inarticulateness" (DeStefano), as in Beckett. The iambic pentameter, probably the most articulate medium there is, offers an ironic counterpoint to this search for inarticulacy.

Glyn Maxwell writes in verse, and lines are part of the stage directions. The author's note to his *Plays 1* and *Plays 2* has five bullet points, three of which strictly focus on verse. The first one claims the variety of lines in the plays is due to the fact that they are "used for various

effects.” The second one insists on the fact that the dramatic line is a poetic line - “These plays are composed of lines – not sentences or thoughts – and the lines should be kept intact.” In other words, poetic diction has to be used throughout the dialogues. The last one reads –

Words and lines and spaces come where they come for a reason, as in a musical score. There is nothing poetic about these plays aside from the one principle of their construction. They are written in verse not for reasons of aesthetics or culture of nostalgia, but because poets write in verse and a poet wrote these.” (9)

This tongue-in-cheek statement that plays with tautology makes a strong case for verse on stage: it is a valid mode of expression for contemporary plays that deal with the way we speak and the way we live.

Best Man Speech, a few words

The title of Maxwell’s *Best Man Speech* seems to say it all – this is a dramatic monologue uttered by Bailey, the Best Man, at his friend Addy’s wedding to Miranda. We expect to be taken down memory lane, to be seized with laughter and tears, to disregard the groom’s embarrassment if necessary, to hear an articulate speech that uses all the resources of rhetoric to convince us that the groom is not such a bad person, apart from a couple of forgivable mishaps or misdeeds. Research is rather sparse on wedding toasts – whereas How-To books are plenty – but it seems that the whole point of a best man speech is a rite of passage for the groom which will allow him to turn a new leaf with his bride, since his youthful years are turned into a story that is presented to the audience, a story the audience puts an end to by clapping. It is therefore also a communal act meant to strengthen the bond of the audience who are witnesses to this new beginning. In other words, this institutional speech act is in itself a writerly, theatrical, performative event. The metafictional dimension is emphasized in the playscript since at one point, Bailey imagines one member of the audience asking him “Who is this *Best Man*?” (*Plays* 2, 71). The italics are indicative of an ironic tone, but may also be read as a way for the playwright to interrogate the nature of the text he is writing. Indeed,

Maxwell uses several other devices to emphasize the metatheatrical dimension of his piece.

Bailey's speech abides by all the rules of the genre, or almost. The "tale of love, and cheating, with a sting, / a revelation, and a true confession..." (*Plays 2*, 72) begins with a mean girl / mean boy type of story but ends like a tragedy with the villain exposed for what he has done while the star-crossed lovers are parted forever. Bailey's insistent reminder that he is talking about love ("a tale of true romance for all you hardened / cynics in the room" (*Plays 2*, 74), "love romance, and the matters of the heart" (*Plays 2*, 75), "a love-chapter" (*Plays 2*, 77)...) is as ironical as can be, but it is also a great reminder that he is telling a story of redress – the words "tale" and "story" crop up repeatedly and create an opposition between those who have a story to tell, those who don't, and those whose story will never get told. What Bailey wants is to keep his audience "*un-entertained*" (*Plays 2*, 71, Maxwell's italics) i.e. alert, which also means that he rejects the idea that his best man speech is entertaining in the sense of escapist. To make sure everyone listens to his story, which is ultimately *his* story, Bailey highjacks the mic – he says "*I have the floor*" (*Plays 2*, 70, Maxwell's italics), in italics, as if the sentence was a stage direction intimating the audience to shush and listen. Most importantly, he has a black box, "the present" (*Plays 2*, 69) which he unwraps every so often:

It's an easy listening device, did I say that?

It's helping you to listen to my stories.

I mean, we can't help making stories, can we? (*Plays 2*, 77)

Unwrapping the present, unveiling the truth, keeping the audience alert. The dramatic monologue is addressed both to the real audience in the theatre venue and to the fictional audience at the wedding reception through direct address and rhetorical questions. Indeed, because the fictional audience's expected reactions are embedded within the narrative, the real audience also become the witnesses and the recipients of this transformative speech and story. The speech is highly anecdotal, but its narrative is based on a quest pattern – a quest for information about the groom doubled with a quest for truth about his

dark side. It is steeped in humour and interspersed with puns. So much so that one of its characteristic features, namely the recurrent use of punchlines, may be evocative of stand-up comedy, an identifiable type of performance based on conversational speech with the audience. Paradoxically, the declamatory nature of the long monologue, which could be felt all the more declamatory as it is in verse, is undermined by the subtle play on rhythm, the many enjambments, which bring out the rhythms of natural speech:

This is a Best Man speech. What, did you think
it would be easy listening? (*Plays 2*, 74)

This is indeed poetry at this finest, since we are constantly required to listen, be it rhetorically (through the direct mode of address and the injunction to stay put), dramatically (to help him sustain his audience's attention, Bailey has a prop he calls "an easy-listening device", a present he slowly unwraps, and which may or may not be a bomb, which he promises, or threatens, to drop at any minute), or poetically (provided by the loose iambic pentameters he uses throughout his speech). Only by listening carefully do we see what happened since the story begins somewhere else at a time when Addy was significantly younger. The eye-witnesses to the wedding become ear-witnesses to a dark story of unrequited love, deception, and abuse.

The translation you are about to read therefore tries to highlight the phonocentrism of the play by converting the loose pentameters into loose alexandrines, or dodecasyllables more exactly, and by using variation in the line length to express the speaker's emotional states. In other words, the focus is on rhythmicity, not prosody, on the character's breath, and not on the metronome's tick-tock. Bailey's speech has all the marks of inarticulateness – apart from a couple of purple patches, the vocabulary is rather limited, the syntax is at times broken, tense sequencing sometimes lack consistence, parataxis and aposiopesis rule. And yet because that inarticulacy is framed in lines, Bailey's speech gains in eloquence. This does not translate easily into French, hence the choice of transposing the inarticulacy onto the register. The translators hope that this dark narrative will take your breath away in

French as it did to them in English. Do not hold your breath anymore and turn the page for the best man speech.

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¹ Note that Eliot's comment was prescriptive ("the ghost of a meter should lurk behind the arras"), but that it has been built into a descriptive argument by Annie Finch in *The Ghost of Meter: Culture and Prosody in American Free Verse* (2000).

***Best Man Speech / Les Vœux du
témoin (2004) de Glyn MAXWELL***

Traduction de Claire HÉLIE, Clara MALLIER, Cécile MARSHALL

Bailey s'apprête à faire son discours. Devant lui se trouve un gros paquet cadeau.

Bailey : Bon, voici le présent. Vous l'avez ? Le présent.
J'imagine que vous avez déjà eu des présents
dont vous vous seriez bien passé. C'est ce présent-
là, que je craignais. C'est le moment du présent.
Et moi, j'ai l'honneur de faire le discours.
Miranda et Addy. Addy, l'ami d'enfance,
mais laissons tomber l'enfance, hein ? Il est timide.
Et Miranda, fraîche comme une pivoine,
qui ne rougit pas, félicitations Miranda,
puisses-tu... rester fraîche pour toujours.
C'est le garçon d'honneur qui rougit en vérité. C'est
moi, seul dans le moment présent. C'est moi,
sous les feux de la rampe. Personne pour m'arrêter,
pas vrai ? C'est mon moment.
Regardez ces ravissantes demoiselles d'honneur. Ne sont-elles pas
fraîches ? Elles ne rougissent pas non plus. Sammie,
Jade et Tabitha. En leur nom,
je porte un toast, je porte un toast. Un toast ?
j'aurais dû porter un costume trois pièces !
C'était ma première blague.
(Là, il y a écrit : « Attendre que les rires retombent. »)
Parfait. Allez, on continue.

Bon. Vous vous posez sans doute des questions sur
mon présent, mon humble offrande aux jeunes mariés.

Il y a un prix pour celui qui trouve ! Indice :
c'est un appareil high tech d'*easy listening*,
dernier cri. Un bijou de technologie, j'vous l'dis.
Ça va vous éclater, croyez-moi. Bon,
je ne me suis pas présenté. J'aurais dû
commencer par là, c'est ce qu'a fait ma mère.
Mon nom est Bailey. J'ai bien un prénom,
mais je l'ai laissé au vestiaire. J'ai un ticket
pour le récupérer, mais pour l'instant, c'est Bailey.
C'est plus simple pour Addy comme ça, un seul nom.
Certains d'entre vous, les habitués de ce club
très select qu'est le Maple Vale Country Club,
me connaissent peut-être sous le nom de
« Barman, elle arrive cette fichue bière ? »,
ou de « Ho caddie, c'est quoi ce fer 5 de merde ! » Voilà,
caddie, barman, garçon,
mes noms d'esclave. Mais cette fois, je suis là,
avec tout le gratin. Je devrais,
selon le protocole, lever mon verre en l'honneur
du big boss qui a fait du Maple Country Club
ce qu'il est aujourd'hui, mais comme vous le savez,
il se trouve que c'est le marié, et qu'il a reçu
assez de fleurs aujourd'hui, même si, en vérité,
il s'en est jeté beaucoup. Je vais donc juste
remercier le personnel de service aujourd'hui,
(Les pauvres gars, ils vont devoir nettoyer tout ça –
oups, en voilà un peu plus)

(Il jette son verre par-dessus son épaule.)

et dire à quel point je suis heureux de faire partie
de ce qu'on appelle entre nous « ce public de gueux »
(J'aurais pas dû dire ça, Addy, hein ? nan,
ça rendait bien sur le papier !) Bon, passons,
j'ai la parole, *la scène est à moi*. J'l'entends déjà :
et c'est toi qui la nettoieras demain, Bailey.

Parlons d'aujourd'hui. La journée a commencé
à l'aube pour moi, seul sur la plage ouest,
à 5h du mat', enfin presque seul, seul
avec un mec bourré et KO qui d'un coup
s'est assis pour me dire « C'était une sacré idée ! »
Et le voilà, mal en point et marié,
et me voici, moi qui l'ai sauvé d'un sort
pire encore que le mariage, ou du moins,
disons, kif-kif. Je parle de la mort bien sûr.
Et bah ça y est, voilà-t'y-pas qu'j'l'ai fait.
La seule chose dont il ne faut jamais parler
d'après mon p'tit manuel de bien vivre en société.
Règle numéro 1, la règle d'or, ne pas
en parler ! Et voilà que je fais tout le contraire,
et j'insiste en plus. Regardez le présent, plutôt,
regardez le présent ! Ne pensez plus à la mort !
vous d'vez vous dire, faudrait l'empêcher de parler,
il est pas drôle, on s'ennuie ferme.
C'est quoi ce garçon d'horreur ?

