DOCUMENT

UFD038 Agnès Gayraud

French, Pop's Forked Tongue

What's it like to be a second-class citizen in the land of pop? In this essay, originally published in Audimat 4 (2015), Agnès Gayraud, author of Dialectic of Pop, who as francophone songwriter-performer La Féline has just released her third album Vie Future, asks why English remains the unchallenged native language of pop, and how a 'minority' language can possibly make its mark on pop as a musical art form

> *Le français est une langue qui réso-oo-oo-nne...*
> —Daniel Balavoine

It's a well-known fact that French isn't a good language for singing in. When we hear French sung, there are too many nasals, too many consonants that grate on the ear, too many *ins*, *ons*, and *ans* that resonate in the higher parts of the face, as if the bottom of the jaw didn't exist, as if the mouth were there only to form low sounds, as if the stomach had no breath to impart: at its erotic maximum, along the canonical line that runs from Stéphane Audran to Catherine Deneuve, the smooth and self-assured French voice evokes a certain fantasy bourgeois whose civilized tone serves to dissimulate their perverse sexual appetites. French is a civilized tongue, after all. At the height of its civilizational prestige, it was spoken far and wide, and even in the heart of Russia. We need not even listen to the justifications that all French rock groups give for singing in the language of Elvis and Morrissey because the language of Guy Béart just doesn't sound right. Jean-Jacques Rousseau already said it all, two hundred years ago:

There is something positively impossible about singing in French

> I believe I have shown that there is neither meter nor melody in French Music, because the language is not susceptible to them; that French song is but a continual barking, unbearable to any ear not prepared for it; that its harmony is crude, expressionless, and uniquely feels its Schoolboy padding; that French arias are not at all arias; that the French recitative is not at all recitative. From which I conclude that the French do not at all have a Music and cannot have any; or that if ever they have any, it will be so much the worse for them.[1]

There is something positively *impossible* about singing in French. And if by some chance or misfortune the French decide otherwise, it will be their business and no one else's—for 'with whatever artfulness one sought to cover up the defects of such a Music, it would be impossible for it ever to please ears other than those of the natives of the country

1. J.-J. Rousseau, 'Letter on French Music', in J.T. Scott (ed.), *The Collected Writings of Rousseau* (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1998, 14 vols.), vol. 7, 141–74: 174.

in which it was in use'.[2] Here is the critical proof of its unmusicality: French cannot aspire to any kind of universality at all. It's a merciless condemnation, and it comes from Rousseau, in his time the most ardent defender of popular music. Rousseau stood up for Pergolese's *opera buffa* against the learned musical constructions of Jean-Philippe Rameau; he believed that popular music was endowed with a great power to express natural and universal emotion. But in Rousseau's anthropology, song precedes articulated language, so that the more a language favours articulation over the sonic density of its syllables, the more it distances itself from the innocence that, according to Rousseau, makes for the truth of song. And with its colliding, scraping consonants and its always somewhat dull vowels, French is all articulation and nothing but. It's perfect as a language for philosophy, but song, and above all song that comes from the heart, must be left to those whose language is suited to it. As the singers par excellence Rousseau unhesitatingly designates those lucky enough to count Italian as their native tongue.

America

Two centuries later, Italy is no longer the model for popular expression in song, but the French inferiority complex is still very much in place. The prestigious referent against which it is judged is now present wherever English is spoken, and particularly on the other side of the Atlantic. It is America, the America dreamt of in the fifties by Jean-Philippe Smet and Claude Moine as they joined Lee Halliday to listen to imported records by Elvis Presley and Eddie Cochran, before reinventing themselves as Johnny Halliday and Eddy Mitchell. The musical language of France's top rockers is a French reshaped to resemble an idealised American language. Halliday, who at the time presented himself as 'coming straight from Massachusetts',[3] constructed it by playing with French adaptations of US rock'n'roll standards. His vocal style mimicked that of his idols: he sang from the gut, he wailed, he sweated, as no one in France had ever done before—and especially not *in French*. But Rousseau's curse still hung over him: after fifty years as a colossus of French culture, Johnny still had no American career at all. In France, Halliday was the King; everywhere else, he was nobody.

