

Bernard Noël's *Bruits de langues*: 'un sac de ténèbres | sens dessus dessous'¹

Il faut que je sache ma langue pour la posséder, mais ne faut-il pas que je l'oublie pour qu'elle me possède?²

Bruits de langues, which first appeared as a volume in 1980 and was not published again until 2006, is among Bernard Noël's most intriguing works, challenging both to understand in its unconventional, often ferocious verbal virtuosity, and to situate within his wider poetic endeavour.³ It was written, as he explained at the time to fellow-poet Jean Frémon, in a drastically negative and subversive spirit, 'pour en finir une bonne fois avec écrire'.⁴ For this reason, and although, as the present article will argue, its four different *suites* of eleven 'papoèmes'⁵ in many ways exemplify his philosophy and compositional methods, to date it has received only limited critical attention. Michael Bishop, in the Noël chapter of his 1989 book *The Contemporary Poetry of France*, accurately captures its ambivalently ludic and unpredictable character:

Noël's effort is, in fact, boisterously, superbly creative, a *mécriture* that shimmers and shudders with sense, albeit a sense that may twist from our grasp with a snort of irony. The text has become, simultaneously, a place of ruination and quasi-madness, and a place wherein ruination, paroxysmic fury, is made to show its sanity, its incredible residue of creative potential.⁶

On the other hand, Michael Brophy's extensive chapter on Noël published over a decade later takes a much bleaker view, contrasting the 1980 collection disadvantageously with the two extended lyrical sequences on which Noël was working around the same time, *L'Été langue morte* and *La*

¹ Bernard Noël, *L'Ombre du double*, in *Extraits du corps* (Paris: Gallimard, 2006) [henceforth *EC*], pp. 215-311 (p. 239).

² Bernard Noël, *Le Livre de l'oubli* (Paris: P.O.L., 2012) [henceforth *LO*], p. 11. Notes and aphorisms dating from the late 1970s, originally published as a *livre d'artiste* with 8 monochrome watercolours by Olivier Debré (Marseille: Ryoân-Ji, 1985): for a discussion of this artistic collaboration, see Andrew Rothwell, 'Dorny, Noël, Debré: Two Creative Dialogues', in Jean Khalfa (ed.), *The Dialogue between Painting and Poetry, Livres d'artistes 1874-1999* (Cambridge: Black Apollo Press, 2001), pp. 127-151.

³ Bernard Noël, *Bruits de Langues* (Le Roeulx: Talus d'approche, 1980; n.p.; the poems are numbered 1-44 and are referenced henceforth as BL plus number); republished in *EC*, pp. 149-199. The edition lists pre-publications as follows: BL 1 was a 'poème-affiche' with a drawing by Ramon Alejandro (collection Torse, Atelier de l'Agneau, Liège, 3 April 1974), while the other ten texts of *première suite* appeared in *Argile* 11 (Spring 1974); *deuxième suite* appeared in *Change* 23 (1975); *troisième suite* in *Givre* 2/3 (autumn 1977), a special number on Bernard Noël; 'en tête' and *quatrième suite* were previously unpublished.

⁴ Letter of 21/04/1974, in Jean Frémon and Bernard Noël, *Le double jeu du tu* (Montpellier: Fata Morgana, 1977), p. 93. On the same page, Noël refers to writing as 'le supplice pour rire'.

⁵ On Noël's concept of *papoésie*, see my companion article 'Noël, Nonoléon, Jabès: Anagrams and Palindromes of the *Papoète*', *MLR*, 112 (2017), 121-152.

⁶ Michael Bishop, 'Bernard Noël', in *The Contemporary Poetry of France: Eight Studies* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1985, pp. 101-116, esp. pp. 107-111 (p. 110).

Chute des temps. In the *Bruits* Brophy sees only ‘cette écriture qui cherche à pervertir toute écriture et à étaler insolemment l’horreur de sa propre béance’, and the ‘foisonnement monstrueux d’un système résolument clos [...] affreuse prolifération verbale amputée du sens’.⁷ As I hope to show below, this seems an over-simplification of both Noël’s purpose and his methods in the collection, which depend on a creative tension between order and anarchy, aesthetic form and subversive ‘message’, that it will be the purpose of the present article to explore. On the formal side, Bishop mentions rhymes, acrostics and literary allusions (p. 108), while Brophy gives a more extensive list of rhetorical procedures which, however, he regards as simply contributing to the textual chaos:

Sur le plan technique, une multitude de stratégies subversives (nous avons déjà examiné l’appariement grotesque que régit l’homophonie, et ce n’est qu’un procédé parmi d’autres: calembours, néologismes, anagrammes, citations déformées, acrostiches, paronomases, etc.) transforme en chaos un livre saturé de préceptes rhétoriques mais dont le sens est suffoqué grâce à cette surabondance, même. (p. 110)

Neither critic looks in detail at how these various procedures function to structure the texts themselves. Steven Winspur’s 1991 book on Noël hints at a more positive evaluation, which however remains undeveloped:

des combinaisons étranges de phonèmes donnent naissance à des morceaux lyriques. Bien qu’il se trouve à la limite du sens, le bruit constitue dans ce recueil un répertoire de possibilités verbales qui est indispensable à la création de nouvelles phrases.⁸

In another brief mention of *Bruits de langues* in their chapter on poetry of the body, Winspur and Jean-Jacques Thomas stress the performativity of Noël’s writing whereby ‘what at first appear to be jarring meaningless sounds prompt each reader to construct a meaning as he or she proceeds through the text’.⁹ However, it will be argued below that these ‘meaningless sounds’ are more strongly coded than this, and not simply prompts to some ‘personalised’ meaning-creation process. Finally, while these critics emphasise above all the poetically subversive attributes of the collection, Jean-Luc Bayard, in a brief piece in a special issue of the review *Faire-Part* devoted to Noël, is the only commentator to offer a systematic approach to some of the formal constraints, particularly the acrostics, which structure the composition.¹⁰ The present article will draw on my earlier analyses of the meta-constraint of the *sablier*, a figural structure comprising two equal, connected vessels which can pivot at the point of

⁷ Michael Brophy, ‘Bernard Noël’, in *Voies vers l’autre: Dupin, Bonnefoy, Noël, Guillevic* (Amsterdam; Atlanta, GA: Rodopi, 1997), pp. 96-147 (p. 110); Bernard Noël, *L’Été langue morte* (Montpellier: Fata Morgana, 1976) and *La Chute des temps* (Paris: Flammarion, 1983), repr. in *La Chute des temps* (Paris: Gallimard, 1993) [henceforth CT].

⁸ Steven Winspur, *Bernard Noël* (Amsterdam; Atlanta, GA: Rodopi, 1991), p. 57.

⁹ *Poeticized Language: The Foundations of Contemporary French Poetry* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1999), p. 143.