Rien que son plus vieil ami. Addy et Bailey.
Le B-A BA de l'amitié, c'est pas plus compliqué.
Mais pour ceux qui nous connaissent, vous savez
qu'on est quatre en fait : il y a Addy, Bailey,
Croft et Dennis, bah oui, c'est comme ça qu'on s'est connus,
Grâce au plan de classe de Mr Hackett.
Il nous a tous parqués au fond de la salle
à 13 ans, et allez savoir pourquoi, ça nous a
marqués à vie. Même aujourd'hui, nos potes
ont des noms qui commencent avant la lettre F,
donc les Williams et les Yates, vous n'avez rien
à faire ici. C'est vrai. Demandez à Croft,
il est dans le coin – ou Dennis ? J'le vois pas,
il est dans le coin. Tant pis, croyez-moi,
on était les Alpha Boys. Et, comme par hasard,

assises pas loin des Alpha Boys,
il y avait les Alpha Girls, ou plutôt, l'Alpha Girl.
Ah... il s'en souvient, le voilà qui rougit, le marié,
il se dit : Bailey, déballe pas le passé,
déballe le présent ! Aussitôt dit, aussitôt fait !

(BAILEY déballe le présent qui contient un autre présent, lui aussi emballé).

Vous avez entendu la musique s'arrêter ?
C'est tout ce que j'entends, moi, la musique
qui s'arrête ; et c'est toujours votre serviteur
qui tire le gros lot. Bon, il y a des gens
qui me regardent, des gens que je ne connais pas,
et vous, vous ne me connaissez pas non plus, donc vous
ne connaissez pas du tout mon sens de l'humour,
vous ne savez pas du tout si vous pouvez
intervenir. Et il y en a un qui filme ça,
je le vois, je le vois des pieds à la tête sauf
son visage ; tout ce que lui voit, c'est le mien.
Si vous vous mettez à crier « Ho, ça suffit ! »
en agitant les bras pour me faire taire,
ce sera le moment culte de cette vidéo,
vous serez le boulet qu'a pas compris la blague.
L'horreur !

L'Alpha Girl, c'était Kelly, qu'on appelait tous
Cendar. Me d'mandez pas pourquoi. Je crois que son nom
Ressemblait un peu, mais on s'en fiche. La Cendar.
On sait ce que ça veut dire. La fille
que personne peut voir mais qui est toujours là,
tout sourire, avec ses grandes dents, ses cheveux
gras et ses boutons, la totale quoi.
Imaginez : votre pire cauchemar,
sauf que c'est le nôtre puisqu'il commence par C,
vous me suivez ? Voilà donc l'histoire d'Addy,

une histoire d'amour et de trahison, avec
p'tite combine, révélation et confession...

Donc on doit avoir 15 ans, et il y a une teuf.
A, B, C, D, toute la bande, tous on y va
dans la voiture du vieux de Dennis, sauf Croft,
qui a pris la moto de son frère (et vous verrez,
c'est pas un p'tit détail), enfin bon, on y est,
y a des filles, des filles qu'on se verrait bien
emmener faire un p'tit tour, comme on dit,
mais on se la joue cool, on se dit, genre
c'est peut-être ce soir qu'on va conclure.
(Je précise que je parle pas pour Addy ;
Addy, lui, son casier n'était plus vraiment vierge,
mais comme Miranda continue de me regarder,
je vais pas rentrer dans les détails. Je dirai juste
que nous n'avions même pas le début d'un casier
de ce genre alors que nous avions tous des casiers
à chaussettes qu'on utilisait plusieurs fois
par jour. Je traduis pour les vieux : on était tous
puceaux. A la bonne vôtre !) Bref,
on est tous les quatre à fumer dans le jardin,
et il se met à pleuvoir alors on rentre fissa,
et alors là, tout s'écroule. La fête est finie.
La fille chez qui on est s'est taillée. Ses parents
sont je n'sais où. En Chine peut-être.
P't-être qu'ils y sont toujours. Enfin bon, y a personne.
Il pleut des cordes, tu te souviens, Addy ? Et Dennis,
qu'on a charrié toute la soirée, sort d'un coup :
« Y a quelqu'un dans l'entrée. » Et là, qui c'est qu'on voit ?
La Cendar, Kelly Cendar,
En chair et en os avec tous ses bracelets,
Il n'y a qu'elle et personne d'autre. Et je vous jure,
cette baraque, elle est au milieu de nulle part,
dans le trou du cul du monde. Y a des gens

de nulle part qui savent pas où c'est.
Et tous les potes, ces enfoirés, se sont barrés
à une super soirée où on leur manque pas,
et voilà la Cendar, quasiment à poil,
qui vient droit vers nous, vous y croyez, vous ?
Elle nous fait de l'œil ! ça va trop loin
pour les Alpha Boys.

Donc Addy, Croft et moi,
on se met dans un coin pour établir un plan :
Dennis peut aller tremper son biscuit, disons,
au risque de paraître cru, tirer sa crampe.
Vous savez ce que c'est les garçons... et c'est là
qu'on l'entend, la voiture de son père dans l'allée,
on voit l'enfoiré qui s'engouffre dedans et
notre seul espoir de tous nous tirer disparaît.
Reste la mob de Croft. « J'me casse, qu'y dit, et j'en prends qu'un. »
Et c'est lui qu'à l'idée de jouer ça aux cartes. Il a
son jeu de cartes porno, on le joue en trois manches,
Addy contre Bailey, le vainqueur gagne sa place
sur le porte-bagage, le perdant passe la nuit ici,
avec tout ce que ça implique...
Cendar est dans un coin, elle fait une sorte
de slow chelou toute seule, et nous trois
on distribue les cartes et on prie. Addy part
se chercher une bière et dès qu'il sort de la pièce,
Croft, qui a toujours eu le sens des affaires,
fait : « Je m'arrange pour que tu aies du jeu
si tu me files trente balles. » Et il en est cap',
je l'ai vu faire ses tours. Je peux être chez moi
dans une demi-heure, et tout ce que ça va m'coûter,
c'est toutes mes économies. J'hésite pas une seconde.
Faut que j'vous dise : Addy ne savait rien de tout ça.
Il a toujours cru qu'il avait pas eu de bol !
Il va me tuer... bref, il revient,

il dit qu'il se sent en veine, et on coupe le jeu,
que Croft a truqué, et je tire des rois
et des valets et le pauvre Addy,
il pose un trois. Alors maintenant, enfin, on peut
te dire la vérité. Croft et moi, on a
triché, on t'a laissé là-bas avec Cendar...
Addy, mon ami, mon pote, mon boss,
ta nuit d'amour – ou, comme il nous a toujours dit,
sa nuit enfermé dans les chiottes pendant qu'elle tentait
de crocheter la serrure – ta nuit d'amour
a été rendue possible par tes meilleurs potes,
ça y est, comme ça, au moins, c'est dit...

C'est un discours de témoin de mariage. Tu croyais
que ça allait être du *easy listening* ? Tu croyais
qu'une info n'en cacherait pas une autre ?

*(Bailey déballe de nouveau le cadeau et révèle un autre présent emballé
dans Closer)*

Miranda et Addy, ils en ont fait du chemin,
Addy, son chemin va du trou du cul du monde
à cette table, aux côtés de cette beauté...
dans toute sa... beauté. Une vraie romance,
pour les éternels cyniques que vous êtes.
Pourquoi sommes-nous rassemblés ici aujourd'hui ?
A manger des vol-au-vent et des canapés
au saumon quand on pourrait être peinarde
devant un match de foot à la maison. (Qu'entends-je ?
Ah, apparemment, Croft est bel et bien
chez lui, devant un match de foot.)
Pourquoi sommes-nous rassemblés aujourd'hui ?
Comment est-ce que tout ça a commencé ?
Par un Four-Play. Oui oui, j'ai bien dit un Four-Play.
Pour les néophytes, un Four-Play, c'est
un terme de golf, comme dans le bal du Four-Play,

qui a lieu le dernier soir du tournoi,
pour que tous les joueurs, voyez-vous, puissent continuer
de pratiquer leur swing. Bon, j'avais fait le caddy
quatre jours d'affilée pour Mr Yamaguchi,
et là, Addy me donne quatre entrées gratuites.
Alors je prends mon courage à deux mains, et j'invite
mon crush de l'époque, dont on taira le nom,
ainsi que Dennis, et quelqu'un que Dennis
veut amener. Et ce quelqu'un...
n'est autre que notre mariée du jour, Miranda.
Enfin bref, je réserve une table bien placée,
dans un petit coin plutôt discret. Mais
dans l'après-midi, le téléphone sonne.
C'est Addy : « Bailey, y faut que tu m'aides mec.
Rob et Geoff sont malades, me laisse pas tomber. »
Et croyez-le ou non, mais votre serveur
Accepte de tenir le bar au bal du Four-Play.
Je sais, ma bonté me perdra. Me voilà donc
au bar, à servir de l'alcool à tous les riches
ivrognes – pardon, aux golfeurs – de la ville,
pendant qu'à ma table, que je ne vois même pas,
dans la petite alcôve, on s'amuse comme des fous.
Mais ça m'a offert un point de vue unique
sur l'amour, la romance, et les problèmes de cœur.
A moins que ce ne soient les problèmes de foie ?

Une histoire d'amour et d'alcool. Premier round.
La serveuse apporte la commande : pinte,
ça c'est Dennis ; coca light bien frais, mon ex ;
Chablis, c'est chic, ça, sans doute cette Miranda ;
et ça continue comme ça :
pinte, coca, Chablis ; pinte, coca, Chablis ;
toutes les trente, puis toutes les vingt minutes,
et, du bar, je vois pas ce qu'il se passe,
la serveuse fait des allers-retours

avec pinte, coca, Chablis. Vers onze heures,
 mon ex en a assez de tenir la chandelle,
 et prend un taxi pour rentrer – je sais, c'est fou
 l'effet que je leur fais. Bref, elle est partie,
 fin de la parenthèse. Pinte et Chablis,
 pinte et Chablis, et puis la commande change,
 pinte, Chablis, whisky sour. Hein ?
 Un whisky sour ? Okay,
 je sais qui boit ça : c'est cet homme,
 mon pote, enfin mon boss, enfin le marié.
 Et d'un coup, ça passe à pinte et shot de vodka,
 champagne, whisky sour. Je lis les runes,
 j'suis un putain de Sherlock Holmes : Dennis, énervé,
 est passé aux alcools forts, la nouvelle, Miranda,
 a fait ami-ami avec Mr Bollinger,
 pendant qu'Addy reste fidèle à ses habitudes.
 Il y a un slow à un moment, et là je vois,
 je le vois, ce moment historique,
 sous la boule à facettes, et je reçois une
 commande pour un seul Irish Car Bomb.
 Dennis n'est plus dans la course, il boit n'importe quoi ;
 quand la danse est finie, on repasse au Bollinger,
 un magnum pour l'alcôve, une heure du mat',
 deux verres, deux cigares. Deux cigares ?
 Ça veut dire sans rancune, ça veut dire
 qu'il y a un gagnant et un perdant. La soirée s'écoule.
 Une limousine pour deux, et une dernière commande,
 un dernier cigare en solitaire,
 et un double cognac, que je remplis
 à ras bord pour Dennis, mon vieux copain,
 quand la serveuse me dit : « Apporte plutôt un seau,
 Bailey, la fête est finie. » Et voilà l'histoire –
 corrigez-moi si j'me trompe. Je pensais que Dennis
 était là avec sa jolie... il est pas là ?
 Il a pas pu venir, d'accord. Vous voyez son porte-nom

et à côté, il y a le joli porte-nom
de sa femme, joli. C'est pas bien de parler
dans le dos des gens, mais il est pas là,
alors où est le mal ?