Original Language

But is this really a specific issue with French as opposed to all other, more singable languages? No, it would be presumptuous to think so; on the scale of a globalised pop industry, this is a generic problem linked to the stubborn fact that French is *not the language of modern pop* any more than Italian, German, Dutch or Swahili are. Pop's archetypes were defined not in the Italian operettas of Luis Mariano, but in the language of Robert Johnson, Woody Guthrie, and Ray Davies. Today the power relation is no longer that of Rousseau's polemical duel between singing Italian and all-too-articulate French; instead it sets America and England against the rest of the world—the same 'rest of the world'—without cowboys, double decker buses, or afternoon tea—that receives this anglophone pop as a precious cultural gift. Although it may not have been obvious to begin with, given the European industry of 'adaptations', something we will come to below, the affinity between the English language and the pop form progressively became a self-evident given. In 1967, the 45 'All You Need is Love' was broadcast worldwide via satellite from England; soon afterward, Apple Records opted for to release the *Sgt Pepper's* album in one version only. There is nothing contingent about language: what the fan loves is not some personalized, adaptable product, but a musical work neither the sounds nor the structure nor the language of which can be modified without making it a different work entirely. Sound works that have been recorded and mixed according to well-defined aesthetic and communicational intentions, songs are no longer popular scores that circulate, and can be interpreted and reinterpreted in a multiplicity of different ways; they are now definitively imprinted tracks in which the sounds of instruments are inseparable from the inflections of the singing, and where this singing itself takes on the contours of the original language of pop, namely the English language. In short, in pop, idiom is not a variable:[4] *idiom dictates form*. It seems that English is the original language of

2. Ibid, 147.

3. Presenting Halliday on TV as his protegé, Line Renaud says 'his father is American, his mother French.' In reality, both of Jean-Philippe's parents were Belgian, but he was raised by his aunt and her American boyfriend, the dancer Lee Hallyday.

4. With very few exceptions, most notably Kraftwerk's simultaneous release of some of their records in multiple languages, in line with the trans-European imaginary of their oeuvre.

rock and, by extension, of everything that pop has to offer to the world. And every pop musician who falls on the wrong side of this linguistic divide will one day encounter this strange sentiment: French, they will think to themselves, is just not capable of doing everything that English can.[5]

Thirty years after 'All You Need Is Love' on satellite, it was not easy for the teenage fan miming the songs of The Smiths or Pixies in front of their bedroom mirror to imagine themselves using the language of Patricia Kaas to sing the songs this Anglophone pop culture inspired in them. It would take some time before they would be able, without feeling false, to combine its melodies with the apparently clashing sounds of their own language. But they would do so, eventually.

Vernacular Resistance

In fact, from Johnny Halliday to Mustang, by way of Brigitte Fontaine, Christophe, Manset, Daho, Noir Désire, and—more extensively than any other genre—hip-hop (no French hip-hop artist uses English), French representatives of pop in the broadest sense have now long mounted a *vernacular resistance* to the first language of Anglophone pop. Contemplating our heritage, and the French-language pop being made today with increasing conviction, there are indeed models to be found, and there is even room to cultivate a certain aristocracy of French pop that makes adoptive Anglophones sound cheesy and old-fashioned. From Bobby Lapointe to Yves Simon, from Barbara to Dominique A, each idiosyncratic Francophone outing constitutes an exception that confirms the rule of a language resistant to pop plasticity. Moreover, consciousness of the danger of *singing in French*, which each of these singers has confronted in their own way, has itself played a part in their triumphant critical reception. Without entering into the mysteries of each singular success story, what we will attempt here is a brief archaeology of canonical forms of resistance that were not the sole preserve of one particular artist's idiosyncrasy, but which furnished and continue to furnish a set of models for generations of authors and composers, a set of available solutions to the simple yet impossible equation *French x Pop*.

Adapted Pop

Historically, the first gesture of vernacular resistance to the original language of pop was *adaptation*. In the 'liberated' Europe of the post-war years, a certain contingent of the youth welcomed with fascination the music brought over by the GIs on American military bases, but the population and the ruling classes experienced the Marshall plan more as a cultural invasion, and were not inclined to promote teaching of the invader's language[6]—particularly in the Latin countries, France, Spain, and Italy. In Gaullist (and largely communist) France, Chuck Berry meant Coca-Cola; The Chinese were preferred to the Yankees. Institutional aid for French-language production, the establishment of quotas, and a political discourse scornful of American products all helped shape a music industry whose primary product was a pop *adapted* to the local language. In the sixties there was a whole repertoire of French versions of songs by The Beatles, from Frank Alamo's '*Je veux prendre ta main* [I Wanna Hold Your Hand]' in 1963 to '*Fou sur la colline* [The Fool on the Hill]' by Eddy Mitchell in 1968. Even as early as 1959, Richard Anthony's '*Petit clown de ton Coeur*' (an adaptation of the Everly Brothers' 'Cathy's Clown') had already made a splash. Although the wave would finally break at the end of the sixties, with the emergence of a newfound sensitivity to the original language of

