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1 Song and the French Poetic Tradition

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> 'Voici, pour ma part, comment je définirai la mélodie française: c'est le champ (ou le chant) de célébration de la langue française cultivée.'
>
> Roland Barthes[1]

The aesthetic of the French *mélodie* crystallises a rich network of historical, political, and social influences that crisscross the fields of language, literature, and music. The precise birthplace of the *mélodie* lies neither here nor there, but rather in the intersection of multiple shifting aesthetic terrains whose sediment forms a space of representation, a period of stylistic practice, an aesthetic landscape. The *mélodie* took shape gradually, not in lonely isolation but as a variegated and fluid phenomenon, recalling at times the older genre of the *romance* and dialoguing intermittently with the Austro-Germanic *Lied*. Labile in conception and compositional practice, the *mélodie* would gravitate to still other forms to reinvent itself, or vanish entirely, following the general tendency of the twentieth century to dissolve the traces of art and its elements (syntax, genre, material). It would also fashion itself in opposition to certain aesthetics on the margins of the major genres (opera, cantata, symphony). As we untangle this skein, we shall establish genealogies and ruptures, bifurcations, some invariants, and much diversity. The *mélodie*, which arrived so late among the nineteenth-century arts during an epoch of richly burgeoning genres, created through its dialogue of musical and poetic materials the conditions for a salon art (the dominant model of the *mélodie* for voice and piano) that steadily freed itself from social contingencies to rethink the connection between music and poetry, individual sensibility and critical awareness.

Toward an Aesthetic of the *Mélodie*

The difference in languages, most notably between French and English, cannot alone explain the aesthetic distance that separates the *mélodie* from other contemporary European art forms that unite poetry and music. Neither the conception of 'song', as used in anglophone circles, nor of *Lied* (and its derivatives *Volkslied* and *Kunstlied*) has a precise equivalent in

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the French domain, where the generic term *mélodie* demarcates a serious tradition in opposition, above all, to the genres of the *romance* and *chanson*. The name traces its lineage to the crucible of Romanticism, which during the years 1820–30 ceaselessly birthed new forms and genres in both literature and music. In this regard, Berlioz's *Mélodies irlandaises* (1829–30, to translations of Thomas Moore) and their reception certainly exercised an influence:

> At the outset of the century, the word 'melody' was not an exact equivalent of 'song'. Moore clearly reached for a more erudite meaning to call greater attention to the distinct beauty of the sonorous heritage, as learned as it was popular, of his conquered island. Repatriated in French, the term *mélodie* preserves its intended character. Or better, everything follows as if the rare side, the precious side of this word had predestined its associated genre for elitist ends.[2]

The French *mélodie* did not escape the nationalist influences that roiled the nineteenth century. But it engaged with a tradition that imaginatively positioned itself against other European traditions as universal and unbound by such contingencies. Heir to a courtly tradition, the *mélodie* distinguished itself as an art rooted solely in the aesthetic realm. For Roland Barthes, it was a 'site where language works for free, that is, in perversion':

> This sung writing of language is, to my mind, what the French *mélodie* has sometimes striven to achieve. I am well aware that the German *Lied* is often bound intimately to the German language through the mediation of the Romantic poem; I also know that Schumann's poetic cultivation was immense and that he himself said of Schubert that, had he lived longer, he would have set all German literature to music; nevertheless, I believe that the historic meaning of the *Lied* must be located on the side of music (by virtue of its popular origins). In contrast, the historic meaning of the French *mélodie* is a certain culture of the French language . . . what is involved in these works is more than musical style, but rather a practical reflection (if one can use the phrase) on language; there is a progressive assumption of language by poem, of poem by *mélodie*, and of *mélodie* by performance. This means that the *mélodie* (French) owes very little to musical history and very much to theories of the text.[3]

The French language, through the phonological traits and cultural meanings, both political and social, with which it was charged throughout its history, established a distinctive aesthetic sphere. André Boucourechliev, having chosen in 1984 to contrast the German and French languages by setting Paul Celan's 'Schneebett' in both the original and in translation, described this distinction:

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French is a language that very much dominates the musician. French prosody has at times something quite authoritative about it to which it is hard not to conform . . . In the German language, I could allow myself to break up some words – hence, vocalises. Yet I felt bound – and I return to the authority of the French language – to take account of the prosody . . . the French element corresponds to a certain aura of the French language that is more supple, more luminous.[4]