Mais il vous dirait « sans rancune », et c'est vrai,
c'est comme ça qu'ils se sont rencontrés, salle Tudor,
ces deux tourtereaux de l'alcôve, j'y étais,
votre correspondant dans son smoking du Maple Vale,
assorti à sa... lavallière, je crois que ça s'appelle.
Quelqu'un veut savoir ce qu'il y a dans mon présent ?

(Il déballe le cadeau pour révéler un autre présent emballé dans du papier noir.)

Ma maman disait toujours qu'on peut pas se tromper
avec le noir. Vous ne devinerez jamais,
du moins, pas avant qu'il soit trop tard. Oui, moi je sais,
Sammie, Jade, moi, je sais déjà ce que c'est :
C'est un appareil de *easy listening*, je l'ai pas dit ?
C'est pour vous aider à écouter mes histoires.
On peut pas s'empêcher d'en raconter, hein ?
Addy, tes potes de boulot bougent pas d'un poil.
Ils veulent tous écouter mes histoires...
En voici une courte :
BOUM ! c'est une bombe que j'ai là, figurez-vous !

Donc ce chapitre sentimental se clôt sur moi
en pleine discussion philosophique –
quoi ? c'est vraiment une bombe ? Vous croyez quoi vous ?

La soirée se clôt pour moi sur une grande
discussion à deux heures du mat', affalé au bar,
avec Mr Yamaguchi qui décrète que
ravi de vous n'a pas framme. « Pardon ? dis-je.
– Ravi de vous n'a pas framme, Monsieur Bairey.
– Comment ça, ravi, je ne suis pas ravi,
suis pas la bonne pelle sonne, Mr Yamaguchi.

– Non, c'est vous, vous êtes la bonne, Bairey !
 – La bonne, Mr Yamaguchi, non.
 Je suis barman ! – Ravi de vous n'a pas framme. »
 Je lui appelle un taxi et il me donne une...
 Un genre de carte, et vous vous demandez :
 « Ben, c'est quoi le rapport ? »
 Mais moi, je vous demande : savez-vous
 quels petits clous seront projetés dans le vide et lesquels
 iront droit dans votre tête ? donc, relax,
 relax Sammie, Jade et Tabitha,
 relax la mariée, et rougis,
 relax et réjouis-toi,
 relax Monsieur Fier comme Artaban, relax
 Monsieur J'ai épousé Quelqu'un de mon Rang,
 Madame Je ne Porterai Plus ce Chapeau,
 Monsieur et Madame Cousins qui Nous Aiment Pas,
 Madame la Vieille qu'il Fallait Inviter
 Parce que Franchement tu Flétris, Mademoiselle
 Je suis Venue me Chercher un Mari,
 Mon p'tit Monsieur Dégouté de la Vie
 et toute sa famille dont ravi n'a pas framme,
 et vous tous, les hommes d'affaires assis bien sagement,
 à vous d'mander quand le mot FIN arrivera, relax
 parce que vous ne savez pas ce qui va arriver.
 Et vous n'aurez à écouter cette histoire qu'une
 seule fois, après je me casse, vous me suivez,
 messieurs, ça vous rappelle rien ? Vous avez l'air
 inquiets, messieurs, je vais vous rassurer, au cas où
 vous vous demanderiez si c'est bien une bombe.

(Il enlève une couche supplémentaire de papier cadeau et révèle, une fois de plus, un présent emballé de noir, mais en forme de bombe.)

Vous voilà rassurés ?
 Nos plus belles années.
 Nos plus belles années. Ça renvoie toujours

à un lointain passé. Ça renvoie toujours
à une époque que t'as passée avec des gens
avec qui, depuis des années, t'as plus de contact.
Qu'est-ce que ça devait être bien !
Et bien maintenant tu peux rattraper le temps.
Nos plus belles années point com.
Il y a un site web rempli de tous les gens
que tu pensais avoir rayés de ta vie.
« Site », comme site archéologique.
« Web », comme la toile gluante dans laquelle t'es empêtré.
Du pain béni pour certains, n'est-ce pas, du pain béni
pour un témoin à un mariage. Un témoin
qui doit fouiller la merde dans le passé
de Monsieur Tout me Réussit...
Bon, je suis opé niveau nouvelles technologies,
alors je jette un petit coup d'œil au passé
sur nos plus belles années point com, et wahou,
ils sont tous là, à attendre au même endroit, les mêmes,
comme s'ils n'avaient jamais bougé, comme si c'étaient
des mauvaises graines qu'on a laissées dans le noir
et qu'on met au grand jour, énormes, et pleines de
souvenirs.

Et je veux pas les déranger,
parce que ça serait comme si je venais du futur,
comme dans *Retour vers le futur*, la seule règle,
c'est de ne pas changer leur vie, vous me suivez ?
Donc je surfe de page en page,
sans faire de vague, clic, zap, double clic,
je survole la description de leur style de vie,
et y a pas grand-chose qui les différencie, et en plus,
ils parlent comme si ces années de merde dans cette
école pourrie remplie de crétins étaient
vraiment les plus belles années de leur vie... tenez,
Latchett, exemple parfait. Peter Latchett,

ou « La Chiotte », comme il fallait bien le surnommer,
Latchett, c'était un footballeur, un jeune
espoir plein de talent, alors, bien sûr,
Addy et moi on l'appelle en prenant une voix grave,
on dit qu'on est des recruteurs du club d'Upton Park,
qu'on voudrait voir de quoi il est capable ce samedi.
On va le voir jouer, il cherche du regard
quelqu'un avec un clipboard. Y a personne, mais
faut reconnaître qu'il se donne quand même à fond.
Mais y a personne. Le truc, c'est qu'il est dans son profil.
Sa bio sur le site dit : « Un jour,
J'ai été repéré par le club de foot de West Ham.
Aujourd'hui, mon seul lien avec le sport, c'est de
faire l'arbitre pour les enfants le matin... »
Parce que bien sûr, ils ont tous des enfants.
Comment c'est possible ? Est-ce que j'ai loupé un cours ?
Peut-être qu'il y avait tous les élèves,
Tous à poil en deux rangs face à face, et que moi
je fumais une clope dans le hangar à vélos, et bim,
j'ai pas de gosse, je fais le caddie,
laissez-moi porter vos clubs, mon prince.

Il y avait ce type qui s'appelait Piper.
Apparemment. Son message sur le site, c'est :
« Qui est-ce qui se souvient de moi ? » J'ai claqué
cinq livres pour m'inscrire et lui dire :
« Personne, mec. » Il est père de famille.
J'espère que eux s'en souviennent. « — C'est qui l'monsieur
moche dans le jardin maman ? — Aucune idée. »
Mais je dois m'inscrire pour poster un message :
« Toute anecdote compromettante
concernant Mr J. M. Addison
sera grandement appréciée. » Et j'attends
de voir ce qui se passe. Ah, j'allais oublier,
sur ce site, on a aussi la possibilité

de mettre une photo de sa trombine,
et sur les cinquante tocards de notre promo
qui ont rejoint le club des disparus, y a
qu'une seule personne qui l'a fait. Devinez qui ?
Kelly Cendar, et je sais ce que j'ai dit,
que son vrai nom ressemblait à ça, mais il s'avère
que son vrai nom, c'était Kelly Cendrars, ça l'est toujours,
mais putain, elle met le truc entre parenthèses
(*Cendar*), comme si elle préférait qu'on l'appelle comme ça
plutôt qu'on se souvienne pas d'elle. Et y a une photo.
Mais c'est pas possible que ce soit Cendar, cette nana
maquillée en goth, et qui regarde l'objectif
comme si... qui *me* regarde comme si elle allait
pas me lâcher des yeux, mais genre jamais, et on voit
qu'elle a changé, elle a perdu un peu de poids,
OK, elle a la peau plus saine, et la bouche
fermée. Pourtant, on dirait qu'elle se trouve sur
une scène de crime, mais c'est peut-être chez elle.
Et il y a son petit message :
« Si jamais vous passez par Bramble Park,
levez les yeux, mon appart', c'est celui au-dessus
de l'enseigne MOBIL. » Au-dessus de l'enseigne MOBIL,
O...K... content de l'apprendre. Merci, Cendar,
comme ça la prochaine fois que j'ai besoin de faire le plein,
je passerai, histoire de faire d'une pierre deux coups.

Pendant ce temps : Vous Avez un Mess@ge.
J'ai quelques réponses. Latchett veut me voir.
Piper veut me voir, ce même Piper
dont je n'ai jamais entendu parler, qui me dit :
« Je vois que t'as pas perdu ton sens de l'humour,
Bailey. » Et puis il y a Warbeck, qu'on détestait tous
– Les W, vous voyez, c'étaient de vrais branleurs –
et il écrit : « Hé, c'est bien toi le Bailey
qu'a eu une place au conservatoire d'arts dramatiques

et qui disait qu'il serait une star à vingt-cinq ans ?
T'as un lien de parenté avec le Bailey
qui fait caddie pour mon père à Maple Vale ?
Peut-être que je confonds. » Je peux encaisser
de me faire vanner, vous savez, donc balle au centre,
je décide que je ne verrai pas Warbeck,
ça a toujours été un loser.

Je vois Latchett.

La soirée la plus chiante de toute ma vie,
du moins jusqu'à ce que je voie Piper, pire.
Rien à raconter. Addy est leur héros, un mec
qui s'est fait un nom, un type qui a réussi,
pas comme moi, qui fais caddie, serveur et le ménage.
La lose. *Nos plus belles années point com*, j'y suis pas,
Je suis complètement sorti du radar,
C'est douloureux, je vous le dis.
Donc je déguerpis pendant que Latchett est aux chiottes,
et je descends la rue au pas de course, quand bam,
il se met à pleuvoir, j'ai vraiment pas de pot,
je mets les mains dans les poches, et j'y trouve
la carte que Mr Yamaguchi m'a donnée
avec un numéro griffonné. Je crois l'entendre :
« Ravi de vous n'a pas framme, Monsieur Bairey. »
Et je ne sais pas qui en a, qui n'en a pas,
Mrs Untel et Dr Trucmuch, mais moi j'en n'ai pas,
et quelque chose me dit : ce numéro,
c'est bien ce que tu crois que c'est, un truc sale,
mais une autre voix le lit comme si j'étais
un peu idiot, trop innocent, un clown,
et que ce numéro, je pourrais l'utiliser pour trouver
un peu de, je sais pas, un peu de *framme*.
Donc j'appelle, Sammie. Je compose le numéro, Jade,
l'homme qui porte ce toast des plus gracieux
est le genre de mec qui appelle ces numéros,

Tabitha, et ça sonne,
et je suis dans une cabine, et il tombe des cordes,
et là, c'est quitte ou double. Quelqu'un répond,
j'entends mon cœur qui bat la chamade. Ecoutez !
écoutez j'vous dis ! nos hommes d'affaires veulent savoir
ce que je vais dire. Une voix me dit d'aller
à Bramble Park. Et j'dis OK. Ça m'dit quelque chose,
mais je note quand même la route, et la fille
me demande ce qui me ferait plaisir.
Bah, je sais pas, alors je dis : « La normale. »
Ça sort comme ça, tout seul : « La normale. »
Et elle dit : « OK. » Elle renifle et dit « OK. »
Puis je l'entends tousser, et elle raccroche.