¹⁰ Jean-Luc Bayard, ‘B.N rit du rien: une lecture de *Bruits de langues*’, in *Faire-Part* 12-13 (1989), pp. 159-64. Brophy dismisses the constraints as empty: ‘Cependant, cette discipline formelle, loin de contribuer à l’achèvement du message, n’établit que le site d’un sens délirant qui s’embrouille dans le non-sens du son et, devenant tout simplement bruit, plonge l’être dans une sorte de paramnésie effroyable’ (p. 112). On constraints, see the ‘Introduction’ to my bilingual edition of *La Chute des temps/Time-fall*, Halifax, NS: VVV Editions, 2006, pp. 1-45 (esp. pp. 24-30).

junction to allow material of whatever kind to precipitate backwards and forwards between them, and which, I have argued elsewhere, governs many aspects of Noël's work.¹¹

En tête

Bruits de langues opens with a prose text with the title 'en tête', indicating its dual function as a preface and as a reflection on what the author had 'on his mind', both manifesto and a kind of mental download. In the dense opening paragraph, Noël reflects anxiously on the relationship between time, the composition of the *Bruits*, and his own mortality:

Aurai-je le temps de finir? Question absurde puisqu'elle ne fait pas que je me hâte. Tout projet se joue entre le durable, qui cherche à s'instaurer par la loi, et la dérision, qui est de nous savoir mortels, donc sans durée. Ici, la loi loge dans les grilles et les règles, la dérision dans les "bruits". Les règles obligent à prendre le temps: je prends le temps parce qu'il me manque. Et je le hais parce que je l'aime. La haine et l'amour vont comme la mort et la vie, mais la haine de la poésie n'est que le refus de soi-même : comment, je n'ai fait que ça! Je ne suis que ça! (*EC*, 149).

Here, the opposition between 'durable' and 'mortels' is set in parallel with another, between 'loi' and 'dérision', the two major categories that structure the volume and will guide my analysis of it. Formal constraints, 'les grilles et les règles', require the poet to work frustratingly slowly, with the fear of not living long enough to finish, in constant tension with the urgency of expressing his 'dérision' in the 'bruits', which leads to a paradoxical relationship to time: 'je le hais parce que je l'aime'. This same opposition between 'haine' and 'amour' defines Noël's attitude to poetry as an existential activity: despite his best efforts, the poet will always be disappointed in his written product and the image of himself that it carries ('Je ne suis que ça!'), the image that, as his personal *sablier* flips from life into death, will be all of him that continues to filter through into the world. The multiple binary oppositions underlying the production of *Bruits de langues*, and Noël's attitude to poetry more generally, are the subject of a remarkable companion text, 'Nonoléon'.¹² It gradually becomes clear that this curious narrative, in which the character 'Noël' generates by palindromic inversion an unruly and subversive alter-ego, Léon, is an allegory of the 'amour / haine' dichotomy underlying *Bruits de langues*; indeed the latter actually begins to compose two further texts on the same principles (*CE3*, pp. 13-18). 'Noël', whose name figures on the cover of their 'joint' publications ('je signe toujours Noël ce qu'écrit Léon' (*CE3*, p. 11)), is the rational, analytical aspect of the writing persona, the one who strives for aesthetic effect and sets out 'les grilles et les règles', while Léon, the inverted, vulgar arse to 'Noël's face, is responsible for the bodily-generated 'bruits'. Their combined efforts are sanctioned by Nonoléon, who, as the dialectical negation of them both, represents the poet himself, working with both the rational and the irrational aspects of language to produce a product, *Bruits de langues*, that, in its complex modes of signifying, transcends the dichotomy.

The 'en tête' now takes on the character of a manifesto, and a reading guide, for a subversive form of anti-poetry that the three characters in 'Nonoléon' decide to call *papoésie* (*CE3*, p. 13): 'La poésie a trop chanté; il faut qu'elle déchanté et trouve là le véritable chant' (*EC*, p. 149). Nonoléon, as

¹¹ See especially Andrew Rothwell, "'Et ma logique va en rond": Bernard Noël's Hourglass Figure', *MLR*, 108 (2013), pp. 109-28.

¹² In Bernard Noël, *La Place de l'autre: œuvres III* (Paris: P.O.L., 2013) [henceforth *CE3*], pp. 7-18. For Noël's hostility to 'la belle poésie' and a detailed account of 'Nonoléon', see my article 'Noël, Nonoléon, Jabès', pp. 121-8.

presumed triune author of the 'en tête', then sets out his aspirations for the type of writing that will express the trio's 'haine de la poésie':

Je veux une folie sage, un gâtisme intelligent, et un mauvais poème qui soit un poème mauvais. Je veux une laideur qui soit plus belle que la beauté parce qu'elle aura réussi à la comprendre. (EC, p. 149)

The first three of these apparent oxymorons, summed up in the aesthetic paradox of the fourth, define the challenge he faces in his determination to 'déchanter': each sets out two opposite extremes of value between which the work will oscillate, rather than taking some more conventional middle course, and each can be read as a figural *sablier* to be flipped and flipped again in the process of composition, as the text flows back and forth between the two vessels. The fourth, which might be referred to as the meta-*sablier* of the manifesto, exhibits this conceptual flipping ('laideur plus belle que la beauté') but in the dialectical mode I have identified elsewhere as governing Bernard Noël's writing intentions: the paradoxical 'laideur' of *Bruits de langues* will incorporate beauty ('la comprendre') and thereby transcend it, as Nonoléon transcends the contradiction between 'Noël' and Léon. However, if writing is meant to be an 'entreprise de séduction', this presents Nonoléon with a dilemma: how can he 'être aimé en déplaisant' (EC, p. 150)? How can the reader be led to appreciate the challenge behind what s/he is led to expect will be a set of texts exhibiting aggressive ugliness? Clearly, an unfamiliar type of reading will be necessary, one that aims to discover and hold in dialectical equilibrium with the text's disruptive surface the deeper rules, or constraints, that govern its organisation.

The same paragraph of the 'en tête' continues with the unconventional claim that this tension between the law and its transgression underlies even conventional poetry:

La loi, croit-on, réprime l'excès; en réalité, elle l'appelle. Comment existerait-il sans elle? Le vers libre n'est jamais excessif, sauf dans la lancée du dé, qui trace la même invisible limite qu'autrefois le geste de l'oracle. Le vers classique est en soi un bruit, et ce bruit rit à l'intérieur de lui de la règle qu'il est aussi. (EC, p. 150)

If even the constraints of fixed-form verse are internally mocked by the 'noises' of their words, then *Bruits de langues* can be read as an extension, however extreme, of a venerable tradition; while 'vers libres', apparently free from such rules, are nevertheless governed by a dice-throw,¹³ an apparently unmotivated decision by the poet to create an invisible space, like that designated in the sweeping gesture of the ancient oracle, for the text to occupy.¹⁴ 'La règle ancienne est un geste, et ce geste limite l'ombre à travers le son' (EC, p. 150): while the classical oracular gesture set out metrical rules

¹³ The 'coup de dé' of course evokes Mallarmé, but also the negating/inverting prefix, e.g. of 'déchanter', and Nonoléon's stuttering 'Dé dé...' as he tries to find the right word to begin the acrostic-based composition (Æ3, p. 13).