5. 'It's a great sadness, a stab in the heart, to think that one is doing the same job as Anglophones. They have every right, they have their own very musical language, instinctive musicians, a sort of eternal youthful informality. We're at an immeasurable disadvantage in relation to them. Unless you're Brel, Brassens, or perhaps Cabrel, a true auteur in the French language. But these figures are closer to the troubadour or the minstrel,' says Gérard Manset in an interview with Hugo Cassevetti, 'Gérard Manset: je suis fait de 50% de sagesse et de 50% de tristesse', *Télérama*, April 26, 2014, <http://www. telerama.fr/musique/gerard-manset-je-suis-fait-de-50-de-tristesse-et-de-50-de-sagesse,111528.php>.

6. Today, on the European scale, the French people's grasp of English is remarkably poor. 'According to the 2021 results of the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL), reports the daily paper *Le Monde*, France seems a rather poor student, coming in at 23rd position among EU countries, far behind Belgium, Germany, and the Netherlands, and just ahead of Lithuania and Estonia. A problematic situation when, as we know, success in this test—which is paid for—is a condition of access to most American, Anglophone Canadian, and English Universities, but also now Universities in non-Anglophone countries'. J. Bonnard, 'Pourquoi les étudiants français ont-ils mauvais niveau d'anglais?', *Le Monde*, 24 May 2013.

pop and the importance of recorded tracks, Marie Laforêt's 1966 '*Marie douceur, Marie colère*' (The Rolling Stones' 'Paint It Black'), from the appropriately titled album *Manchester et Liverpool*, testifies to the fact that it lasted for some time. As late as 1971, Serge Lama's '*Superman*' delivered a roguish version of The Kinks' more subtle 'Apeman'.

But quite soon, and perhaps especially once it started to become clear that, aesthetically speaking, these adaptations tended to denature the originals and to be inferior to them, French rock learned to understand and experience itself as rock in a second language. Condemned to the treason of translation, it would stomp along in the rear-guard, playing second fiddle.

Replicas

And then there are *replicas*: those performers with hairstyles, clothes, and shoes faithfully copied from their Anglophone models who, by pushing them even further, go beyond the impression of ersatz adaptation. Committed to a kind of sincere and faithful imitation, performers such as Dick Rivers and Christophe in France, Adriano Celentano in Italy, and Chico Valente in Spain ('El Rock de la Carcèl', 'Twist Around the Clock') didn't just translate Elvis and Bill Haley before going on to constitute their own repertoire, they *became* local Elvises, Gene Vincents, and Eddy Cochrans. With a more or less adept appropriations of their models' way of life, they captured this essential pop truth: idiom—namely the idiom of the blues, of rock'n'roll or rockabilly—also involves the body. So even if you don't have the right language, you can adopt the right posture, and in doing so can bring a more faithful embodiment to lyrics sung in a local language adapted to the inflections of the original idiom. But as they were well aware, none of that changes the fact that this idiom is neither French, Italian, nor Spanish.

In this context, that of an empire whose minions are dispossessed of words that swing, the deliberate *yaourt*[7] of Christophe in the appropriately titled 1984 B-side '*Voix sans issue* [Dead-end Voice]'—a language that no English person could ever

A third, impossible language, a kind of pure functional rockabilly esperanto, both meaningless and triumphant

speak—transcends the ridiculous to attain a kind of aesthetic abstraction. Adriano Celentano's 1976 'Svalutation' takes the replica effect to utterly bizarre heights. A melange of greeting, insult, and slogan, 'Svalutation' means nothing in Italian, any more than it does in English: It's a word drawn from a third, impossible language, a kind of pure functional rockabilly esperanto, both meaningless and triumphant, as in Celentano's rock'n'roll song 'Prisencolinensinainciusol', which creates an general impression of Americanness without actually saying anything comprehensible, a kind of pop glossolalia.[8] Perhaps adaptation engenders monsters; here, at least, it imparts the lost thrill of hearing something for the first time.