Quoi ? vous pensiez que c'était la seule ville au monde
où personne vit comme ça ? Vous pensiez peut-être
que dans cette ville, il pleut jamais,
que dans cette ville, personne est fauché,
que dans cette ville, personne se sent seul, *aaahhh*...
J'aurais pu vous prouver tout le contraire
cette nuit-là, si vous aviez été là,
vous tous qui n'aviez rien
en commun jusqu'à ce soir... Bramble Park,
trois pauvres arbres au milieu des HLM,
et il pleut, et il fait nuit, et près d'un banc,
je vois une femme qui ouvre son parapluie,
qui attend, qui me tourne le dos,
je vous fais pas un dessin, vous devinez la suite,
évidemment, c'est elle, c'est Cendar,
sur son petit lopin de terre détrempé,
c'est son petit parc, et le numéro
de Yamaguchi, c'est son numéro.
Elle n'est pas maigre, mais on dirait qu'elle est fanée,
toute blanche, presque fantomatique, je vois que
son mascara commence à couler avec la pluie,

ses cheveux sont attachés, mais n'importe comment,
tout est bizarre. Je suis sur le point de m'enfuir,
je vous l'jure, je la connais l'histoire,
quand Cendar me demande si je voudrais du thé ?
Si je voudrais du thé ? Je dis non merci
et j'ai soudain l'impression de tomber

et me voilà, à dire du lait, sans sucre, merci
tic-tac, tic-tac,
hein le prêtre, hein Sammy, j'y vais,
je visite son petit logis, à Kelly Cendrars,
et c'est comme si je rentrais dans un soap pourri
qui dure depuis des années ! Je me rends compte
que ça m'a toujours interpellé, j'ai toujours
eu ce... disons, je me suis toujours demandé
pour certaines personnes, ce que ça faisait d'être eux,
d'avoir vrillé en quelque sorte,
de ne plus être, je sais pas moi, au cœur des choses,
de vivre une petite vie étriquée,
faite de tasses de thé, ou assis dans un parc,
à joindre les deux bouts comme on peut,
comment on tombe sur ces gens-là, Bailey,
je me demande, où sont-ils, quel est ce monde
triste qui les héberge ? du lait, sans sucre,
tic-tac, tic-tac.

Merci, Kelly, je suis assis ici avec Cendar,
je vois les toits, ils sont mouillés, sombres
dehors, le soleil s'est couché, mais dans quelle ville,
la mienne ? Verrai-je encore ça ? « Je te connais,
lance-t-elle en écrasant son mégot, t'étais au lycée,
tu faisais du théâtre. – Je faisais du théâtre,
c'est vrai, je réponds. – C'était ça ton rêve, qu'elle dit,
je t'ai entendu en parler à la cantine.
– Y avait quoi au menu ? je m'entends lui demander.
– Un truc qu'on n'aimait pas, qu'elle dit, du ragout.

Moi, j'aimais que les frites, j'aimais pas le ragout, mais à chaque fois qu'ils soulevaient le couvercle, c'était du ragout. Je disais toujours à Mrs Gladstone : 'C'est quand qu'on a des frites ?' et elle disait toujours les frites c'est pour demain, c'est le règlement. Elle était un peu bizarre. » Je sais pas quoi dire, je suis à des années-lumière, mince, c'est trop étrange, et je regarde le cendar, non, le vrai cendar, et ses doigts posés dessus, on parle de tout et de rien, on parle de grands sujets, le ragout, les frites, mais on ne dit rien du fait que je l'ai appelée sur ce numéro, donc je suis soulagé quand elle allume une clope et dit : « Je peux pas faire ça avec des potes, tu comprends ? »

Comme si le monde dans lequel je vis avait basculé, tout part en vrille, parce que voilà que je suis un pote de Cendar. Je dis : « Oh... bah... ça se comprend. – T'as pas fini ton thé », elle dit. Et je me dis qu'elle va me mettre dehors, et Seigneur, faites qu'elle me mette dehors pour que peut-être je puisse recommencer ma vie, avoir des mômes, ou fabriquer une bombe comme je l'ai appris en faisant le caddie pour le vieux qui bossait dans la démolition, c'était un super golfeur pour un mec sans doigts. Vous voyez de qui je parle ? 81 sur la fiche de score, il voulait me filer cinquante balles de pourboire, j'ai refusé, je lui ai demandé comment on faisait une bombe. Il a dit que ça valait pas cinq balles, mais j'étais convaincu du contraire. Bref. Elle dit : « T'as fini ton thé », mais c'est une question, j'ai fini, et elle me ressert, et je reste assis encore une heure à attendre que cette fichue conversation meure de sa belle mort.

Addy, mon ami, mon camarade de toujours,
pour toi, j'apporte leurs verres aux alcoolos,
pour toi, je fais le caddie toute l'après-midi,
pour toi, j'ai contacté les gens les plus chiants qui soient,
pour toi, j'ai été rejeté par le cas soc'
dont personne ne voulait s'approcher,
et j'ai tué le temps à coup de tasses de Lipton,
et à regarder ses vieilles photos. Tic-tac, tic-tac.
J'ai pas attendu aujourd'hui pour être ton homme
de confiance, je te le dis, même si ce matin,
à l'aube, j'ai empêché la mer de t'emporter
et je t'ai regardé prendre un nouveau départ.

Quand je m'apprête à partir, je suis bien décidé
à changer de vie, à vivre celle de quelqu'un d'autre,
pour que rien sur cette terre ne me ramène plus
dans cette cuisine, assis face à elle, mais elle dit :
« Faudrait que tu reviennes me rendre visite...
Regarde. – Regarde quoi ? je dis. – Regarde,
Regarde bien », alors je suis son regard. Et là,
y a une bouteille pleine parmi d'autres toutes
poussiéreuses sur le rebord de sa fenêtre.
Du Bailey's. « Elle est pour toi cette bouteille,
elle dit, t'as ton nom dessus ! J'y touche pas tant
que tu reviens pas ! » Sérieux, c'est quoi ce truc qui fait
que ce dont on devrait se débarrasser pour toujours,
ça nous trotte dans la tête comme si c'était en vie ?
Parce que j'étais de nouveau là la semaine suivante,
par un mercredi après-midi pluvieux
à siffler du Bailey's dans un mug d'Arsenal,
jusqu'à être assez bourré pour poser ma question.
Ce truc dont je m'étais dit que ce serait la seule
raison pour que je retourne dans cette cuisine.
« Bon, tu te souviens d'Addison – enfin Addy ?
– Oui. – Il se marie. Je suis son témoin, donc

je cherche des anecdotes. – Des histoires vraies ? »
elle dit, depuis l'évier où elle fait la vaisselle,
elle porte du noir, une longue jupe, finalement,
elle n'est pas trop mal, elle a un rencard,
elle me dit, pas un client, un vrai rencard,
mais je m'en fiche, je suis là avec mon Bailey's,
en train de vivre cette aventure. « Ouais, des vraies. »
Je m'demande si elle va ressortir le coup
d'la soirée où je m'suis tiré, quand on a joué
aux cartes. Addy a toujours dit qu'il s'était
enfermé aux chiottes et s'était endormi,
pendant que de l'extérieur elle essayait d'ouvrir.
Alors là je me dis, et s'il y a un scoop,
Ou quelque chose qu'Addy ne s'est jamais résolu
A nous raconter ? « Je sais un truc Bailey,
commence-t-elle, un truc tellement vrai que c'est
même pas une histoire. Je veux dire, c'est même pas
encore fini. Mais t'es son témoin, donc
je peux rien te dire. – Tu me prends pour qui ? (Je plaide.)
C'est son mariage, je ne vais pas le griller
le jour de son mariage. – Miranda, dit-elle,
ce qui me surprend, c'est le nom de la mariée. »
Je me demande comment elle peut savoir,
et elle se penche vers moi, boit une gorgée et dit :
« Il me l'a dit, le Japonais. – Je sais, je lui fais,
'ravi de vous n'a pas framme.' – Bairey, elle dit,
tu devrais pas être rat. »

Etre rat, être là, vous avez pigé. C'était
notre première *private joke*. A partir de là,
le temps passé ensemble, notre... affinité,
disons, s'affinait jusqu'à faire frémir les papilles.
Frémir res papires. « Je passe te voir à ra fin
de ra semaine. – Ra fin de cette semaine ou ra suivante ? »
Fallait être là, Tabitha, Jade, Sammie.

Des vieilles carcasses pour vous, mais déterrez-nous,
c'est tout ce que vous trouverez, des vieilles carcasses
et des *private jokes*. D'ici quelques siècles, des gens
croiront que tous les deux on pratiquait une religion
qui reposait sur cet étrange fluide sirupeux.
J'y suis retourné, je l'buvais à la bouteille,
mon Bailey's, sans vomir, assis avec Kelly
à passer le temps, mais c'est pas des moments
dont vous vous souvenez, 3 heures, 3 heures et demie,
le mercredi après-midi, elle me mettait dehors,
poliment, mais ce n'était que justice. Elle bossait,
elle avait un « emploi ». Se disait travailleuse,
qu'elle avait pris la journée. Alors, j'ai dit
que j'avais pris toute la vie, toute ra vie.
Elle a souri comme si elle portait un masque
qui ne souriait pas, qui était soudé,
comme si quelque chose avait mis une étincelle
dans ses yeux qui n'aurait pas dû être allumé.
Des feux de bengale. Illégal. Comme si son esprit
Etait surveillé par un logeur. Un... « rogeur ».

On sait quoi si personne nous dit rien ? Rien.
Tout ce à quoi on peut se fier, c'est ce qu'on voit
faire dans le monde, ceux qui sont là pour vous ou contre vous.
Les trois demoiselles d'honneur, regardez-vous,
vous pouvez bouter jusqu'à devenir aussi rouges
que la robe qu'on vous a forcées à porter,
mais tout le monde dans votre univers est là pour vous.
C'est pas pareil pour Kelly, je vous le garantis,
Avec tout ce qu'il y avait contre elle. Qu'est-ce que
Je faisais là, en silence ou à bavasser,
à me souvenir de détails insignifiants
sur des trucs d'y a des siècles pendant que le thé
refroidit, que dehors le ciel se couvre, et que
les réverbères s'allument, rouges ou orange ?