The influence of the French language, depending on the literature and the poetry that enfolds and nourishes it, grants the *mélodie* a clear rapport with singing: the declamation yields its place to the art of diction, the play of drama to the experience of musical reading. The enunciation becomes neutral in its precision, irrespective of the gender of performer or poetic subject. What we hear in Fauré's setting of Verlaine's 'Clair de lune' or Duparc's treatment of Baudelaire's 'L'invitation au voyage' is a certain rapport between language and poetry, and not a story. A sentimental romantic tale is far less troublesome than this emotion that writing awakens in a subject, a speaker, a reader who delights in its own dissolution in the depths of aesthetic experience.

Towards a French Tradition: Linguistic Aesthetics and Politics

One of the main influences on the *mélodie* undoubtedly lies in the status of the French language, which from early on played a role in constructing a centralised political space in France. Among the milestones that mark this connection between the French language and state-building, we should mention the 1539 ordinance of Villers-Cotterêts by which Francis I imposed two articles (never revoked) that replaced Latin with French as the legal and administrative language of his realm. We must cite next, of course, the celebrated institution of the Académie française founded a century later by Richelieu in 1635 and validated by letters of patent signed by Louis XIII. The Académie set out to 'give definite rules for our language and to render it pure, eloquent, and fit for the arts and sciences'. One of the first members of this academy, the grammarian Claude Favre de Vaugelas, found part of his theoretical inspiration in the poet François de Malherbe whose efforts to simplify expression and strip away rhetoric, breaking with the magnificence of what would later be called Baroque poetry, imposed upon an entire century the model of a polished, perfected language, whose aesthetic ideal was inextricably bound to a policed and political mastery of language. The ideal of French classicism owes much to a political model in

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which language, in the context of courtly culture, had become a major weapon in the arsenal of power. By the late seventeenth century, France had already conjured the dream of being an exceptional culture among the nations. Its growing power in the centre of Europe required a narrative of military pre-eminence, which meant inflating the moral superiority and artistic excellence of its protagonist. France also demanded an art that was not merely an Italian tributary. It needed to define its particularity and establish an idea of primacy. The *tragédie lyrique* was thus fashioned as the antipode of Italian opera. At the heart of this opposition lay the question of taste and *mesure*, supposedly possessed by the French, versus Italian extravagance. This aesthetic distinction was expressed in large measure through the status granted to language, or put differently, through the position it enjoyed through its relationship with moderation, mastery, order, law. Italian Baroque opera subordinated language to music, taste to emotion; the *tragédie lyrique* subordinated music to the controlled diction of the language and the measured declamation of the verse. From this vantage point, the alexandrine, whose metric structure was founded on balance and symmetry (twelve syllables divided into equal hemistichs by a caesura), established a model of formal perfection that enshrined a moral and intellectual perfection, a historic ideal of distinctly French origin among whose most beautiful ornaments we may count the *mélodie*. This notion of a form that enshrined the ideal, whose beauty exteriorised the wholesome and good (*du bien et du bon*), a heritage of Ancient Greece (just as the French *mesure* was heir to *sophrosunê*, or temperance), was energetically perpetuated as a distinctive trait of what would become *l'esprit français*, characterised by Marcel Proust in the third volume of *À la recherche du temps perdu* (*In Search of Lost Time*, 1920):

> All the same, it is a pleasant thing, and probably exclusively French, that what is beautiful in equitable judgment, what has value according to the spirit and the heart, should first be charming to the eyes, painted with grace, chiselled with care, also expressing within its material and form an inner perfection.[5]

The great *mélodie* singer Pierre Bernac would uphold the same ideal: 'Debussy speaks of the "clarity of expression, of precision, of terseness in the form of French music" in contrast to the German musical genius, which excels in long sentimental effusions; lyricism and even passion are not lacking in French music, but reason and the mind control the emotions'.[6] We thus cannot understand the *mélodie* without examining this linguistic imaginary that descended in a straight line from the work of the Académie française and assumed its place among the accepted truths about the

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perfection of the French language, a perfection postulated as a universal law all the more so as French became the international language of the nobility and diplomacy, albeit a law that would be challenged after the defeat of Napoleon at Waterloo by the British, Dutch, German, and Prussian armies.