¹⁴ Compare, from Noël's third interview with Dominique Sampiero (1995): 'une vieille image: celle du geste de l'oracle. Le devin délimitait par son geste une portion du territoire céleste, et cette portion devenait un lieu de sens et cette portion devenait un lieu de sens puisque l'entrée dans ce lieu d'un oiseau devenait significative. Je construis un espace qui donnera du sens à une précipitation verbale... [...] Une fois que mon champ a des bords, il peut pleuvoir des mots dessus, à la limite n'importe quels mots car le champ va leur conférer tension et énergie' (*L'Espace du poème: Entretiens avec Dominique Sampiero*, Paris, P.O.L., 1998 (p. 71)). In the first interview (1994) he explains the nature of this poetic precipitation: 'La poésie est pour moi une sorte d'orage mental qui fait pleuvoir du verbe, du mouvement. Sa matière première n'est pas de la représentation. Elle provient directement de l'au-dedans, de l'au-dehors. Et ça pleut de l'un dans l'autre. Il y a un moment d'orage, de violente unité' (*L'Espace du poème*, p. 21). The metaphors of the oracle and precipitation recur in the near-contemporary text 'encore', the preface to *La Chute des temps* (Paris: Gallimard, 1993), pp. 7-11 (pp. 9-11).

of number and rhyme which formed a boundary to the 'ombre' of the poet's identity and world that the text could contain,¹⁵ for the modern writer that boundary is less tangible and, albeit unattainably, more ideal:

La loi est en l'air: elle cherche à épouser notre souffle. Et nous sommes malades parce qu'ils ne se rencontrent plus. Ce que je veux est en l'air. Je ne le vois pas.
(EC, p. 150)

The difficulty for the contemporary poet, his inevitable 'affliction', is to invent for himself (rather than relying on the cultural tradition) such an ideal, invisible space to contain, but also paradoxically to liberate, the 'souffle' of his expression, as Noël explains to Dominique Sampiero in the second of their interviews:

L'informel est beaucoup plus difficile à assumer que le formel. Dans tous les retours à la forme, à travers des astuces oulipiennes ou autres, il s'agit de réintroduire de la contrainte, et donc du centre, en tout cas du centré! Mais il est également vrai que cette contrainte est plus libératrice que la pseudo-liberté surréalisante.¹⁶

This expressive tension between *contrainte* and *souffle*, which governs *Bruits de langues* to an exemplary degree, is couched in physiological terms, at once literal and metaphorical, in the concluding paragraph of the 'en tête':

La langue voudrait battre comme le cœur. Elle accepte la loi des dents. Elle reste couché derrière. Elle attend. Mais les mots? Les mots sont le battement. Ils ne le sont pas. Ils en profitent. Ils sont le silence qui fait du bruit dans les yeux.
(EC, p. 151)

Literally caged in behind the 'grille' of his teeth, the poet's tongue lies patiently in wait, frustrated in its aspiration to liberated speech, while its desire for an organic 'battement' is transferred to its homonym, language, and to immaterial, unpronounced (silent) words which, taking on a subversive autonomy, will generate dissonant orthographic and phonetic patterns on the page, and consequently in the reader's head.

La loi des dents

As the triune authors in 'Nonoléon' set out to compose what would subsequently become a fifth sequence of *bruits*, the eponymous hero enquires of the other two: 'Avec quoi allons-nous travailler?' 'Noël's reply: '— Les crimes de l'armée française et la grille des *Bruits de langues*' (OE3, p. 13) refers to the new work in progress, but his allusion to a governing system of acrostics also relates back to the four existing sequences:

Tu sais que la série doit comporter onze poèmes, chacun de quinze vers composés à partir d'une phrase posée verticalement en acrostiche... (OE3, p. 14)

Léon is about to describe further details but 'Noël' silences him: '—Tais-toi, le reste de la grille est un secret' (OE3, p. 14). Bayard identifies two types of constraints that govern the collection, numerological ('la règle'), and acrostic ('la grille'), which in combination constitute the oracular

¹⁵ See Andrew Rothwell, "'Qui es-tu sous la ressemblance | Qui va là sous couvert de moi': The Hourglass of Poetic Identity in Bernard Noël's *L'Ombre du double*", *MLR*, 110 (2015), 121-48.

¹⁶ *L'Espace du poème*, p. 37.

boundary of a potentially signifying space into which the materials of the work can ‘precipitate’. Bernard Noël’s long-standing interest in numerology probably goes back to his brief involvement with the Cercle d’Études Métaphysiques, founded in 1953 by Raymond Abellio, who had a strong interest in the subject.¹⁷ As ‘Noël’ confirms in ‘Nonoléon’, each *suite* of *Bruits de langues* contains eleven poems, like the eleven letters of Bernard Noël’s name,¹⁸ with fifteen lines per poem, like ‘les quinze lettres qui ont été la règle pour mes titres pendant vingt-cinq ans’.¹⁹ Reflecting on the demise of classical verse forms, Noël remarks to Sampiero: ‘Aujourd’hui, il s’agit de faire des sonnets sans la forme sonnet’:²⁰ as confirmed by the title of the fifth sequence of *bruits*, the fifteen-line text is Noël’s chosen vehicle for doing this. Bayard also points out that the *achevé d’imprimer* carries the same date, ‘le 19 octobre’, as many other of Noël’s books, while the title of his second novel, *Le 19 octobre 1977*, was also the date when his friend the artist François Lunven committed suicide.²¹

With the addition of an acrostic ‘grille’, the numerical framework of the work becomes very much more challenging, as not just the initial letter of each line, but also the internal stanzaic division of each poem (and therefore its organisation into larger sense-blocks) is determined by the words of its acrostic. The acrostic poem (a form of steganography, or ‘hidden message’)²² is a form practised over many years by Noël in his ‘Lettres verticales’, texts addressed to personal friends and intellectual collaborators (poets, artists, publishers) and often published in small collaborative editions with graphics by painter-friends.²³ He invests this special kind of vertical composition with an ethical and mythical dimension in which, as the ‘en tête’ describes, the text takes on the characteristics of a standing skeleton:

J’empile d’abord les lettres, puis, à chacune, vient se joindre le vers comme à la vertèbre la côte. (*EC*, p. 150)

From his early years as a writer, he had developed a figural theory of the text as a bodily production becoming in its turn an *autre corps*, an alternative self, different from the poet but carrying a form of his identity (Nonoléon to ‘Noël’, in fact).²⁴ In this creative myth, the skeleton appears, often amid a

¹⁷ Abellio (1907-1986), whose birth name was George Soulès, was a politician and Vichy collaborator turned mystic and philosopher. Noël’s ‘Lettre à Renate et à Jean de S.’, dated ‘2-13 janvier 1964’, mentions ‘Abellio et son groupe d’études occupés à renouveler la Tradition à la lumière de la phénoménologie. Mes rapports avec ce groupe [...] furent passionnés et éphémères’ (*LS*, pp. 75-99 (p. 78)). The capitalised ‘Tradition’ doubtless alludes to the group’s focus on esoteric and gnostic enquiry.

¹⁸ In the second Sampiero interview, Noël reports that he is writing a long poem in 11-syllable lines (*L’Espace du poème*, pp. 47-8), probably ‘Le Passant de l’Athos’ (Bernard Noël, *Le Reste du voyage*, Paris: Seuil, 2006, pp. 9-47).

¹⁹ *L’Espace du poème* REF ?).

²⁰ *L’Espace du poème*, p. 70.

²¹ *La Chute des temps* is also based on numerical constraints: as Noël reminds Sampiero, the total length of the text’s five parts (three cantos interspersed with two counter-cantos) is 1,111 lines (‘Chiffre en apparence arbitraire mais qui me plaît: il est réversible, c’est ce que l’on appelle un chiffre magique’, made up of 333 lines for the first and third cantos and 223 for the second, each counter-canto having 111 lines (*L’Espace du Poème*, p. 70). See also Thomas and Winspur, who comment: ‘Numerical form thus replaces the semantic matrix as generator for the poem’ (*Poeticized Language*, p. 142).

²² Noël remarks in the second interview: ‘cette forme n’est pas nécessairement perçue comme une forme par le lecteur, en cela elle reste informelle’ (*L’Espace du poème*, p. 37).