Pourquoi je restais là si longtemps si c'était pas pour changer la façon dont c'était perçu, mon comportement d'avant ? J'en ai parlé, un jour, un jour où je l'ai vue, j'ai tout craché, j'ai dit, tu te souviens de mes potes et moi quand on a joué aux cartes pour pas être avec toi ? « J'étais moche à l'époque, elle a dit, on était tous moches. – On était des gamins, j'ai dit, c'était juste pour rire. » On s'est assis dehors ce jour-là, le seul où on s'est assis dehors. Donc on est assis sur le carré de pelouse commun à tout l'immeuble. « Vous étiez des gamins. » Elle était allongée sur l'herbe. Elle a dit : « OK, laisse tomber alors. – L'eau a coulé sous les ponts », ai-je marmonné, comme si l'eau allait couler plus vite, plus propre, plus claire, comme si tout allait s'évaporer, mais le seul effet, ça a été de figer le temps. Elle s'est allumé une clope. « Ca ragoute sous le pont. C'est toi le témoin », elle a dit, et je ne sais pas pourquoi mais j'ai pas compris tout de suite. J'ai cru que c'était un compliment, du genre Bailey, t'es un mec bien, puis j'ai pris conscience de mon erreur, « être le témoin », c'était une raillerie, une malédiction, comme d'être Judas dans l'histoire, alors j'ai opiné parce que c'était comme ça que je me sentais aux yeux de tout le monde, pour Addy, qui est mon ami, et pour... pour Kelly, parce que j'étais son, son témoin à lui. « Si t'es son témoin, tu lui fais un EVG ? »

Ben oui. Faut bien enterrer sa vie de garçon. Et dieu sait qu'on l'a bien enterrée. Croft et Dennis, ils vous en raconteraient des belles, si le marié

ne savait plus que dire, enfin s'ils étaient là,
et Evans aussi, et Foster, Harris, Latchett,
Mason, Mills, O'Reilly, Piper, Sedley,
Warbeck, Williams, Woods et Yates, et tous leurs
petits messages qui disaient du fond du cœur :
Désolé, pas dispo ce soir.

(Il jette des morceaux de papier en l'air qui retombent doucement autour de lui.)

Mais moi, je peux raconter, je suis là, Addy,
je suis en pleine forme, comme vous pouvez le voir,
pour quelqu'un qui a deux litres de Smirnoff
dans le pif. Bon sang, quelle soirée on a passée !
c'est que j'ai assuré, j'ai fait venir des filles,
j'ai fait venir des strip-teaseuses, et on a passé
un bien joli moment, à écumer les boîtes,
l'une après l'autre, tous les six, les six Alphabet
Boys, Addy, Bailey, Croft, Dennis, Evans et Foster,
tous bourrés. On était le Club des Cinq, et rien
ne nous arrêta, nous, les quatre Bourrés
de l'Apocalypse, oyez bonnes gens,
les Garçons Sauvages arrivent, fermez bien vos portes,
Ils ne devraient pas tarder, tous... tous les trois.
A moins qu'ils soient plus que deux. Le couple... dynamique.
Jamais faire confiance à un barman quand on picole.
Deux litres de Smirnoff hein, c'est ce que j'veus ai dit,
mais ce n'était que de l'eau minérale. Je suis
un acteur, l'oubliez pas, pas un barman minable,
un vulgaire caddie, un fabricant de bombe
artisanale à deux balles. Je suis un acteur
ce soir, comme je l'étais ce jour où tu m'as dit
que si je restais près de toi, un jour j'aurais
un hôtel à moi, c'est bien ça que tu as dit ;
pas un caddie de golf, ou une cravate du Maple Vale,
ni deux semaines de vacances, ni mon mercredi,

mais un hôtel rien qu'à moi. « Oublie, Bailey, tu vas te faire baiser à Londres, le monde du showbiz, c'est des pourris, reste avec moi, je te le dis, l'avenir nous appartient mon vieux. »

Quel baratineur. De l'eau minérale, de l'eau minérale sous les ponts. Et elle m'a dit que si je me pointais dans son petit appart' avec Addy KO, après son EVG, elle me dirait son secret, elle me dirait tout ce qu'elle savait. Alors je me suis dit, OK, ça me semble pas bien méchant. J'aurai pas bu, je le ramènerai chez lui quand les autres seront partis, y sera KO, comme d'hab, et allons-y, on verra bien. On va voir un truc qu'on n'aurait jamais pensé voir.

(Il ouvre avec beaucoup de précaution la « bombe » factice et révèle un vrai mécanisme avec une minuterie et des explosifs.)

Le démolisseur vous dit qu'il faut pas bouger. Jacques-a-dit plussoie : comme il dit, faut pas bouger.

Bon, elle a dit que l'histoire n'en était pas vraiment une, parce qu'elle n'avait pas de fin, mais je suis parmi vous ce soir pour lui en donner une, de fin, que vous allez entendre... ou pas. Ça dépend de ce qui va se passer. Je sais que certains parmi vous savent reconnaître quand une blague est une blague, et plus important, quand une blague n'est plus une blague. Certains parmi vous sont sans doute parvenus à la conclusion que, de façon générale, on peut se fier aux apparences, hein. Mais vous ne connaissez pas mon sens de l'humour. Ou alors, ce sont ceux qui pensent me connaître le mieux qui s'attendent au pire. « Ah, diront-ils quand ils en auront réchappé, j'ai toujours su

que ce Bailey ne valait rien. »

L'un de ceux qui appartiennent à ce camp, le camp des pessimistes, a sans doute déjà composé en douce le 18 sous la table dans sa serviette.

Peut-être que vous l'avez fait, peut-être que je ne finirai jamais cette histoire. Tout ce que j'ai dit sur ce... ce présent que j'ai apporté c'est que c'était un appareil de *easy listening* et que si vous m'écoutez, tous autant que vous êtes, table 12, table 5, table d'honneur,

on arrivera au bout en un morceau, ensemble.

Alors, de quoi vous avez peur ? Vous le voyez pas là, Addy ? Qu'il soit votre mari, votre parent, votre patron, votre ex, votre rival, votre partenaire de golf, votre ennemi, votre héros, peut-être pas au mieux de sa forme, mais sinon, toujours en vie, sauvé, avec nous ? Alors quoi, vous pensiez que je l'avais transformé en sirène ?

On a joué aux cartes, le marié et moi, ce fameux soir, il y a toutes ces années, où j'avais trop peur de me retrouver seul avec c'te meuf pleine d'espoir qui ressemblait à rien, donc j'ai lâché des sous et j'ai triché, je me suis cassé et Addy est resté avec Cendar, tous les deux dans leur tanière, et ce qu'ils ont fait c'est l'amour, pour reprendre ses mots à elle, ce qu'ils ont fait, c'est l'amour toute la nuit, cette nuit-là, parce que ce qu'il a découvert, c'est pourquoi toutes les filles la méprisaient.

Parce qu'il n'y avait rien qu'elle refusait de faire pour un peu de plaisir. Nous, on l'appelait Cendar, mais les filles de l'école l'appelaient Sans-Tabou. Sans-Tabou. Au petit matin, il s'était envolé, et elle s'est retrouvée toute seule dans la maison au milieu de nulle part.

Elle était amoureuse, qu'elle dit, mais sans preuve,
Sans-Tabou, la Cendar, toute seule. L'heure a tourné,
la journée a passé, la semaine s'est écoulée
et elle, elle attendait quelque chose. Elle attendait
de revivre ce moment... un jour, nous les humains,
on sera un objet d'étude pour des créatures
qui diront dans leur langue : « Voilà ceux qui voulaient
Revivre ce moment. »

Nous étions les Alpha Boys,
le petit jeu de Cendar ne nous a pas échappé,
et Addy, on l'a bien chambré avec ça :
elle te regarde, Addy ! et lui reste de marbre,
il la snobe dans le couloir,
il la snobe à la sortie du lycée,
il la snobe,
et puis un jour, il la prend à part, il la pousse
dans un coin et il lui dit : « On peut refaire
ce qu'on a fait quand, et seulement quand, c'est moi
qui l'dis. Le reste du temps, je veux pas te voir.
Tu me suis pas, tu parles pas de moi, jamais.
Tope là ? » Pas au top, elle tope,
elle est op', et pendant près d'un an,
ça se passe comme ça. Addy dit qu'il s'entraîne
en circuit et qu'il sera pas joignable, mais
il est avec Sans-Tabou dans la petite cabane
sur la plage, pendant une heure, par tous les temps,
tel le p'tit couple qui tourne sur l'horloge suisse
coincés sur leurs rails, lui on le voit quand il fait beau,
elle quand il pleut, on les voit jamais ensemble
et ça lui va à elle,
parce qu'il est tout son univers, et que c'est tout
ce qu'il a à lui offrir. Le temps passe,
elle quitte l'école sans avoir vraiment brillé.
Dans les années qui suivent, on voit tous bien qu'Addy
est sous une bonne étoile, tout lui sourit : « L'avenir

nous appartient, mon vieux. » « Tu peux bosser ce samedi, Mr DeMarco a besoin d'un caddie. » « Pas de problème Mr Addison, tout ce que vous voudrez... » et aujourd'hui il a des actions ici et là, et quand il veut du plaisir sans tabou, il sait où se le procurer. Alors il lui dit, histoire de la faire vraiment courte : « Va te faire foutre, Kelly. » Et elle lui dit : « Ne me quitte pas. » Bon, en vrai, on peut pas dire que ce soit un ordre, quand elle dit : « Ne me quitte pas », c'est rien, c'est une prière, hein, en vérité, « Ne me quitte pas ». Une prière à laquelle il n'y a pas de réponse. Et il dit : « Si je vois encore ta tronche, j'la fais réduire en bouillie, tu piges ? » Et là, elle est désolée, mais elle doit lui montrer des photos qu'un ami a prises pour elle, elle doit le dire : « Ça prouve que je t'aime et que tu m'aimes. » Et il dit : « Ça prouve que dalle », et elle se contente de dire : « C'est peut-être vrai que ça prouve que dalle mais j'ai fait des doubles qui sont dans un Tupperware dans un coffre à la banque. *Ne me quitte pas.* » Il lui dit qu'il va la tuer. Mais elle bouge pas. Il veut lui donner du fric, sort son portefeuille comme si c'était un atout, sa carte maîtresse. Mais c'est pas de l'argent qu'elle veut, la Sans-Tabou. Alors bien sûr, il connaît quelqu'un, et donc un soir il envoie quelqu'un, peut-être que ça va lui faire peur et ça marche très bien. Bingo. Une vraie réussite. Plan A. Mais Addy peut pas la laisser comme ça, comme... une bombe, qui peut exploser si elle est contrariée ou si personne n'écoute, donc il se dit. Si on passait un deal. Toi, tu bosses pour moi, tu gardes la moitié de ce que tu gagnes, et tu la fermes sur nous deux, et moi, j'ai plus jamais

besoin de te voir.

C'est ça leur deal. Elle se dit qu'il pense pas vraiment qu'il la verra plus jamais alors elle accepte, parce que ça lui permet de s'en sortir.

Elle se tape les hommes d'affaires du Maple Vale.

La table onze sait de quoi je parle.

Et voilà, le problème Cendar est résolu

pour le boss, et tout le monde est content, ou presque.

Sauf que le boss, il se dit que ce qu'il lui faut

c'est une garantie, quelque chose qui va clore

le deal pour de bon, la maintenir dans le réseau.