The Old Poetic Language

When Serge Gainsbourg has first Madeline Bell, and then later in 1967, Brigitte Bardot sing on 'Comic Strip', with its onomatopoeic lyrics—'Pfff, Shebam, Pow, Blop, Wizz'—he is also playing with the possibilities of a third language, this time borrowed from comics and French and Belgian *bande dessinée*, as a crystallization of the psychedelic pop idiom. But vernacular resistance to the original language of pop comes out in other ways in Gainsbourg's work. Where a whole tradition of French *variété*,[9] was fascinated by America and constantly emulated American *vocal* models,[10] Gainsbourg looked for other models. Rather than focusing on an America as seen from France, with rock in its bones, saturated with soul, he instead scoped out the pop coming over from England. And rather than phoney stateside

7. [*Yaourt*—the French term for a type of purely musical nonsense language concocted by non-Anglophone singers in imitation of an English language they don't know how to speak.—trans.]

8. On Glossolalia, see my essay 'Glossolalia/Xenoglossia' in S. Goodman, T. Heys and E. Ikoniadou, *Audint—Unsound:Undead* (Falmouth: Urbanomic, 2019), 61–4.

9. French 'varieté', associated with the late 1970s, is an eclectic popular form wherein a celebrity singer juggles with utterly contingent set of musical styles. Usually surrounded by studio musicians with a broad range of technical skills, the *variété* singer relies on their embodiment and singing, rather than their own musical style, to mark them out.

10. Sometimes succeeding to the point of themselves being covered Stateside, as was the case with Nicoletta's soul hit 'Il est mort le soleil'.

souvenirs, he promoted an aesthete's celebration of the French language and its superiority in matters of *poetry*. This new treatment of the language was to have an impact on all French music that followed: in Gainsbourg, French no longer mimics the inflections of English but champions its status as an *old poetic language* engaged in a raunchy frottage of the youthful pop idiom. He reverses the linguistic inferiority complex into a superiority complex. In this sense Gainsbourg's success still seems like a kind of deliberate staging: a staging of the relation between a language that is noble and specific (French) and a language that is young and, since it is universally accepted, more vulgar (the English of pop songs). In an irresistible perfect fit of form and content, we hear the shimmering of Serge's elegantly paedophile aesthetic, the contained excitement of an older man manipulating the mouths of young ingenues with his lexical ambiguities, as if painting lipstick on the mouth of an innocent young girl from a good family. If every voice speaks of a certain type of man or woman, the Gainsbourgian voice is that of a Lolita: it excludes the thick substance of soul voices, the broken-heartedness that tears the throat, the pathos of sobs, sweat, and tremelo. The French voice, ironically proud of being fully decolonized, is that of a woman-child more desired than desiring, who speaks a language of somewhat perverse loves with the greatest elegance. It is in this superficially diabolical French, by inveigling the supposedly naive pop idiom into unexpected kinkiness, that would finally persuade the Americans to consider that the French maybe had something to offer that the English-speaking world did not. It required an erotomaniac, torn between high culture and fetishism, to endow French pop with its most marketable language, a new tongue which, since then, has always remained somewhat forked.[11]

Interviewed in 1967 by Denise Glazer about the wave of 'Anglo-Saxon *chanson*' that he had initiated and which was still in full swing, Gainsbourg eulogised the 'little girls' France Gall, Françoise Hardy, and Sylvie Vartan, while dismissing offhand, with a certain cruelty, the whole bunch of 'old-timers' from the *rive gauche*—where he also hailed from—with their literary pathos and their Pythian voices.[12] They're outdated—What more is there to say? The word has been spoken, and today, the pop lover in their heart of hearts continues to think: French *chanson*—a vernacular resistance become a ghetto, limited to its tradition of old poets, to the radiant existentialism of the forties, serious and literary—lacks all eroticism. Goodbye Lucienne Delyle, Annette Lajon, Marie Dubas, all born before the Great War,[13] says Gainsbourg: the youth, and everyone who understands that modern music is all lightning bolts and desire, want pop. And he at least gives them an exciting French version of it. In fact, in his half-spoken half-sung duet with the shimmering sonorities of Anglophone pop, the French pop of the sixties finds a canonical, and ultimately universal, form. But there is still a price to be paid: a certain restriction imposed upon the manner of expression: French duos must always have the air of glacial ingenues, with the masculine voice always detached. The pop idiom of French Gainsbourgian pop allows itself only euphemism and sly smirks. It caresses with a leather glove, but it lacks heart. Any sincerity—any indication that language might threaten to become direct—is a sign of weakness. The enchanting singer *à la française*, from Alain Chamfort to Philippe Katerine, was more ready to recognise their weaknesses and, more likely to be a loser in love, availed themselves more readily of the resources of self-deprecation. Here the French excel at the sad buffoonery of the runner-up, the dominated lackey who knows how