²³ 33 of these epistolary poems, dated ‘1973-2000’, are collected in Bernard Noël, *Lettres verticales* (Paris: Editions Unes, 2000). Recipients include Roger Giroux, Bram Van Velde, Michel Deguy, André Dimanche, Henri Michaux, and Olivier Debré.

²⁴ In ‘Où va la poésie?’, the text of a lecture from 1989, Noël describes the ‘body’ of the text as ‘le corps de langue que je veux aimer et qu’à la fois je veux livrer’ (*L’Espace du poème*, pp. 139-147 (p. 141)). Compare the early statement: ‘Je voulais donner un corps à mes mots et des mots à mon corps’ (*LS*, p. 80).

landscape of collapse and desolation, as a pared-down, minimal persistence of self on the basis of which the task of rebuilding identity can begin, as in the concluding statement of ‘Situation lyrique du corps naturel’ of 1956:

Mon squelette blanchit, mais la grille des côtes, en coulant dans le sable, appelle un autre corps.²⁵

For the metaphorical ‘flesh’ of a desired new selfhood to build around the skeleton of the old, words must well up from the inner, artesian void and accrete onto the acrostic textual spine:

Je me penche vers le dedans, et c’est un puits à mots – artésien. [...] On rêve de s’apercevoir blanc, mais le squelette même n’est-il pas une grille à mots?²⁶

This last sentence completes the reversible *sablifier* of the bodily/textual skeleton, over-determined by the structural term ‘grille’, epitomising orderly construction and the availability of empty places in the system, the poet’s founding *loi* which simultaneously constrains his expression (‘derrière les dents’) and enables it by creating verbal slots to be filled.

Equally important for Bernard Noël, however, is the ethical symbolism of the acrostic spine, whose black letters give the text an upright status even when the horizontal ‘ribs’ of its lines remain blank and unwritten, an act of resistance and assertion of life in the face of deathly conformity, as argued in the ‘en tête’:

Il n’y a pas d’affirmation qui n’appelle aussitôt sa contradiction.²⁷ C’est pourquoi je suis debout jusqu’à la mort. Ce debout-là est aussi la raison d’être de la forme du poème. La verticalité de ce qui refuse de rester simplement couché dans le livre est analogue à la verticalité du vivant.

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In the lecture-text ‘Où va la poésie?’ (1989), Noël takes his commitment to verticality back to an even deeper myth, the origin of speech and, subsequently, writing:

Je me suis inventé un mythe pour situer l’origine et la persistance de la poésie:

Le poème se distingue immédiatement par sa façon d’occuper la page.

Le poème s’y tient debout, vertical.

Et j’imagine que cette verticalité retient la trace, qu’elle mime l’acte fondateur de l’humanité puisque l’homme s’est humanisé en se dressant, en se mettant debout.

Faire acte de verticalité, ce n’est pas seulement s’arracher à l’horizontale, c’est libérer la main qui, en cessant de servir à la marche, va pouvoir s’outiller et va surtout permettre à la bouche de n’être plus un organe de préhension —

²⁵ Situation lyrique du corps naturel’, *EC*, pp. 15-17 (p. 17).

²⁶ ‘Le Chemin de ronde II’, *LS*, p. 129.

²⁷ As ‘Noël’ is contradicted by Léon, to form their dialectical textual ‘cop[ain]’ Nonoléon...

comme nous pouvons l’observer chez la plupart des animaux — pour devenir l’organe de la parole.²⁸

Thus the acrostic ‘grille’ of *Bruits de langues* has a multiple significance for Bernard Noël, not just as the core of a system of constraints determining the oracular space into which the ‘orage mental’ of the text will precipitate (its ‘loi’), but also for its intimate mythical connection with poetic identity, a pugnacious resistance to conformity, and the origin of language itself.

When, following Bayard, we lay out horizontally the forty-four acrostic spines of *Bruits de langues*, we obtain four new steganographic poems of eleven lines, each containing fifteen letters, which adds a second dimension to the original numerological constraint:²⁹

<p style="text-align: center;">première suite (Poem A)</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. bail i cu i stue o 2. nuit de carie oeil 3. rat mort vaut pape 4. il faut tuer le moi 5. tuer la faim d’etrl 6. donne du cul a l’ame 7. un dieu est de trop 8. ris du rale qui tue 9. il faut etre betes 10. et nus pour savoir 11. nier oui comme non 	<p style="text-align: center;">deuxième suite (Poem B)</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 12. on escrit le double 13. un corps de bouche 14. il mange ta langue 15. le nu puis l’intime 16. tu n’a plus que l’os 17. et le trou du nom, la 18. merde d’ombre et la sciure 19. sciure des dents; l 20. e temps des mots n’e 21. n finira de ce cote 22. et l’autre est mort
<p style="text-align: center;">troisième suite (Poem C)</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 23. out of me and alone 24. ce secret de l’oeil 25. hante plume et bec 26. en le monde mental 27. rien qui ne soit du 28. vif venu de l’autre 29. on rature la natur 30. la representatio 31. empale la realite 32. u elle escrit ainsi 33. r un nouveau monde 	<p style="text-align: center;">quatrième suite (Poem D)</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 34. deja la mort escrit 35. si tu vas avec elle 36. autan n’ecrir plus 37. ce par quoi tient l’ 38. espece nous tient 39. reduit a la servir 40. vit ou plume font l 41. e meme a suivrrre etc 42. le refus est une il 43. lusion et je le dis 44. en parodies de moi

Table 1: transcription of *Bruits de langues* acrostics, after Bayard (pp. 162-3)

Given the complexity of the writing task and its prolonged gestation, it is not surprising that the four poems contain certain orthographical imperfections, including missing accents (it would clearly have been an excessively difficult constraint to begin lines with the correctly-accented vowel). The very first texts of the *Bruits* (line A1), published separately, has no acrostic, suggesting that it predates

²⁸ ‘Où va la poésie?’, *L’Espace du poème*, pp. 142-3. Later in the same text, Noël asserts the specifically modern character of this ‘érection’ (EP, p. 144): ‘Le poète s’est donc révolté contre l’emportement linéaire de la parole, il a transformé la verticalité de la poésie en position de résistance contre la ligne. | C’est le commencement de ce que nous appelons la modernité’ (EP, p. 143).

²⁹ The texts are here labelled as A – D for convenience, with the lines numbered consecutively to maintain their correspondence with the numbering of the poems which they generate.

Noël's decision to create the 'grille', while A5 ends with 'l', rather than the 'e' needed to make 'etre'. In the second *suite*, Poem B has two cases where a two-letter word is split between lines ('l|e' in B19 and B20, 'e|n' in B20 and B21). Lines C29 and C30 both have a missing final letter ('natur' and 'representatio') to respect the 15-letter constraint, and C32 and C33 begin with disconnected letters ('u' and 'r'). Finally, in the fourth *suite* D36 drops the last letter from 'autant' and 'ecrire', again to meet the line-length constraint, and 'il|lusion' is split between D42 and D43. Nevertheless, the deliberate construction of the forty-four 'papoèmes' of *Bruits de langues* according to a strict numerological and acrostic system, the 'loi' of which the author writes in 'en tête' at the start of the volume, is clearly the work of the rational, philosophically-enquiring and ethically-minded 'Noël', rather than his subversive-inverted counterpart Léon.