Alors quelqu'un passe de nouveau la voir, mais cette fois,

il lui apporte un petit cadeau. « Salut Kelly,

tu veux venir faire la fête ? » et elle aime tellement

le petit cadeau qu'il lui a mitonné

qu'elle en redemande. « Quand est-ce qu'on se voit ? »

« Tu fais quoi demain ? » Ensuite elle en a besoin

de temps en temps, jusqu'à ce que de temps en temps,

ce soit tous les jours, et ensuite il lui faut du fric

parce que le petit cadeau coûte cher,

parce que le petit cadeau lui coûte très cher,

encore que si vous la voyiez, comme je l'ai vue

hier soir, vous verriez que le petit cadeau

lui a dessiné une belle silhouette.

Ce qui nous amène presque au présent, à moins

bien sûr que vous ne regardiez ça en vidéo,

ou dans une autre vie, dans un musée.

Le dernier pote est reparti en titubant

pour retrouver sa femme ou sa télé, ou les deux,

et Addy et moi, on faisait les idiots

devant le club, sauf qu'il n'y a qu'un idiot

dans mon histoire, et qui tient ce rôle ? Il dit :

« Si on s'faisait un bain de minuit ? » Mais il n'y a

que lui et moi. Je réponds : « Allons faire un tour »,

je le mets sur la banquette arrière, il s'allonge,
et je démarre. Je sais par expérience que quand
il est assez bourré, il tombe dans les vapes ;
dont acte.

J'arrive à Bramble Park, il est quatre heures du mat'
Je dis qu'il est dans la voiture, KO. Elle fait :
« On prend ma voiture aussi. – T'as une voiture ?
Je savais pas. – Comment tu saurais ? dit Kelly,
on n'en a jamais eu besoin. » Puis je regarde,
je regarde derrière elle, dans l'appart', et c'est tout
vide, tout ce qui reste ce sont les trucs
que personne n'emporte. « Où est tout le reste ? »
Elle a une p'tite Ford toute pourrie, toute sa vie
est à l'intérieur, dans des cartons. Y a des cartons
jusqu'au plafond, elle peut même pas voir derrière.
On est là sur le parking, et c'est clair
qu'elle en a assez de cette vie. « J'ai une cousine
dans le Nord. » C'est vrai, elle m'en a déjà parlé.
« Prends ta voiture et suis-moi. » Et sans vraiment
réfléchir, je pourrais ne pas être d'accord,
je pourrais demander pourquoi au juste,
je fais ce que Cendar me dit. On démarre,
je la suis. Et là, sachant ce que vous savez,
bien sûr, j'ai quelques menues appréhensions
(oui Tabitha, ça sonne un peu pédant), j'ai peur
de ce qui pourrait arriver, parce que je sais
qu'elle est en colère, mais d'une colère
sourde, qui a couvé pendant des années,
et moi je suis arrivé là comme par magie,
pour réaliser son rêve, sauf que je ne sais
pas trop ce qu'elle a en tête, je sais juste que...
je suis... je suis en quelque sorte, sans savoir
pourquoi, je suis *pour* elle, et pas *contre* elle,
et d'une certaine façon, ben,

être pour une personne, on dirait que ça annihile toute volonté, ça coupe pas seulement le souffle, ça coupe aussi la volonté.

On roule jusqu'à la plage.

Je la suis jusque là-bas ; nuit sans lune, tout est noir, aucun signe de l'aube.

J'entends sa portière claquer, puis plus rien, puis ses pas qui crissent sur le gravier.

On dirait une armée qui approche.

Elle ouvre la portière, s'assoit à côté de moi :

« Ma cousine dit qu'elle m'aidera, dit Kelly, mais je l'ai pas vue depuis mes treize ans.

Elle a intérêt d'avoir changé. J'ai changé, moi. »

J'lui dis que j'ai changé aussi ; elle me regarde Bizarrement.

« On ferait mieux de passer chez toi, prendre tes affaires, elle dit. – Oh, prendre mes affaires, je réponds pour dire quelque chose, d'accord, pour le voyage. »

Une fois que c'est dit, c'est décidé. Je pars avec elle. Dans le Nord ! Mais je sais toujours pas pourquoi elle m'a demandé d'amener Addy ici quand il serait KO. Elle se tourne vers moi.

« Faut pas le réveiller »,

dit Kelly, comme si elle lisait dans mes pensées.

Elle me tend la main. Quand je la prends –

moi qui croyais que la mienne était froide –

je me rends compte que c'est la première fois

qu'on se touche. C'est furtif, rien de plus,

mais je sens soudain l'appel d'une chose tellement...

tellement lointaine, que c'est comme si plus rien d'autre n'existait pour moi.

On a ouvert la portière arrière. Il n'a pas

bougé, ni moufté. Je l'ai attrapé par derrière

pour le sortir, puis Kelly lui a pris les jambes,
et avec ce poids mort qui se rendait compte de rien,
on est descendus vers la plage cahin-caha,
et on s'est retrouvés sur le sable.

J'allais le poser, maintenant qu'on y était,
mais on n'y était pas, elle a dit : « Près de l'eau »,
et étouffant un rire devant cette folie, j'ai
continué, je sentais le sable devenir plus dur,
plus plat, mais elle ne montrait toujours aucun signe
que c'était là que nous devions le laisser.
Puis, à quelques mètres de l'endroit où la mer
venait lécher le sable, elle a posé ses pieds
sur le sable noir, et j'ai posé son corps.

Elle se tenait bien droite. « C'est ce que j'ai décidé. »
J'ai acquiescé, mais comme si j'étais dans un film,
parce que tout ça n'avait aucun sens. « Est-ce qu'on sait
dans quel sens va la marée ? dis-je innocemment.
– Elle monte », dit-elle.

Elle savait. Ils avaient l'habitude de venir ici.
Elle et lui. « C'est ce que j'ai décidé.
– Il est KO, dis-je, pensant que peut-être
il fallait dire les choses clairement. Il est peut-être
pas en état de s'en tirer. » Elle s'est mise
à remonter la plage
vers le parking et les lumières de la ville,
lentement, comme si c'était un jour d'août baigné
de soleil, comme si elle devait trouver son chemin
au milieu de familles qui hurlent, et qu'elle était
une grande dame calme, sereine, imperturbable.
« Ce serait ma faute, Kelly, s'il lui
arrivait du mal, j'étais son témoin.
– C'est vrai, elle a lancé, mais tout le monde sait
qu'il fait ce qu'il veut, qu'il aimait nager

seul au petit matin. Tu savais pas ça ?
On est venus nager ensemble un jour. Seulement
cette fois-ci, il avait trop bu. »
J'ai regardé derrière moi, en vitesse.
Les bras le long du corps,
le visage tourné vers nous, il ne bougeait pas.
Aucune idée du temps qu'il faudrait à la marée
pour monter. Peut-être qu'il se réveillerait
dès que l'eau froide l'effleurerait. Peut-être.
Kelly était arrivée au parking,
et, les mains croisées derrière la nuque,
elle regardait loin derrière moi quand je l'ai rejointe.

« Je veux pas y aller toute seule, Bailey. J'ai besoin
de toi pour lire la carte. » J'avais les mains autour
de sa taille, je me souviens pas leur avoir
demandé de la toucher, mais elles étaient là,
posées de chaque côté des hanches de Kelly,
et je sentais à travers la laine et le coton
sa chair et son sang qui battait. « Je f'rai l'affaire ;
c'est ça, maint'nant que tu as eu ce que tu voulais. »
Puis j'ai regardé en arrière, là-bas au loin,
là où les vagues allaient et venaient, et
où gisait le petit tas que nous avions laissé.
Et il m'a semblé que ça ne coûterait rien
de continuer à avancer, de m'enfuir,
ça paraissait un acte si lointain, si ténu
quand on y pensait. Il semblait impossible que
toutes ces années passées ensemble, tous les bons
moments, nos moments de folie, nos belles années,
et même son nom, Addison, Addison,
aient quoi que ce soit chose à voir avec
ce tas de vêtements chiffonnés au bord de l'eau.

C'est juste, c'est juste que de manière
très délibérée, j'ai enlevé mes mains,

levé l'index, dans un geste
qui voulait dire : « Quoi que je fasse maintenant,
je viendrai avec toi, ce que tu veux,
c'est ce que je veux, quoi que je fasse maintenant... »
et j'ai reculé, je me suis retourné, et là,
j'ai couru en direction de la mer. Je suis
repassé dans les traces laissées par nos pas,
et j'ai regardé le corps minuscule s'agrandir
et devenir de plus en plus net,
jusqu'à devenir un objet, un monstrueux
objet de pitié. A ce moment-là, la mer
le gagnait sur sa gauche ; sous lui le sable salé
entourait ses épaules comme le bras d'un client roublard,
un autre bras autour de ses chevilles, son veston
de plus en plus sombre, son pantalon clair
de plus en plus taché, pendant que sa grosse tête
endormie restait inerte. Alors je l'ai attrapé
par les coudes et je l'ai éloigné de l'eau.
Je l'ai posé et je suis parti vivre ma vie.
Ma nouvelle vie, oui.

Et vous croyez que j'ai vu quoi, Sammie, Jade,
hein, et toi, Tabitha, pendant que
je remontais de la plage vers ma nouvelle vie ?
J'ai vu ma nouvelle vie me regarder. Je l'ai vue
me tourner le dos et monter dans sa voiture,
j'ai entendu son moteur démarrer,
je me suis vu me mettre à courir en criant
son nom, j'ai senti que je ralentissais,
comme si j'étais paralysé, comme quand on court
dans un rêve et j'ai vu sa voiture s'éloigner,
et je me suis arrêté d'un coup sur le sable,
ce matin, sans elle.

Et je voulais vous dire qu'il n'y avait rien,
rien en vérité...

(Il coupe les fils attachés à la « bombe » et il en sort une pluie de confettis.)

qui reste de ma nouvelle vie.

Vous pouvez vous détendre. La mort ne vous attend pas non plus. C'est ça mon présent.

Pour Addy, un toast à ta vie,

pour Miranda, un toast à sa vie à lui,

et pour vous tous, un toast, quelle que soit la vie

que vous meniez, dans vos oripeaux de bonheur.

Je porte un toast à une fille que vous n'avez jamais

connue, que vous verrez jamais et que jamais

je ne reverrai, et c'est tout ce que nous avons en commun.

Alors n'oubliez pas, quand vous m'effacerez

de cette vidéo, ou que vous la rangerez

pour ne plus la voir, que le meilleur moyen

de se souvenir d'une chose,

c'est de regretter qu'elle se soit passée.

(Il part.)

(Noir.)

La Vocifère. Translating Caryl Churchill's The Skriker

Saraé DUREST

Abstract: In Caryl Churchill's *The Skriker* (1994), reality and supernaturality crash into one another on the stage as well as in the characters' language. As such, the play presents a riveting challenge for both translation and analysis. My research approached these two fronts by proposing a full translation of the play together with a commentary, and I became interested in the way in which the translation process and the hermeneutic process fuelled each other. The following essay sums up my findings, from thematic contents to dramaturgy, as I worked my way through these questions: what does the playwright mean? Is meaning more important than what words, rhythms, sounds are used to convey it? If not, how does all this carry over in translation, especially when confronted with the eponymous character's shape-shifting, elusive language? The goal was also to produce a translation that carried the potential for a stage production. The translation strategy was built accordingly, into a method that prioritises rhythm and sound over meaning in order to engage the audience's feelings rather than their rational understanding.