11. On the deeper meaning of the *chanson* identified in Gainsbourg as a minor art, see Pacôme Thiellement's fine text 'Le Vampire et la petite fille', in *Pop Yoga* (Paris: Editions Sonatine, 2013), 150–57.

12. The anglophone period that was supposed to be just a passing phase is still here. Do you remember, hey? My prediction, my turnaround, I really smelt it out, huh? Yeah, it got rid of quite a few people who were somewhat racist, and then it got the girls on the market, who had the advantage of being fresh and rosy, very industrious, marvellous, huh? You remember what happened in '45, '50? Hey? All those old timers who were lost in *chanson*? Ah, they weren't exactly doing well! Well, of course, we had…to be counted among the first rank—who was around, still? Agnès Capri, Gréco, but all of the others behind them, the cavalry, you know all that [whistles]—gone. Now, we have these little girls, they're scorned, well, I find that very unjust, France Gall et al., because they were doing a very difficult job… […] France Gall…Sylvie…Françoise Hardy…Charming.' INA, archive, 16 April 2017, 'Serge Gainsbourg et la chanson anglo-saxonne', <http://www.ina.fr/video/I05052906>. After the war, Agnès Capri was director of the Théâtre de la Gaîté-Montparnasse, and then founded her own cabaret. From there came, among others, Germaine Montero, Cora Vaucaire, Catherine Sauvage, Juliette Greco…. All of them sung Prévert and are quite obviously Gainsbourg's targets here.

13. Even though Gainsbourg would go on to exploit their repertoire, beginning with his reprise of Marie Dubas's 'Mon légionnaire'

to play to the gallery. But this character must at all costs maintain a certain detachment: if they were to take themselves seriously, they would be committing an irreparable error—and knowledge of this always affects their singing, which lacks in self-assurance as an aesthetic choice.

Soul = Âme?

By contrast, a certain form of *variété* finds a more direct way to express emotion—and this is perhaps the only place where it's still allowed, since the 90s are over and we no longer recognise the lyrical possibilities of politically-engaged rock—partly in taking inspiration from the pop genre that one might think the furthest from the expressive possibilities of Verlaine's French: soul. On French TV shows such as *Star Academy* and *Nouvelle Star*, copied from the original Dutch show The Voice, the competitors don't adopt the style of Gainsbourg's 'Je t'aime moi, non plus', susurrated from lips from which a Gauloise hangs suggestively, but instead that of Nicoletta's 'La musique' or the generous '*Je t'aaaaaaaime*' of Lara Fabian. Here the search is not for auteurs—a category in which the French singer could exercise their superiority complex—but for voices. By redirecting into the French language the (already competitive) flood of YouTube cover versions by French youths of Whitney Houston, Lana del Rey, and Rihanna, these TV shows in fact solicit a vocal lyrical emulation that is found nowhere else in French pop. And, of course voices do indeed emerge—and even ones that sing in French. But in the very virtuosity of their gluing of the French tongue to the soul idiom they take as their model, they reveal their secondary character. Just as surely as they inspire respect as performances, French soul songs elicit a kind of embarrassment—unless they feature an exceptional composition and an exceptional performance which together leave no room for doubt—as when we hear Esther Galil's 'Le Jour se lève', Adamo's 'La Nuit', or Vigon's 'Un Petit Ange Noir'. Because it's as if the virtuosity of the singing demanded an at least equivalent intensity from the songwriter in order to do it justice. This intensity, an uncertain equilibrium between lyrics, language, and the singing body (whether real or represented) is perhaps nothing other than 'authenticity', that elusive quality we speak of when we find a song truly compelling. And aesthetically speaking, soul is rooted in authenticity; if it's not authentic, then its lyricism begins to seem affected, despite itself. In so far as its transposition into the French language already uproots it and transports it far from the gospel that linked it to another people and another land, some small miracle is necessary in order for soul to escape the affectation of second-hand pathos. Otherwise, just as French chanson always lacks a little in eroticism—if we agree with Gainsbourg's preference for juvenile pop—soul *variété* in France always lacks authenticity. Fundamentally, it is not from here. Its only true homeland is Eurovision. An English song performed with a thick French accent is more likely to make one think of what is singular about France. When Lizzy Mercier covers 'Tumour' (on the 1979 album *Press Color*), when Hermine sings 'Veiled Women' (*The World On My Plates*, 1982), their mother tongue inflicts the most mercilessly tender blows upon pop's dominant language.