State of the Language

The *mélodie* is inextricably tied to the history of the French language and, more practically, to the state of that language in the nineteenth century, and thus to the highly distinctive French phonological system that impacted song. An offspring of Latin, the French language nevertheless departed greatly from its progenitor. It abandoned the accentual system of Latin, based on the word, for a more flexible system based on syntax. Whereas Latin accentuation is grounded in the volumetric mass of the individual word, that of French is organised according to the place of the words within syntactic units. At the same time, the French language progressively developed a tense, frontal phonetics. It is distinguished by an articulation placed chiefly at the front of the buccal cavity, aiming for forward resonance space, and by the muscular energy exerted in tensing the muscle groups involved in phonation – this is not a relaxed mode of phonation that requires little movement and muscular force. This phonatory system led to the dissolution of diphthongs (still heard in the eighteenth century) and was distinguished by the premium placed on articulation, which meant giving consonants their precise character and sharply differentiating vowels. The articulatory system of modern French, which resulted from the evolution of practices shot through with political ideology, joined a literature that, in part, took upon itself the same defining traits – precision, elegance, and so forth. So many rigid features that French literature of the erudite tradition accepted, passed on! So many features from which it sought to free itself as well, in a poetry that counted the names of Lamartine, Hugo, and, later, Verlaine and Rimbaud.

(R)evolution in Prosody

A happy accident would conjoin the histories of poetry and music in the sphere of metre, a coincidence that can explain both the miracle of the *mélodie* and its distinction from the poetic-musical creations of other European countries. Indeed, with Louis Quicherat's *Traité de versification*

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française (1838), metrical theory underwent a decisive modification, which drew support from contemporary poetic practice and would impact the way that later poets viewed the issue.[7] It involved a shift from an arithmetic and syllabic conception of French verse to a rhythmic-accentual conception, based on the arrangement of accented and unaccented syllables. This change of perspective prompted an evolution in thinking about the alexandrine (the axiomatic model of the French metric universe since its classic age in the seventeenth century) from a symmetric binary structure (6 + 6) toward a quadripartite conception, in which the two principal accents (at the caesura and the rhyme) were joined by two secondary and mobile accents within the two hemistichs. Thus, in both theory and the most modern practice, French nineteenth-century verse took on new colours as a rhythmic experience that simultaneously liberated classical metre and thrived in the sonorous space close to music (Stéphane Mallarmé would even speak of the tinkling (*pianotage*) of twelve tones in the alexandrine).

In the Romantic Cauldron

To understand both how music took charge of poetry and how poetry imposed itself upon music in the *mélodie*, we must unavoidably return to the moment of its birth, to the larger aesthetic movement from which it sprang: Romanticism. Romanticism was a European movement that, for political reasons, took on different colours in France than the Romanticisms that developed in England, Scotland, Ireland, and the German-speaking lands (from the dissolution of the Holy Roman Empire in 1806 through the Napoleonic protectorate to the German Federation after 1815 led by Prussia and Austria). The situation in France owed its distinct quality to the French Revolution and its aftermath in the Napoleonic Empire. For more than twenty years, France set itself in opposition to its neighbouring monarchies. It did this by rejecting the political, religious, and aesthetic outlook of the kingdoms that banded together against it and, for some, became its prey.

An aesthetic divide opened: revolutionary and imperial France constructed its universalist discourse by continuing the aesthetics of neoclassicism, a European movement that had emerged during the 1750s. The revolutionaries of 1789 rediscovered in neoclassicism the glories attending the birth of the Enlightenment, while Napoleon projected upon it the glorious dream of imperial Rome. Some French authors who, in different ways, inaugurated what would be known as Romanticism chose exile (René