Résumé: Dans *The Skriker* (titre traduit : *La Vocifère*) de Caryl Churchill (1994), le réel et le surnaturel s'entrechoquent sur la scène autant que dans le langage des personnages. En ce sens, la pièce constitue un défi passionnant, à la fois de traduction et d'analyse. Ma recherche aborde ces deux aspects en proposant une traduction intégrale de la pièce complétée par un commentaire. La manière dont le processus de traduction et le processus herméneutique s'alimentent mutuellement a attiré mon attention. Le présent article résume le résultat de ces recherches, depuis les horizons thématiques jusqu'à la dramaturgie, animées par une volonté de répondre aux questions : que veut dire la dramaturge ? Le sens est-il plus important que les mots, rythmes et sons employés pour l'exprimer ? Dans le cas contraire, comment tout cela est-il pris en charge par la traduction, en particulier face au parler sonnante et trébuchante du personnage éponyme ? L'objectif était

également de produire une traduction qui contienne les germes d'une production scénique. J'ai construit mon projet de traduction en ce sens, en plaçant la priorité sur le rythme et les sons plutôt que sur le sens, de manière à interpeler la sensibilité des spectateurs plutôt que leur compréhension rationnelle.

Keywords: Churchill, Skriker, translation, logorrhoea, alterity, folklore, aesthetics, orality, musicality, formal constraint, dramaturgy

Mots-clés: Churchill, Vocifère, traduction, logorrhée, altérité, folklore, esthétique, oralité, musicalité, contrainte formelle, dramaturgie

Caryl Churchill's 1994 play *The Skriker* is a striking illustration of the playwright's taste for formal innovation and stylistic creativity through constraint. As such, it was immediately suggested to me by my tutor Pr. Elisabeth Angel-Perez when I presented my ambition to work on a play whose translation would represent a technical challenge. The following pages encapsulate the research that ensued and the findings that I developed in the resulting thesis, under the joint supervision of Pr. Angel-Perez and Pr. Florence Naugrette in a crossover between the departments of English Studies and Compared Literature at Sorbonne Université.

My goals were to produce both a translation and a literary analysis of the play, with a mind to show how each of those processes fuels the other. The hermeneutic qualities of the act of translation thus came to be at the core of the analytical part of the research, particularly the modes of translation specific to drama. The translation process itself led to reflections on the nature of theatrical writing, on the role of the subconscious in the author's process as well as the translator's. By dealing with language, the research went after something outside language in Caryl Churchill's process. The prism of translation served to parse the light spectrum of *The Skriker*, aiming at an analysis of its aesthetics and dramaturgy.

The Skriker is dominated by rhythm. As the eponymous character deliquesces into apparently whimsical logorrhoea, she (or it) lets the audience hear of decay through strings of words missing more and more syllables into oblivion, of fear and anger through staccato outbursts of roaring consonants, of raging despair through heart-wrenching accelerandos, of childhood and monsters through strange names and rags of nursery rhymes peeking up from the subconscious abyss like bubbles in a boiling cauldron. In contrast, the other two main characters, women in their late teens, speak a modern, natural, conversational language that struggles to keep up with the effects of magic on reality. The play is brimming with contrast to the point of contradiction, with politics and poetry, with magic and rationality. It deals with modernity through folklore and with individual identity through the collective consciousness of what defines alterity. Translation was a constraint used as a point of entry into this epic piece of drama.

My early findings pulled the focus more and more toward the intrinsic relationship between translation and interpretation, and the structure of the research arose accordingly: the discussion of the play's main themes was comprised in the preliminary first part, followed by the complete translation. The interpretative third part was dedicated to the reflections that the translation process itself had allowed, as well as my attempts at defining how translating the text affected analysing it.

I would like to start by giving a few samples of the text in my translation, to serve as a basis and an illustration of the translation strategy that I discuss further below. If possible, these should be read together with the corresponding passage in the original text. The excerpts will be referred to in Roman numerals, followed by the line number from the French version in Arabic numerals.

EXCERPT I. This is the opening of the play, the first paragraph of a monologue about five times as long in total. A bravura piece for the performer, this liminal monologue is an immediate deep dive into the Skriker's splashy and slippery manner of speaking.

> Read it in the original English: Churchill 2015: 9

VOCIFÈRE. J'ouïs la fille rire braire se frire un piffreur d'armes, elle savait filer filon filer droit parfait impec' la plus vulgaire paille de blé en or, de clé en mors, venaison dorée et venise au fond des eaux, donjons au fond du château des cailloux fous ge-nous et vous non plus. N'épouse jamais un royal de luxe bien-aimé. Brèche brise-reins brûle-doigts bruissement bruissement bravo va-t'en tu n'avances pas. Pleure plisse plante son joli gâteau à la crème soufflé trou dans le cœur à cœur ouvert. Voit une petite chosette sale noirêdeuse avec une longue longue queue ne sait quand reviendra. Au secours, s'écrie-t-elle, osse-laide-mande mon aide. Donc je file les fuseaux fusils fusions en or en aura en dorure et si elle ne peut pas devinette et fond du trouver mon nom alors je l'emporterai sans faute sans frauder sans frotter sans faux s'en fout s'en fut sans. Est-ce William Gwylliam Guillaume ? Est-ce Pierre Paul Jacadi a dit est-ce Jean-Blague ? Est-ce Alexandre Sandro André de Draguignan ? Méphistophélès Christophe Cristobal Cymbale Chérubin Bain-moussant ? C'est pas ça, je dis, c'est passage clou-t'es libre ce soir fais voir ce que tu sais faire. Puis pointant du doigt elle dit Tracassin ! Tratra petit ca joli sein sein ! De ses levrettes chevilletes rosettes, de sa bouche d'égout, de là sortit ma sécrétion nectar fleur de ma jeune et belle et la bête de trou trou troie n'aura pas lieutenant colonel gaz moutarde. Glapisse ! rapetisse ! repoussé à un réduit, raide, rassis, risque un somme suave salve dans le noir pour me sauver pêle-mêle, un gronde un fronde un monde plus loin.

EXCERPT II. This dialogue is taken from the second scene of the play, in which we first encounter the two human protagonists, Lily and Josie. It goes to show both the more naturalistic language used in the play, as well as how that everyday language tries to work around the supernatural.

> Churchill 2015: 16

JOSIE. Je croyais que c'était une patiente parce que si tu les voyais tu comprendrais ce que je veux dire, il y en a j'ai l'air de rien à côté. On dirait que je suis pire parce que j'ai fait quelque chose mais il y en a qui croient qu'ils sont quelqu'un d'autre et moi je sais... Qu'est-ce que je disais ?

LILY. Tu croyais que quelqu'un était / une patiente.

JOSIE. Oui mais elle a des centaines d'années. Et puis j'étais impressionnée par la magie mais maintenant je crois qu'elle a quelque chose qui ne tourne pas rond.

LILY. Quand tu dis des centaines d'années, tu veux dire genre quatre-vingts ans ?

JOSIE. Elle a l'air d'avoir la cinquantaine mais elle a je sais pas peut-être cinq cents ans ou un million d'années, je ne sais pas l'âge de ces trucs-là.

LILY. Quand tu dis magie ?

JOSIE. J'ai pensé que peut-être elle pourrait rentrer avec toi.

LILY. Josie, tu seras bientôt sortie. Il vaut mieux attendre qu'ils t'autorisent.

JOSIE. Elle voudrait me faire souhaiter que le bébé revienne mais je ne le ferai pas parce qu'elle rendrait ça horrible.

EXCERPT III. Josie has now been taken to the underworld by the Skriker. In this passage, rational language and fairy tongue come together with a bang as the Skriker, in a still mostly intelligible speech, starts leaning again towards her idiosyncratic mode of expression.

> Churchill 2015: 36

VOCIFÈRE. À la tienne, Josie, mariée ou pendue.

JOSIE. Je n'ai pas soif.

VOCIFÈRE. Soif qui fouette, gosier séché sec comme du sablier.

JOSIE. Oui, mais je ne...

VOCIFÈRE. Tournis torches fraîches faudra.

JOSIE. Oui mais je ne veux pas...

VOCIFÈRE. Ne veux-tu pas te sentir réchauffement et heureuse pour toujours ? Réchauffe les caquets de ton écorcé. Te rendre bravoure et bavure. Regarde le multicolore, respire la savoureuse. Tu boiras bien une trinquette avec moi, Josie, après tout ce qu'on s'est fait prendre ?

EXCERPT IV. A sample of stage directions. Even though none will be uttered on stage in a full-blown stage production, being true to the technical language of the author is key to giving directors tools to understand the author's intentions – and how to navigate them, be it to follow or transgress them. In the case of *The Skriker*, much depended on the translation of the silent folkloric creatures' names to echo from one culture to another.

> Churchill 2015: 46

De nombreux couples en train de danser. Parmi eux, le KELPIE et la FEMME, la DAME VERTE et l'HOMME AU SEAU, qui est faible, l'ELFE DOMESTIQUE, la VOCIFÈRE en homme, CROC-EN-SANGLANT-OS-CRAQUANT, le MOLOSSE NOIR, JOHNNY PIEDS-AU-CARRÉ, MIMI LONGBRAS. Il y a une grosse chaussure et, lorsqu'ils ont fini de danser, ils y grimpent. Elle est identique à la chaussure de LILY qu'elle a jetée d'un coup de pied. Elle est assise sur le canapé avec un HOMME d'environ trente ans. C'est la VOCIFÈRE. JOSIE coupe des légumes. Le BÉBÉ est dans un couffin.

The politics of *The Skriker*

The political element resonates through the play and through its eponymous creature itself, in a mostly pessimistic underlying perspective. Politics here are what rules, what unites, what concerns all, but also what divides and excludes. *The Skriker* says something of the relation to otherness, materialised by the paradoxically super-natural forces of nature that have become both a victim and an executioner of the human characters, but also of interpersonal relationships.

The main character's talent for narcissistic manipulation tells a tale of perverted relationships between humans, with one and all attempting to use the others as a means to an end. Human presence is regarded as a self-destructive force by the Skriker herself. Such an invasive degradation tampers with all the layers of dramatic and fictional space. Everything is dislocated: time is elliptic and possibly non-linear; space is pervaded by human and supernatural behaviours alike; language and human interactions are manipulated as weaknesses by the Skriker.