Minimal French

Rather than try to expand the soul of the language to dimensions that are foreign to it, there remains the opposite possibility, that of retraction. The French post-punk of the 1970s and early 80s, for example, happily trades on the concision of the French language, one might even say on its natural coldness, precisely its anti-soul: this is the French of 'automatic' modernity and of 'modern mathematics', the airport French[14] of Antena on 'Camino del Sol', or of the detached hedonism of languid seaside resorts. The English do this too in their own tongue, but for once, this pop idiom, the language of a Europe in decline, functions especially well in French: its dentals, its occlusives, and its natural tendency to critical doubling sit well with the sounds of the synth and the acid beats of the drum machine. Kraftwerk's 'Les Mannequins', which stands up fine next to 'Showroom Dummies', the chanted 'Qu'est-ce que c'est' in the refrain of Talking Heads' 'Psychokiller'.[15] The arty, ludic language Tina Weymouth adopts in the first global white rap hit, Tom Tom Club's 'Wordy Rappinghood': '*mots pressés / mot censés / mots*

14. Speaking of the aesthetics of the airport, the minimal wave song 'Paris-Orly' by the group Deux offers a touching example of the alliance between the international French of Cati Tête's white voice and the Lyon accent of Gérard Pelletier, speaking-singing in English.

15. Covered in French by Sheila in her 1980 'Psychodrame', with the psychosis dialled down considerably.

qui dissent la verité / mots maudits / mots mentis / mots qui manquent le fruit d'ésprit'. This time the groove is cold, the model one of black culture, but the ludic language comes out of the unrestrained gymnastics of the philosophy of language and Derridean paradoxes, with all the froideur of the intellectual agility associated with that milieu. Such lyrics are well received, whether as art-student metadiscourse or as a babble pushing at the limits of the absurd; but they give very little margin of manoeuvre for moving an audience or for telling stories. Which of course doesn't disqualify them from being pop. In fact, a whole swathe of eighties songs in French[16] function aesthetically precisely by accepting this trade-off. Indeed it is this very constraint that makes them effective: structurally, the prosody is one of brief bursts, its breath always cut short. If there is emotion here, it is grasped in a tension that renders it crystalline: when Ellie sings '*Je t'aime tant*', the very rhythmic alliteration of the ts producing a restrained formal counterpoint to the candour of her confession of love. '*Il avait une petite douleur pour seule mémoire*', sings Jacno later, in 1998:[17] In the brief tinkling of the word '*petite*', an emotional chasm opens up. Ten years later, the pop French that travels most successfully is still the deliberately minimal variety. When Yelle sings '*je chante en français des années 80 / je n'aime pas le passé, mais c'était quand même bien* [I sing in eighties French / I don't like the past, but it works]' ('Amour du Sol', from the album *Pop Up*, 2007), she is referring to the way in which she cuts up the language and squeezes it into the short units of meaning that the genre requires on the musical level. Her music works as an export, and rightly so, partly because the charm of her language is communicated irrespective of meaning. And yet it remains that pop French meant for a foreign audience only seems to be able to draw upon a very constrained dictionary. The less it says, the more compelling it is. '*Je perds la raison / Dans la mer du Japon*' croons Air's song ('Mer du Japon', 2007). While it excels in great instrumental stretches, the 'French Touch' often implies a triumph of the spirit over the letter. The music eclipses the language. And if we have to sing songs, it is the original language of pop, the English language, that will be chosen by Phénix, Modjo, and Daft Punk, even when it gives rise to lyrics whose facile sentimentality the authors perhaps wouldn't risk indulging in French: 'And it was you the one that would be breaking my heart / When you decided to walk away / This is a game of love' ('The Game of Love', *RAM*, 2013). Still, sometimes it's possible to believe in the paradise of culture, as on the occasion in 2011 when a native of San Francisco, a quite knowledgeable pop fan, confided to me, out front of a hip concert venue in the city, that they were impatiently awaiting the arrival of Sébastien Tellier, and particularly, this young man said, looking forward to his performing the song 'L'amour et la violence' (a Christophe-style ballad that closes the album *Sexuality*, otherwise entirely sung in English). Strange, since in fact this song has only two lines; without becoming verbose, French language here seems liberated from its obligatory concision.