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de Chateaubriand to England) or were exiled (Germaine de Staël in Switzerland and Germany). Jean-Jacques Rousseau's influence also had more impact across the Rhine than in France. The theories of the sublime that accompanied the emergence of Romanticism circulated freely in England and Germany where they often took on a counter-revolutionary aspect, and they comprised a new aesthetic that was, in effect, censored in France. Edmund Burke's *Philosophical Inquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful* (1757) had spread widely at the end of the century: after influencing Diderot, the idea of the sublime would nourish the reflections of Immanuel Kant (*Critique of Judgment*, 1790), Friedrich Schiller (*On the Sublime*, 1793, and *Concerning the Sublime*, 1798), and Johann Gottfried Herder (*Kalligone*, 1800). Yet as this concept voyaged through space and time (time marked by the French Revolution), it underwent a sea change. Burke's sublime, based on emotion, bears the impress of sensualism: the sublime is nothing more for him than an effect, born of a shock that nature imprints on the senses. Kant critiqued this conception and gave it an idealist slant. What remained for Burke a matter of physiology must now be thought of in aesthetic terms, but as an aesthetic that engages a sense of negativity inscribed within the feeling and consciousness of humanity's deficiency in the face of its surroundings (nature, cosmos, God). Certainly, the experience of human finitude is what allows humanity to transcend the senses ('*Sublime is what even to be able to think proves that the mind has a power surpassing any standard of sense*').[8] But this experience shades easily into a sorrowful feeling – despondency before an unattainable truth, abnegation in the face of a reality in which one cannot participate.

Obviously, the *mélodie*, which freely embraced a minor aesthetic (short form, less demonstrative literary subjects), distanced itself from the 'delicious terror' that, according to Burke's own expression, lay at the heart of the sublime, a major category of Romanticism that permeated Romantic opera from Gaetano Donizetti's *Lucia di Lammermoor* to Hector Berlioz's *La damnation de Faust* (this also marks a divergence from the *romance*, a genre more attuned to the spirit of the times, which had become tainted with the sublime during the Reign of Terror). Nevertheless, the *mélodie* participated in the modernist rupture that developed out of the aesthetic crisis out of which it was born – in part, as in the *Lied*, through the experience of loss (the theme of the dead beloved, of absence), but also in the radical transformation of meaning. The self that sings is no longer the spokesman for a community; it is not the 'voices of the nations in songs' disclosed by Herder, the grand deeds of the ballads that comprised the

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moralising historic mythology and geopolitical dreams of a nation, or the 'soul' that across the Rhine could join in a collective religious song, the chorale, as in Schubert's 'Ave Maria' or many of Brahms' religious *Lieder*.[9] The self that reveals itself in the *mélodie* is an interpreter: he or she delivers the poem, expresses himself or herself in delivering the poem. He or she indistinctly delivers a poem that, above all, speaks of poetry itself since it removes everything serious (the grandiose, grandiloquent, and pathetic) that could anchor it to thematic subjects.

Poetic Revival

Contrary to what one might imagine, Romantic literature fashioned itself after prose works of a philosophical bent. Chateaubriand, Madame de Staël, Benjamin Constant, Senancour – so many authors explored the modern world, with its tragic character and flaws, in essays and novels. Not until 1820 with Alphonse de Lamartine (and Marceline Desbordes-Valmore in roughly the same years) did poetry return to the French landscape, and it returned under a completely new guise:

> That which, in our view, marks the distinction and importance of Lamartine is that at the moment in which poetry had vanished from sight and after at least two centuries of 'functionality' in French verse – between the bedside and the salon, the backstreets and the Académie – he revived the demands of poetry and restored its serious nature. Shattering precisely that which hitherto had allowed it to function superficially above its still cadaver, he began from the premise that poetry was dead – that it no longer existed, that one must begin anew from this death and silence, from its absence or its chattering counterfeit (neoclassical poetry, descriptive or didactic, the conventionally lyrical). Language was no more. A new one must thus be found. In this condition, Lamartine's intervention could hardly be other than radical, as indeed it was.[10]

His *Méditations poétiques* (1820) aimed to invest this sclerotic form with delicate movement. The 1849 preface noted their novelty: 'I am the first who has brought poetry down from Parnassus, who has given to what one called the Muse not a lyre with seven conventional strings but the very fibres of the human heart, touched and stirred by the uncountable frissons of the soul and nature'. Poetry would henceforth be something created outside the rhetorical forms, beyond the rules and customary practice of what had passed for verse art in the previous century. It would also seek to assuage the uncertainty and wavering of the shivering self before whom the

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chasm opened in 1789. In Lamartine, the mystic exaltations no longer return to religious certainties, but are ventures beyond. For him the infinite opens onto the void, enthusiasm onto exhaustion or dispossession. The themes themselves, seemingly spiritual, vaporous, or amorous, remain vague. The poem that might be seen as the touchstone of his poetics, 'Le lac', culminates in the emergence of a word prior to language (a groan, a sigh) that succeeds in suspending the laws governing the material world. The result is a distancing from psychological reference (prosopopoeia instead of direct address, 'they' instead of 'we') and an attention to the poetic act itself (what 'everything says'):

O time! Suspend your flight, and you, propitious hours!
Suspend your course:
Let the wind that moans, the reed that sighs,
Let the faint perfume of the fragrant air,
Let everything that one hears, sees, or breathes
All say: They loved!