The overarching notion of dislocation crosses over from the thematic to the stylistic as it pervades language itself. Because Caryl Churchill focuses on formal creativity, her words do not simply express their point – they are the point. In *The Skriker*, the truth value of language is put into question as several truth systems collide. In the Skriker's logorrhoea, Churchill develops a ludic yet menacing

use of lapsus (see I, and III, 1, 9-10), pointing towards an unsettling form of predestination: the ancient fairy tells the whole story from the very beginning, converting the whole play into a mere iteration of an endless cycle, whose insignificance is counterbalanced only from our point of view, because we happen to be witnessing it. All engage in the war of each against all and in the self-centred quest for supposedly universal happiness. All fail. All die. Generation after generation (four of them in *The Skriker*), individual after individual, the cycle goes on. The Skriker's language is bursting with an infinity of those iterations. As she imposes the treacherous gift of wishes come true upon the human characters, once again the boundaries of reality and those of language break apart. Language, relationships, truth and even reality corrode into a damaged system that barely holds together.¹

Amidst the failing relationships symbolically depicted in the play emerges a focus on the feminine and feminist voice. The Skriker's feminine incarnations reveal broken forms of femininity falling victim to the pressure of social constructs. They are mere puppets created by and for another. The two human characters, Lily and Josie, appear violently real in comparison to the fabricated, impressionistic characters invented by the Skriker. The empathic focus in the play, the two young women left to their own devices facing the challenges of womanhood and maternity appear incapable to express tenderness or love. Lily and Josie's seemingly unconditional love, clues of which transpire in their all-forgiving behaviour towards each other, is never explicitly stated. But it is our contention that the audience, as they perceive a silent and gauche desire to express tenderness, is all the more emotionally involved since the characters fail at expressing their own emotional engagement. Lily can barely formulate her willingness to sacrifice herself in an ultimate act of love at the end of the play. Lily and Josie's failure is that of tragic characters falling victim to destiny, both strengthened and doomed by their flaw, each a different form of clumsy love. Through that prism of tragedy, the Skriker becomes an incarnation of fatality, beyond the notions of good and evil, radically outside all human value systems, playing with good and bad intentions alike.

The Skriker engages the audience in a reflection on their own intrinsically lonely experience of the world. The political and metaphysical reflections brought on by the play are not brought on so explicitly, and that is what makes them effective. Each audience member converts their own reception of the play into something personal and hence particularly relevant to their own experience. In the words of R. Darren Gobert: “[The play] works expressionistically, to be sure, giving form as it does to whatever unconscious drives or murky forces of history or ideology. But part of what it expresses must always elude understanding for its visceral impact to register” (30). Caryl Churchill herself had already confirmed that strategy, stating that “Playwrights don’t give answers, they ask questions” (Churchill 1960: 446).

Folklore in *The Skriker*

The study of Caryl Churchill’s choice of characters shows an emphasis on the grotesque quality of folkloric aesthetics on the one hand and on figures materialising danger and death, embodied mirrors of primary fears, on the other hand. The tension between the grotesque, provoking incredulity and even amusement, and horror, provoking involuntary adhesion, creates a contact point with buried individual interiority. The audience is made to face their own belief system. The *Skriker* thus becomes the otherness that opens the door to the self through its own weaknesses.

Many of the “spirits” assembled by Churchill are bogeys: supernatural embodiments of childhood fears but also of parents’ fears regarding their children (see characters named in IV). The folkloric imagery is in broad terms a representation of the obscure menace that a person identifies with what is unknown to them in the world. The supernatural explains away the unintelligible, helps them cope with the unacceptable. Churchill’s discordant crowd of creatures epitomises the presence of something other to which everyone reacts in accordance with their individual history. The playwright’s final choice of staging these characters exclusively through dance and music plays a crucial part in the eerie atmosphere of the play. Devoid of

traditional dramaturgical stakes, the supernatural characters become non-persons just as they are given bodies on stage. They become pure presence, and thus a canvas ready to reflect the unsettled audience's memories and fears. They seamlessly take over from individual mental representations.

The tension between the common ground that is folklore and each individual's personal take on these folkloric roots is particularly valuable to the playwright as it builds reception at both a collective and a personal level. The responsibility for this collective and personalised imagery is passed on to the translator. I chose to convert the original reference system into the French "langue-culture" (Meschonnic 50) in order to awaken similar associative effects in the French audience by drawing from familiar folklore and culture.

Hermeneutics and translation strategy

The translation process enriches the translator's understanding of the text as much as it requires an understanding. Confronted to the Skriker's associative language, the translator must create a new frame for meaning, which necessarily reflects their subjectivity but whose effectiveness relies on the translator's receptiveness to the author's and the audience's subjectivities. Translating a piece of drama also implies putting the text on a mental stage and hearing it rendered by imaginary actors. The hermeneutic process thence is sharpened by the necessity for the translator to multiply their interpretative stances.

As a result, I had to angle the French text towards its eventual transmission to an audience. This transmission is about enabling the spectator to create their own meaning rather than offering up ready-made rational meaning. The translation had to tend towards Rancière's emancipation of the spectator. My translation strategy leaned towards having the text heard rather than understood, aiming at an aesthetic rather than intellectual reception. This priority on sound over meaning sprang from the analysis of the original text as much as it helped deepen that analysis.

In the more naturalistic dialogues (see II), that same sense of an aural and ephemeral quality of the text led me to favour what Antoine Vitez calls “le mouvement du sens”: not the semantics of words, but what guides and encompasses them, what pulls them towards an interstitial place of meaning.²

In order to acquire a conversational quality in the naturalistic dialogues, a certain amount of distancing from the original text was necessary. Marks of orality, of hesitant epanorthosis, of interruption create a rhythm that is far from random. The translation had to attain the same degree of precision but also of confusion to sound as natural as the original. In that regard, I systematically put my translation to the test of orality, saying the sentences aloud as I went on, and then having actresses read the text out loud as well. The creation of a performance-reading of the play at the end of the academic year was the ultimate realisation of that journey towards the achievement of orality.

A problem that arose in the naturalistic passages was the incursion of the supernatural in language. How can grammar rule over what breaks the rules of reality? Syntax suffers particularly around the verb *wish*, the pillar of the Skriker’s magic reality (see II, 14-15). English is more amenable than French to such distortions, and the resulting French versions sound considerably more circumvoluted than the original. At least these somewhat awkward formulations highlight Caryl Churchill’s attention to the limits of what language can express, particularly when it comes to experiencing the unknown.

The Skriker’s speeches, spilling over on all sides, set the focus on rhythm and poetry against semantics (see I). The spirits’ singing subordinates language to music: words become mere evocations, bundles of sounds to be interpreted freely. I proposed a systematic nomenclature of the associative sound and meaning effects, based on the musicological repertory of nonchord tones. This allowed for a precise analysis of concordance between original and translated effects, and went to show that, stylistically, nothing is left to chance in the character’s seemingly random logorrhoea. Some *sensation* of randomness, however, had to be retained. As Julie Vatain puts it, referring to the

interpretative work of the actor rather than the translator here, “dire ce texte ne saurait correspondre à l’expliquer” (75). Translation and analysis function in conjunction, but the latter cannot show through the former in the end.

In order to translate the Skriker’s glossolalic lines (see I), I started by reading every passage many times out loud, in order to grow accustomed to the sounds and rhythms that transpired. Only as a second step did I go on to look for meaning in the text. Once I interpreted the overarching meaning of a given passage, I started translating, prioritising rhythm and sound, but as a means of expressing the idea, the tale, the atmosphere or the emotion behind the text. I was keen to let my mind ramble freely on some passages, in semi-automatic writing, guided only by my cultivated familiarity with the rhythm and sounds of the original text. Some lines were therefore translated very quickly in that manner, embracing the sensation of creative overboil that the playwright might have felt during the original process.

Building the aesthetics of *The Skriker*

Caryl Churchill creates a form that essentially materialises the themes that she wants to touch upon. In *The Skriker*, meaning is to be grasped emotionally, in a deeper, more intense, less controllable manner than that of analytical understanding. The playwright is possibly borrowing from the surrealists and letting the work escape her grasp. This schizophrenic stylistics blurs the boundaries of self and other. The Skriker’s glossolalic lines conjure the fear of demonic possession, materialising the fear of radical alterity within the self.

Language escapes the speaker and becomes something other. On the political level, that other language is possibly that which is free from domination: there is language outside, there is femininity outside of the patriarchal system of representation carved into the language of domination. Cloistered for too long, the runaway language rips at the seams of the dominant language and its syntax (see I, 4 and 13-15 for symbolical references to patriarchal femininity). In an optimistic light, that resurgence of the self opens a common ground between

newfound self and other, towards a malleable horizon of renewed intersubjectivity.

The Skriker is not producing logos: her point is not what she has to say but the fact that she is speaking. She is saying “listen to *me*”, listen to what I am. Her choice of starting the play with the story of Tom Tit-Tot, on whose secret name the whole tale depends, is revelatory of a language that syncretises a search for the truth of identity (see I). With such a goal in mind, how could she not burst into an infinity of words? Caryl Churchill crafted a formal constraint that obscures rational meaning, accumulating linguistic signs in order to let something outside language be heard. As rationality loses its footing, emotion and cognition take over. Caryl Churchill gives the best key to understanding this hybridisation poetics and aesthetics, by writing about opera: “When I’m listening to sung words I like taking their meaning in without any effort, and I’m also happy to hear them just as sound” (2008, author’s note to *Hotel*). In that sense, *The Skriker* is an opera, a stage beyond rational language.

Dramaturgic horizons

The final part of my research revolved around staging *The Skriker* and the dramaturgy that could be built towards achieving a convincing production. I argued that the challenge of turning the text into visual poetry was best tackled by projecting the creative team’s successive subjectivities on top of the author’s (and of the translator’s), rather than proposing a minimalist, symbolist staging open to the audience’s projections. Caryl Churchill was careful to name all the silent creatures haunting the stage, with nothing but their appearance to speak for them since they are never mentioned in the spoken lines. This bestiary calls for an exploitation of folklore on the director’s part, including the latter’s own subjective experience of the imagery, thus mixing together collective and deeply personal imagination.

In order to best complement this argument, I put together an appended glossary of all folkloric creatures mentioned by Churchill,

including comments on my translation of the names (and thus how those reflected my own subjectivity).

My translation of the stage directions (see IV) also aimed at representing Caryl Churchill's technical language as much as her aesthetics in the text. Neither nuance nor vagueness were converted into more straightforward technical indications, so that the highest possible number of clues left by the playwright as to her dramaturgic aesthetics might carry over into the French version. Hence, for instance, her constant use of the verb *go* instead of *exit* was rendered by *s'en aller* instead of the conventional *sortir*.

My final proposal was that *The Skriker* invites a dramaturgic aesthetics similar to fireworks, involving an ensemble of fragmented units in such rapid succession that it creates a glare of bedazzling continuity.

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The full text of my translation is available from the catalogue of unpublished manuscripts at L'Arche Éditeur.

¹ On damage in *The Skriker*, see Aston 97 sq.

² See Vitez 31 (italics in original): "[...] ce qui compte dans le phénomène de la traduction – et du spectacle, et de tout ce qui se fait dans le temps, tout ce qui court –, c'est la hiérarchie des signes. Je suis toujours scrupuleux quant au sens littéral, mais il faut aussi tout le temps se poser la question du « si » magique de Stanislavski : *qu'aurais-je dit, qu'aurais-je fait, si...* ? Je parle là du traducteur des dialogues de théâtre, de dialogues rapides."