This rationality is further reflected in the thematic structure of the four acrostic poems, each of which addresses programmatically a topic of central interest to Bernard Noël's writing. Thus the second line of Poem A visibly enacts the 'verticalization' of meaning in the collection, as the final line of the first overt (and non-acrostic) text of *Bruits de langues*, 'œil carié de nuit' (*EC*, p. 153), is re-used in variant form, 'nuit de carie oeil' (A2), as the generating acrostic for the second text (*EC*, p. 154). This compressed double image seems to flip irresolvably between pairs of metaphors based on the unstated black/white referential matrix of a decayed tooth: the observing eye eaten away by the black hole at its centre, and the darkness encroaching round the moon that mirrors its gaze. This dysphoric vision of a decaying self in a dark cosmos leads to a violent repudiation of humanistic values ('il faut tuer le moi | tuer la faim d'etr[e]') and religious transcendence ('rat mort vaut pape', 'un dieu est de trop'), to which the only response is the sardonic anger ('ris du rale qui tue')³⁰ that will take over, with many comparable alliterations, the surface texts of the *Bruits*. Base physicality is asserted against the claims of spirituality and Cartesian dualism ('donne du cul a l'ame'), along with a rejection of the philosophical tradition ('il faut etre betes | et nus pour savoir'): real knowledge can only be founded on a dialectical negation of the negation ('nier oui comme non') inherited from Raymond Abellio and also seen at work in 'Nonoléon'.

Poem B expresses the consequences of this position for the poet as he inscribes a phantom self-image/alter-ego in his text ('on ecrit le double | un corps de bouche'). This textual double, whose nature and identity Noël's work explores from many different angles,³¹ is an empty, negative presence ('le trou du nom') whose speaking mouth paradoxically 'chews up' both the poet's personal life and his language ('mange ta langue | le nu puis l'intime') before excreting them onto the page ('la merde d'ombre et la sciure | sciure des dents').³² Here as elsewhere, the poet is aware

³⁰ Such self-aware sardonic laughter goes back to Noël's early writing: 'Rictus, le bord du temps ou le dernier sourire | Quand l'âcre cri de feu s'arrête pour voir | Et mesure le rien qui rage et râle au noir | De la chute, où tomber renouvelle le pire... | Crâne dur, os vidé, orbite sans regard | Et le rire qui rit de s'être écouté rire...' ('Le Chemin de ronde I', *LS*, p. 68); 'voilà que le dérisoire se met à vous ronger autant que le faisait la chose, et alors il n'y a plus de mot, plus d'issue, sauf peut-être dans une quinte de rire. On s'expulse en riant. On s'essore. On se fait mal jusqu'à ne plus avoir mal ('Le Chemin de ronde II', *LS* p.121).

³¹ See my article "'Qui es-tu sous la ressemblance'". Noël's view of the Other is anti-Sartrian: 'Si la phénoménologie m'attire, c'est peut-être qu'elle est le seul moyen d'intégrer le double. Je est un Autre, mais de cet Autre vu me revient un regard qui m'intensifie au lieu de me dissocier.' ('Le Chemin de ronde I', *LS*, p. 69). The double is thematised in the opening lines of BL 10: 'et comment | trancher le double' (*EC*, p. 162).

³² 'Sciure' (sawdust) is one of the images of precipitation (others include sand, rain, and snow) closely associated with the original *sablrier* image of identity in early works such as *Extraits du corps* (see my article "'Et ma logique va en rond'").

he will be out-lived by this verbal double ('le temps des mots n'e | n finira de ce cote | et l'autre est mort').³³

Poem C, starting unusually with a line in rather unnatural English expressing a phenomenological distancing from the self, is concerned in a more positive spirit with the ways that vision and language mediate the relationship between external reality and inner (mental) space – the 'secret de l'oeil' which ferries into the world inside the observer's head the 'vif venu de l'autre [monde]' ('le vif' being perhaps the supremely positive value for Noël). This perceptual exchange, the foundation of written and spoken expression ('hante plume et bec'), overwrites the natural order ('on rature la natur | la representatio | empale la realite')³⁴ with the creation of a 'nouveau monde', a hybrid between external and internal matter.

Poem D returns to the dysphoric link between writing and the poet's death ('deja la mort écrit'). Ceasing ('autan n'ecrir plus') is not an option because death drives the urge to write and perpetuate a self-image, just as the species exploits the sex drive for its own perpetuation: 'ce par quoi tient l' | espece nous tient | reduit a la servir'. This equivalence of phallic pulsions ('vit ou plume font l | e meme')³⁵ is impossible to resist ('le refus est une il | usion'), leaving the poet no option but to continue writing 'en parodies de moi'.³⁶

The thematic and figural structure of each of the second-level acrostic poems of *Bruits de langues* might in fact be summed up in a single over-arching Noëlían topic:

- A: Identity and the body
- B: The textual double
- C: Vision and expression
- D: Sex and writing

They amount to deliberate manifestos setting out the existential circumstances in which Noël sees the poet as working, programmatically adumbrating an aggressive, subversive approach to writing which he will implement in the overt texts. The underlying *grille* or skeleton that governs their construction is therefore formed not just from the numerological and acrostic constraints already identified, but also from this carefully-constructed metathematic programme.

This does not exhaust Noël's steganographic manifesto, however, for if, at Bayard's suggestion, the reader 'prélève les têtes' (i.e. the initial letters) from each line of the written-out acrostic skeletons, 'puis creuse et aligne ces crânes, beaux, si beaux que nos yeux brillent',³⁷ each of the four hidden poems shows itself to contain a further, hidden, acrostic (highlighted in bold in Table 1, above).

³³ 'Aucun livre, du moins parmi ceux qui relèvent de cet exercice de la langue appelé "littérature", aucun n'a besoin, une fois publié, que son auteur soit vivant. Le nom, en tête de la couverture, n'est qu'une étiquette en vue du classement dans la bibliothèque et aussi dans l'histoire. Le nom désigne une présence sans corps, une écriture sans main, une voix sans voix.' Bernard Noël, 'Parler autrement', postface to Georges Perros, *L'Ardoise magique* (Nantes: L'Œil Ébloui, 2014, pp. 59-64 ; p. 59).

³⁴ On Noël's use of the aggressive metaphor of the 'pal', see my 'Noël, Nonoléon, Jabès', p. 130 and n. 32.

³⁵ A letter to Jean Frémon of 20/08/1973 makes this connection explicit: 'De même que nous détournons la reproduction dans l'érotisme, nous détournons la reproduction du langage dans la poésie' (*Le double jeu du tu*, p. 24).

³⁶ Compare: 'comment être le bouffon de soi' | l'habitude est trop habituelle | un pieu de temps planté en tête' ('Poème en désordre', in Bernard Noël, *La Vie en désordre*, Coaraze: L'Amourier, 2005, pp. 25-46 (p. 30)). Compare the closing lines of 'La Nuit de Londres' (1970), with the sardonic repeated 'r' of the *bruits* reinforcing the nihilistic theme: 'reste la nuit | rayée d'un nerf | que racle | un rire noir' (*EC*, p. pp.137-141; p.141).

³⁷ 'B.N rit du rien', p. 163.