The 'French Touch' often implies a triumph of the spirit over the letter. The music eclipses the language. And if we have to sing songs, it is the original language of pop, the English language, that will be chosen

With a French Accent

But placing a taboo on verbosity, on the loquaciousness which itself can be a source of musicality, is perhaps the greatest injury one could do to language, and to a musician. If minimal French gives us a pole of coldness where everything contracts, we could perhaps reinvigorate its local—and vocal—pride by moving toward a warmer pole which, in passing, would also help the letter regain the upper hand over the spirit, the flesh of words over the abstraction of language. And the key to this reheating, this liberation of the loquacious, would be that which localises us, that which marks a belonging: the accent or accents, real or borrowed, of which Anglophone pop music has always availed itself. This is Murat in Auvergne, but already Piaf and the language of the outskirts of Paris, it's the Occitan of

16. Although other, more coldwave groups such as Marquis de Sade and Marc Seberg, for example, on the contrary cultivate the existential emphasis of Ian Curtis's singing, but with Rimbauldian lyrics.

17. Jacno, 'Pour seule mémoire', *La part des anges* (1998).

Les Fabulous Trobadors,[18] the Parisian accent of Daniel turned against itself, Diabologum's paradoxically cold Toulouse accent, the 'Messino, not French' of Noir Boy George, the Marseilles accent of Keny Arkana, with the Arab *waw*, *hamza*, and *gahyn* vocables injected into the language of 'Duc de Boulogne'. In the work of these artists, the authenticity of sung French is resecured by a local language that marks a belonging, but makes no secret of its linguistic and cultural impurity. Booba rhymes Mimi Mati with the Illuminati, peppers his raw French with snippets of Internet argot—'*Révolution de lover / tu n'as que trois followers*' ('LVMH', *D.U.C.*, 2015). Regardless of how aesthetically successful it is, we might say that what is gained here is a greater degree of conviction. In fact, where song seeks to be aggressive, to make a claim, it would have far less impact in a borrowed language. Punchlines delivered by a Frenchman in the language of Notorious BIG would no doubt be pitiful, delocalising a street language and a slang that is spoken neither by the speakers nor by their French audience. The local accent says more than a language: it speaks of a community, which it would betray if it were to liberate itself from this common language; on the contrary, it honours the community by representing for it. Also in play here is something of the authenticity mentioned above. Vernacular resistance becomes community resistance, in whatever sense we take the notion of community here. But fundamentally, the same goes for authentic American music. If you really want to do like the Americans, then sing in the language of your home. To truly imitate the original rock idiom is first of all *to imitate the original relation of rock to its idiom*—and this relation will always be more authentic when it recognises in itself a place, an origin, to which fidelity—an ethical relation which the accent transforms into an aesthetic relation—can be anchored.

Over There is Here

Well before hip-hop, inspired by the American folk revival of the sixties, inspired by John and Alan Lomax, Harry Smith, and the Folkways anthologies, militant French folk conscientiously mapped out this path: to rediscover *over here* what had been discovered *over there*. Surely the French also have our own rural space, our lost girls and our deserters. Maybe our folk music could substitute the little map of France for the vast map of America. But in fact, the transposition is not so easy. Where are our Appalachian hillbillies? Where is our Texas? Certainly not in Toulon. It threatens to become a somewhat arbitrary affair, as in 'Mary-Jeanne' (1967), the adaptation of cover of the Bobbie Gentry hit 'Ode to Billie Joe' penned by Pierre Delanoë and sung by Joe Dassin, where the Tallahatchie Bridge on the Mississippi becomes the 'pont de la Garonne' which, in rhyme if not in geographical fact, is situated in 'Bourg-les-Essonne' an invented town that sounds more like a mythical Paris suburb. But with a little more ethnomusicological rigour—and it's somewhat disconcerting to learn that Joe Dassin was the author of a thesis in ethnology on the Hopi Indians at the University of Michigan—if America can't be traced onto the French landscape, then the country harbours plenty of honourable vestiges of its own popular language of song. Often we have to go back, in ourselves, to our teenage years, into childhood memories of compilations of songs sung by Yves Montand or by our grandmother, to hear the resonances of a distant, archaic French, sometimes morbidly seductive: the laments of the Canuts, impoverished silk workers dressed in rags, the story of King Renaud who 'returned from war with his guts in his hands', the image of the red, bloody mound. Anonymous, often backdated and rewritten, coloured by political allegiances—whether those of the Resistance or those drummed into boy scouts under the Petainist regime —these songs can still move a listener who is more familiar with the pop idiom. In fact, in all of these songs, often with missing words or verses, first recorded on wax cylinders at the end of the nineteenth century, there lies concealed one of the origins of the European folklore that Irish, Polish, Ukrainian and French migrants took over there two hundred years ago as part of their baggage. Since American folk descended from Europe, since it can be traced all the way back to ancient French ballads, to take up this repertoire is, in a certain sense, to continue the work of the American folklorists. The French folk revival of the seventies—along with its current rediscovery—reterritorializes in France an idiom that was initially fascinating for its American