We should note the evolution of the poem's title, which went from 'Ode au lac du Bourget' to 'Le lac de B.' and, finally, 'Le lac' (Mallarmé would proceed similarly with 'Sainte Cécile', which became the poem 'Sainte' that inspired Maurice Ravel), as the fundamental movement that initiates the ideal – and the practice – of a poetry rent from, or resistant to, the fixed referents that hem in the arts. Indeed, Aurélie Loiseleur identified in the *Méditations* a 'progressive "desertification", as if the cancellation of the image, just as it emerges, must give free rein to the feeling for the infinite', or again of a world 'less encumbered', 'dedicated to infinitude and effacement', demonstrating the reinterpretation of the sublime as negativity.[11] Lamartine initiated the experience of writing as mediation, that is, as the felt experience (the *frisson*: sensory impression) of a double negation: absence itself, and the lack of an existing form of expression prior to the poetic act. With Lamartine we must think of poetry as the invention of *another* language, a language altered, alternative, 'a language more penetrating, more harmonious, more sensual, more abounding in images, more exclaimed, more song than its usual language', as the poet wrote in his *Cours familier de littérature*.[12]

It is important to note how much this idea of poetry, whether French poets embraced or opposed it, influenced both the *mélodie* and the formal relationship that music maintained with poetry. Even in 1820, Louis Niedermeyer was inspired by the poem 'Le lac' (the song was composed in 1821, published in 1825). Having no other name at hand, Lamartine

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described the song as a 'romance' or 'ode', but Camille Saint-Saëns underlined its novel character: 'Niedermeyer was, above all, a precursor. He broke the mould of the tired old French *romance* and, inspired by the beautiful poems of Lamartine and Victor Hugo, created a new genre, a superior art analogous to the German *Lied*; the resounding success of "Le lac" cleared the way for M. Gounod and all the others who followed him on this path'.[13] Gabriel Fauré, at the end of his life, returned to it:

> The name of Louis Niedermeyer, for the preceding two or three generations, hardly awoke any memory but that of the celebrated song: 'Le lac'. It is very likely that his name has no other meaning for the present generation. Such oblivion is a grave injustice. Even if we count only 'Le lac' – or 'Automne' or 'L'isolement', also by Niedermeyer – we cannot fail to acknowledge the profound change to what was in France around 1835 the representative genre of music sung with piano or guitar accompaniment . . . This transformation appears in the choice of poems, in the introduction of full recitatives before the *couplets*, in the style so greatly elevated by comparison with that characteristic of the 'Romance' of the time.[14]

Lamartine's poetic works also inaugurated a new way of thinking about poetry in France. Based on 'negative objects' (the term appears in Chateaubriand's *Le génie du christianisme* of 1802), they shun descriptive poetry and didactic literature (philosophic, encomiastic, theoretic, scientific). Inscribed within the history of a sensibility, they eschew circumstantial markings and divest themselves of the narrative features that are the fundamental elements of the traditional *romance*. In these works, poetics suspends any collaboration with the general order of discourse. The *méditation* thus wavers between a theme and a poetic genre, and this hesitation shifts the centre of gravity of the poetic act, in large measure, toward the literary act itself, toward poetic self-reflection. At the heart of this self-reflection, the metaphor of music – connecting a religious, mystical, and harmonic discourse to a reinterpretation of the poetic voice – unfolds. It enjoins a specific use of language (named 'song') that tends less to embrace actual music (vocal or instrumental) than to distance itself from the domain of logic and the assertions of language. We can already hear the 'fading' of poetry that would inspire the *mélodie* at its zenith with Paul Verlaine.

It is from this key impulse, introduced by Lamartine, by which poetry reflects on itself and reveals itself through equivocation, achieved by effacing lyrical situations, topical humour, politics, and indeed, at times, by even renouncing the external world, that the *mélodie* derived its aesthetic. From Hugo, it chose the vein mined in 1829 by *Les orientales*,

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