When written out horizontally in their turn, these produce a third-level poem of four eleven-syllable line (this double transfer of Noël’s key numerals 15 and 11, from number of lines to line lengths – or rather, in the process of composition, the reverse – is a consequence of the acrostic ‘grille’ but adds further numerological cohesion and aesthetic layering). The resulting text, which we might label ‘Poem X’ because it can only be found once the first system of acrostics has been written out, is the secret generative kernel of the whole book hinted at by Nonoléon:

b n rit du rien
ou il temsene
o cher voleur
d’sa cervelle

Decoding Poem X is complicated by a likely acrostic error: after proposing a dozen potentially thematic anagrammatical reorderings of the opaque second line (including ‘le oui se ment’, ‘mène toi seul’, ‘œil usé ment’ and ‘œil ému sent’), Bayard speculates that an unintended ‘correction’ may in fact have crept in, the accidental intrusion of ‘s’, the nineteenth letter of the alphabet, into the nineteenth poem of the book, and so proposes the rectification ‘ou il t’emmene’.³⁸ The ‘cher voleur’ of the poet’s ‘cervelle’ is of course the reader,³⁹ to whom ‘B.N.’ lays down the sardonic challenge of the ‘rien’ at the centre of the textual and mental labyrinth into which s/he will be led, Virgil-like, by the poet. *Bruits de langues* is thus scaffolded by a triple verticality: 44 surface texts, then two further layers of hidden poems supported by and built on acrostics – pugnacious assertions of the poet’s existential purpose in writing the collection, and a complex ‘informal’ space into which the ‘orage de tête’ of writing can precipitate.⁴⁰ In order to understand this structure, the reader has to work in reverse to the process of composition, peeling away the layers to recover the original four-line kernel from which the collection expanded out during the years when it was being constructed.

However, this does not yet exhaust the *grille* and *règles* which constructs the collection’s signifying space, for while the first and second *suites* are essentially written in free verse, characterised by occasional fragments of standard metre and multiple internal sound-echoes, the third and fourth obey additional constraints of metre and end-rhyme which are mostly evident to the reader. For reasons that will become clear in due course, the texts of the third sequence (BL 23 to BL 33) are written in the classic alexandrine (12-syllable) line,⁴¹ with complex and varied rhyme-schemes (see Table 2):

BL	Metre	Rhyme Scheme
23	12	AAA BB CC DDD EFEFE
24	12	AB CDCDCD EE F FG
25	12	AA BBB CDCDC EE FFF
26	12	AA BC BCCBC DEDEFF
27	12	ABAB CDCDD ED(E)D FF

³⁸ ‘B.N. rit du rien’, p. 164.

³⁹ Compare this *sablier* metaphor, again setting composition and reading in parallel: ‘Le livre est une tête ouverte: on lit en lui comme on écrit en elle’ (‘Où va la poésie ?’, *L’Espace du poème*, p. 146)

⁴⁰ Brophy seems to miss the dialectical significance of the acrostics entirely: ‘L’acrostiche serait même la marque risible de ce travail dégradant et aliénant car, se juxtaposant à une usurpation violente du sens en général, il figure dans la strophe comme ornement particulièrement inepte et superfétatoire’ (*Voies vers l’autre*, p. 114).

⁴¹ There are two exceptions: it is hard to force the final line of BL 27 (‘un côté marie-honnête et tout l’autre cochon’) into 12 syllables (*EC*, p. 181), while the last two lines of BL 29, mirroring the poem’s subject, seem on the point of expiring metrically: ‘un mort inachevé | rôle’ (*EC*, p. 183).

28	12	ABA BABA CC D D EEDD
29	12	AA BCBCDD EE FF GHI
30	12	AA BCBCDDEFEGFG
31	12	AABBCC DD EEFFDDD
32	12	A BCBC DDEEE FFGFG
33	12	AB(A) BCCDDDD EEFEF

Table 2: Metre and rhyme in BL troisième suite

The end-rhymes here not only add a further overt constraint to the covert acrostic that determines the first letter of each line, they also interact with the acrostic text itself because its word-divisions govern the stanzaic division of the poem into sense-groupings of lines, and Noël only rarely carries a rhyme over from one group (stanza) to the next. What might at first appear to be a purely formal constraint therefore has a deep, if semi-hidden, influence on the meaning structures of the text.

Contrasting with the fixed line-length of the third *suite*, the fourth combines complex and very variable rhyme-schemes with a virtuosic display of variable versification. In one direction, the line length increases regularly from 6 to 12 syllables, but this is countered, from BL 37, by interleaved texts whose line length (marked in bold type in Table 3, below) reduces from 4 down to a single syllable:

BL	Metre	Rhyme Scheme
34	6	AABB CC DDEE FAAFB
35	7	AA BB CCB DDDD EEFF
36	8	ABABA B CCB BB DEDE
37	4	AA BBB CCCC DDDE E E
38	9	ABABAB CACA CACAC
39	10	ABBACC A DD A EE A FF
40	3	AAA BB CDCDC EECC E
41	11	A BAAB A CDCDEE FFF
42	2	AA BACCA DDE EED DD
43	12	AABBCC DD EE FF GGF
44	1	[Ire, dire]

Table 31: Metre and rhyme in BL quatrième suite

A good example of Noël's deliberate use of rhyme is the decasyllabic text BL 39 (*EC*, p. 194), structured as five different 'couplets' separated by five repetitions of the same semi-long [ε] sound – 'aile' and its homonym 'hêle', the portmanteau homonymic coinage 'ressemêle' [*ressemeler / se remêler*], 'pêle-mêle' and, most adventurously, a sexual allusion 'entre tes Dardanelles': it is clear that this aspect of *Bruits de langues* would repay further study. But what are we to make of the increasing amplitude of the alternation between long and short lines as the collection moves towards its close, an alternation that may be sensed by the reader but only made fully apparent when tabulated? The acrostic of the first text, 'deja la mort écrit', and the thematization throughout *Bruits de langues* of the uttering body, might suggest an imitation of physical processes, the poetic subject's breathing or the systolic/diastolic beating of his heart, alternately laboured and shallow, as he continues to *guégerroyer* with language while fading towards death. The final poem (acronym: 'en parodies de moi') stands out on the page as barely more than its acrostic spine, visually reminiscent of some of the black and white 'Signe-personnage' works produced at the beginning of the 1950s by Olivier Debré, on whom Noël has published a number of important texts:⁴²

⁴² See, for instance, Bernard Noël, *Debré* (Paris: Flammarion, 1984), pp. 15-16.

et
NON

puisque
au
rien
on
doit
ire
et
sens

dire
et

mort
o
i

The poem can certainly be read as a series of breathlessly-monosyllabic⁴³ ejaculations, just fourteen words of which five are ‘et’ (the slightest conjunction of coordination) and only one rhyme (‘ire’, ‘dire’), gasped out until ‘mort’ and ‘moi’ finally merge in a miniature, minimal reduction of the horizontal-vertical *grille* underlying the collection. Whereas BL 29 had ended with an ‘unfinished’ death (mirrored by the incomplete versification of ‘un mort inachevé | rôle’ (*EC*, p. 183)), here the poet seems to have achieved the objective of acrostic BL 4: ‘il faut tuer le moi’. Yet despite the inevitable demise of the author in his own text,⁴⁴ it continues to fulfil his duty to oppose ‘rien’ by expressing his ‘ire’ and his persistent creation of ‘sens’, while the last word, ‘moi’, combining the female ‘o de l’oubli’ and the phallic ‘i’ of the ‘cri de la partie sauvage’, maintains his ‘érection syllabique’ (BL 26, *EC*, p. 180) to the bitter end.⁴⁵

Du bruit dans les yeux

[le poème] est d’ailleurs le seul
espace vital où la loi devient folle
mange l’irréversible et retourne la mort⁴⁶

Alain Marc remarks that the apparently wild phonetic clashes and connections that characterise the surface texts of *Bruits de langues* have an ‘effet proche de l’écriture automatique’,⁴⁷ but their origin and purpose are quite different. Noël’s distaste for Bretonian surrealism and the Freudian

⁴³ This assumes the elision of ‘puisque’ with the following ‘au’, and a compressed pronunciation of ‘rien’.