18. One of the leaders of the group, Claude Sicre (author of a thesis on ethnography on Occitania) advocates this 'local' spirit not only on the scale of the region or the language, but even on the scale of the Arnaud Bernard district in Toulouse.

heritage.[19] But as open as it might be, this return to the homeland always harbours the possibility of identitarianism, of a regionalism that it may choose to politically adopt in the name of oppressed minorities.[20] If, inversely, it is free of such political commitment, it becomes the folklorism of the aesthete. But disconnected from any such deep attachment, the cosmopolitan singer who sings with an accent or inflections that are not his own loses a part of precisely that authenticity he wanted to find in this type of song. For deep historical reasons, combined with colonialist guilt and the anxiety of the loss of power, France is embarrassed by any rootedness that is too firm, any exclusive belonging, any turn to communitarian origins—all of those things that made Lomax's American collections of the twenties and thirties so powerful.

The ultimate effect of the French language's status as a forked tongue is that the language is still capable of producing real oddness

What remains to us is the aesthete's ear, that of the collector and fantasy filmmaker Harry Smith and his 1952 *Anthology of American Folk Music*. Bob Dylan says somewhere that it bowled over his generation not because the songs included in the anthology gave a faithful description of ethnic and political America—Smith deliberately withheld any indication of whether singers were black or white—but 'because they were odd'. Now, if the Anglophone pop idiom has become familiar to the point of being somewhat banal, the ultimate effect of French's status as a forked tongue[21] is that the language is still capable of producing real oddness. And when this happens, for instance when a Parisian listens to a French voice but one that is bizarrely distant, it can bring a tear to the eye—as when one first hears the French Cajun of Cléoma Breaux and Joseph Falcon singing 'Le vieux soûlard et sa femme' on Harry Smith's compilation. Rousseau was wrong: sung French can move us. But what we love in the pop tracks that we love, with or without the masks of irony, archaism, or coldness, is always the same thing: *that within their grooves, we hear French as a foreign language.*

19. The organisation of the first folk festival in Lambesc in August 1970, largely inspired by the American folk revival of the 1960s, expressed this new mindset, at the antipodes of the patriotic spirit of the forties. At the end of the seventies, groups such as Mélusine, le Bamboche, and Malicorne reprising the repertoire and the traditional instruments of the regions of France, combined educational work, the organising of folk dances, and vocal and sonic experimentation. The album *Maison rose* (1977) by Emmanuelle Parrenin, still playing today, is a good example of the approach, resulting in an original work.

20. Or not: the musicians that make up Jericho, a subset of the constellation of musicians from Novía, draw on the 'secular and devotional repertoire of Occitania'. But for Yann Gourdon, hurdy-gurdy player and instigator of the project, Occitania is valued 'for its landscapes and soundscapes rather than in terms of identity'. Interview with Olivier Lamm, 'Aux siestes électroniques, Jéricho reveille le folklore français', Liberation, 21 July 2015, <http://next.liberation.fr/musique/2015/07/05/aux-siestes-electroniques-jericho-re-eve-the-folklorefrancais_1343858>.

21. It seems to me that the whole spirit of La Souterraine's recent French-language compilations are precisely oriented by the search for this possibility, probing everywhere possible for this oddness of French song.