⁴⁴ ‘Chacun devient le mort de ce qu’il exprime parce que la chose exprimée n’a plus besoin de lui et coupe le lien’ (*Debré*, pp. 5-6).

⁴⁵ In a letter of 10/3/1968 to Georges Perros, Noël writes of ‘la verticalité du poème’, commenting: ‘Excusez ce vertical, pour moi il fait image de cri debout’ (Bernard Noël, Georges Perros, *Correspondances*, Draguignan: Unes, 1998, p. 72). Compare also, from ‘La Nuit de Londres’ (1970): ‘un cri | tend son i | pour faire un diamètre | à cette ombre’ (*EC*, p. 140).

⁴⁶ Bernard Noël, *Le Reste du voyage* (Paris: Seuil, 2006), pp. 10-47; pp. 36-7.

⁴⁷ Alain Marc, *Bernard Noël Le monde à vif* (Pantin: Le Temps des cerises, 2010), p. 32. Brophy dismisses them as ‘une vaine orchestration de sons’ (*Voies vers l’autre*, p. 115).

Unconscious is well documented,⁴⁸ and his own materialist creative philosophy is in large part a reaction against such mentalism. Thus, in his 1993 study *André Masson: La Chair du regard*, Noël accounts for the gestural automatism of Masson's drawings by appropriating and repurposing Breton's celebrated definition of surrealism in the 1924 *Manifeste*, keeping the structure and layout of the quotation but swapping out the key adjective *psychique* for its look-alike antonym:

SURRÉALISME n.m. Automatisme *physique* pur par lequel on se propose d'exprimer (...) le fonctionnement réel de la pensée à travers l'agitation organique qu'elle communique au corps...⁴⁹

In a later interview with Claude Margat, he explains the mechanism of this alternative form of automatism in terms that might also be applied to his own writing:

L'automatisme de Masson est le diagramme des pulsions organiques dont la main devient le sismographe.⁵⁰

The puns and homophonic collisions that characterise the surface texts of the *Bruits* might plausibly be theorised as manifestations of just such a *physical* automatism, 'pulsions organiques' of the 'bête à mots' wagging and phonating inside Léon's 'bouche aboyante', and from an early point in his writing career Noël had experimented with verbal sound-play, as in this note from his diary 'Le Chemin de ronde II' (dated 'juin 1965-1968'):

Rêve de rire et râle du roulement des roses / chemin horizontal / lente coulée /
et nul reflet n'habite le son pur / qui va vers la rose des nerfs – Ne dites pas le
sens du son: il n'en a pas. (LS, p. 130; obliques original)

His orthodox acceptance here of a disconnection between sound and meaning, as enshrined in the Saussurean doctrine of *l'arbitraire du signe*, would however be radically re-thought and inverted in the intense verbal creativity of *Bruits de langues*, which makes dense and unapologetic use of such alliterations:

filament filant
au fond du froid (BL 4, EC, p. 156)

voici la ruine où rôde un rêve dément (BL 28, EC, p. 182)

lassés du laps qui nous fait lanturlu
autant lapper les lies ça vaut les lues⁵¹ (BL 39, EC, p. 194)

⁴⁸ See e.g. my article 'Noël, Nonoléon, Jabès', p. 123.

⁴⁹ Bernard Noël, *André Masson: La Chair du regard* (Paris: Gallimard, 1993), p. 35 (emphasis added). Breton's definition: 'Surréalisme, n. m. Automatisme psychique pur par lequel on se propose d'exprimer, soit verbalement soit par écrit, soit de toute autre manière, le fonctionnement réel de la pensée' (*Manifestes du surréalisme*, Paris: Gallimard, 1985, p. 36). The artist Hans Bellmer performs the same verbal replacement in the title of his 1957 book *Petite anatomie de l'inconscient physique ou l'Anatomie de l'image* (Paris: Le Terrain Vague, 1978).

⁵⁰ Bernard Noël and Claude Margat, *Questions de mots. Entretiens* (Paris: Editions Libertaires, 2009), p. 153.

⁵¹ 'Laps' collocates strongly with 'temps', suggesting that death is the theme here. The online *Trésor de la Langue Française informatisé* (<http://atilf.atilf.fr/>) [henceforth TLFi] gives, sub **lanturlu**: '[Exprimant un refus méprisant, l'indifférence, ou une réponse évasive] Synon. *allez au diable; adieu! bernique! tintin! Il lui a répondu lanturlu*'. 'Boire le calice jusqu'à la lie' – to the bitter end; 'lues' may be read as a parallel coinage designating the residuum, or dregs, of reading left in the memory. Compare, in BL 14: 'un jeu de lie | et de lu' (EC, p. 167) – also below.

Noël's aim in doing this is to re-motivate sound-plays and draw attention to lost connections between apparently unrelated words, once they have been unshackled from the censorship of declarative communication. He sees such 'noisy' connections as inherent in language itself, but lost to our normal perception, buried in a form of collective unconscious that he calls *oubli*:

L'exercice de l'écriture, pour peu qu'il soit débarrassé d'intentions, fait surgir et s'exprimer des éclats de l'immense dépôt commun que notre langue recueille depuis toujours. Aucune parole n'est perdue mais toutes sont oubliées en attendant que nous reviennent par l'écriture des parties impersonnelles de ce que nous savons sans le savoir...⁵²

It is this 'unknown knowledge', cross-wirings between words and concepts, that the poet unearths in *l'oubli*, 'la masse obscure dans laquelle me semble puiser l'écriture' (ibid).

Unlike the surrealist unconscious, *oubli* is 'impersonnel', not an individual creative resource but one shared by a whole language community:

Le territoire de l'oubli ne se confond pas avec celui de l'inconscient, lequel se compose bien d'oublié, mais d'un oublié entièrement particulier, personnel. L'inconscient n'est que la couche superficielle de l'oubli, car l'oubli n'a pas été oublié que par moi. Il faut imaginer l'oubli à l'échelle de l'espèce – l'oubli comme inconscient de l'espèce, un inconscient stratifié dans le système nerveux, dans le cerveau... (*LO*, p. 14)

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Later in *Le Livre de l'oubli* these references to layering ('couche superficielle', 'stratifié') develop into an archeological metaphor, and as 'dépôt' is literalised and particularised into 'décharge', connections start to emerge with Baudelaire's poet-*chiffonnier* and his afterlife in the work of Walter Benjamin:

L'oubli est la terre mentale: une terre bondée de vestiges. Quand on la fouille, on n'y trouve pas des souvenirs mais des images ou parfois des formules à l'allure d'oracles. En fait, c'est ici la décharge de tout ce qui fut dit dans tous les autres fois. (*LO*, pp. 49-50)⁵³

The poet thus delves into the communal rubbish-tip of the French language and restores to public consciousness lost verbal gems, which Noël characterises in strikingly Bretonian terms ('images', 'formules à l'allure d'oracles'), making a text that reveals and re-values, in Baudelaire's words, 'un tas de débris'.⁵⁴ 'Écrire | crocheter', states BL 12 (*EC*, p. 165): as he explains in a video interview marking the publication of *Le Livre de l'oubli*, the poet is a humble *gratteur*, in the dual sense of picking over lost remnants and scratching a living with his pen:

il me semble que rien n'est perdu, les paroles prononcées, elles sont comme accumulées quelque part, [...] comme des déchets dans une décharge. Mais il me

⁵² Back cover of *Le Livre de l'oubli* (2012).

⁵³ Compare: 'Et où fouiller, sinon dans l'oubli? L'oubli, qui est l'enfouissement dans l'espace intérieur du vécu, du lu, du pensé, de l'imaginé, du réfléchi, bref de tout ce dont notre culture est composé. L'écriture puise dans l'oublié...' (*LO*, p. 52). The 'décharge' metaphor first occurs in one of the final notes from 'Le Chemin de ronde II', linked to memory rather than 'oubli': 'Parfois, le sol cède, et je suis heureux, car ce sol n'est jamais que la croûte de la grande décharge où vont les images, jour après jour, siècle après siècle ; quand j'enfonce, c'est enfin dans toute la mémoire du monde. Un instant' (*LS*, pp. 101-135 (p. 135)).

⁵⁴ Charles Baudelaire, 'Le Vin des chiffonniers', *Les Fleurs du mal*.

semble intéressant d'aller gratter dans cette décharge pour en retirer des fragments qui évidemment s'associent d'une manière nouvelle quand on les déterre.⁵⁵

The creative potential of the linguistic *décharge*, like the Marché aux Puces de Saint-Ouen in *Nadja*, resides in the disorderly juxtaposition and jumble of context-less items, stripped of their place in the value-systems of society and become, in Breton's telling term, 'pervers':⁵⁶

L'oubli ne connaît ni le classement, ni la hiérarchie: il ne veut rien retenir, il réserve seulement des surprises. (*LO*, p. 60)

As Noël goes on to say in his video interview, *grattage* is partly a process of deliberate craft, but partly also accidental, as the poet exercises his 'bête à mots' in the absence of prior intentions:

le grattage, si je puis dire, n'est pas purement volontaire, il est fait de l'exercice de l'écriture, de l'exercice de la langue plutôt à travers l'écriture. Oublier soi, tu vois [...]

In this sense writing also requires self-forgetting, taking the risk of giving oneself over to the collective social 'wisdom' of language, as BL 13 (*EC*, p. 166) suggests:

un produit social
nourriture de tête

cette fracture
où bouge l'autre
récit récif ou reste
peut-être aux dépends de soi-même
sans que soi soit

'Fracture', 'récif' and 'reste' all speak of the danger of plunging into the linguistic *décharge*, while the hope of producing a 'récit' that will connect with other people is undermined by a threatened loss of self, eloquently explored in 'Nonoléon'.⁵⁷

The creative promise of *oubli* and the *décharge*, for Noël, is Mallarméean, a negation of the negation also observed previously in 'Nonoléon':

L'oubli est le contraire du néant. Il est la positivité de l'absence. (*LO*, p. 28)⁵⁸

The second poem of *Bruit de langues* thematises this positivity arising out of a dual death, of conventional signification and of the writing self, in terms of the action of the mouth, first swallowing ('à la trappe') normal names (of things, of the poet himself), before expelling their sounds once again in a jubilant liberation of the 'bête à mots':

⁵⁵ Interview with Jean-Paul Hirsch, 13 November 2012, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dVoVrgTXgeM>.

⁵⁶ 'J'y suis souvent, en quête de ces objets qu'on ne trouve nulle part ailleurs, démodés, fragmentés, inutilisables, presque incompréhensibles, pervers enfin au sens où je l'entends et où je l'aime' (André Breton, *Nadja*, Paris: Gallimard, 2007, p. 43).

⁵⁷ The acrostic of BL 4 reads: 'il faut tuer le moi' (*EC*, p. 156).

⁵⁸ Compare: 'Et si écrire, c'était tenter de lire l'oubli?' (*LO*, p. 12); '– L'écriture est l'expérience de l'oubli' (*LO*, p. 28).

niant le nom
un creux sous la langue
inverse bouche
trappe du sens

du mourir encore
et puis la glotte qui glousse⁵⁹ (EC, p. 154)

This dialectical positivity is thematised in *Bruits de langues* as the hijacking, collapsing and negation of meaning in a battle to subvert language, characterised by Noël in a portmanteau fusion of 'guéroyer' and the mock-jocular 'guéguerre' (= minor squabble) which simultaneously defines and exemplifies his creative product, disparagingly characterised as a mass noun:

on guéguéroie de langue et ça crée du poème (BL 23; EC, p. 177)

Dual/hybrid meanings abound throughout *Bruits de langues*, forming *sablier* structures where meaning oscillates irreconcilably between divergent possibilities which thereby become connected in unfamiliar ways. When, for instance, in the opening lines of BL 15 we read 'lent gage | et dé part' (EC, p. 168), we also simultaneously hear *langage* and *départ*, each orthographic-phonetic form working doubly hard to express the poet's patient commitment to language, and the poem's initiation by a 'coup de dé'.

In 'ordinary' language, double meanings derive from either polysemy or metaphorical association, semantic plurality being encoded either directly in the language system, or indirectly in the cultural system which uses the language, and it is almost always resolvable by linguistic and/or pragmatic context.⁶⁰ In contrast, one of the tasks of poetry over the centuries is gradually to extend and renew the stock of available metaphors, creating a *frisson* of novelty and a sense that a new meaning or connection has been created. While Western cultures generally accept polysemy and metaphor as legitimate because they are based on sense, homophony is not normally allowed to contribute new meanings as it is regarded as accidental, unmotivated, and therefore illegitimate. Hence its subversive attraction for a poet like Noël, because it undermines the control exerted by linguistic convention on what is sayable. As will be seen below, homonymic writing tends to release the obscene and scatological, as well as the humorous and metalinguistic potential of language, but many of the following examples from *Bruits de langues*, often occurring in pairs and based on coinages, also turn out to be cruxes of metapoetic reflection:

faire plaie [*fair play*] | à la cervelle | un tas d'os seulets [*osselets*] (BL 9; EC, p. 161)

raie crie [*récrie / récrit*] le monde | en corps [*encore*] une fois (BL 9; EC, p. 161)

la forme évide [*est vide*] | art chie vent [*archivant*] (BL 14, EC, p. 167)

un couple d'os | s'aimant [*ossements*] (BL 16, EC, p. 169)

on n'a qu'une | sûre face [*surface*] (BL 16, EC, p. 169)

et cris [*écrits/écrit(s)*] (BL 17, EC, p. 170)

mur muré [*murmuré*] (BL 18, EC, p. 171)

⁵⁹ Compare, in 'Poème à déchanter': 'quelle douceur dans la glotte à glou' (EC, p. 106). Later in the same text we read: 'orthographe | entrée du coma [*comma*]'. *TLFI* (sub **comma**) notes that the English punctuation term belongs to the international telegraphic alphabet.

⁶⁰ See for instance George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors we Live By* (2nd edn Chicago; London: Chicago University Press, 1980).

et cris vains [*écrivain(s)*] (BL 21, *EC*, p. 174)
en rester las [*là*] (BL 22, *EC*, p. 175)
pouèt prend ton vit sage [*visage*] (BL 23, *EC*, p. 177)
vous avez la syllabique | à défaut de botte à nique [*botanique*] (BL 35, *EC*, p. 190)
la femmine [*famine*] (BL 40, *EC*, p. 195)

Related categories are homophonic reduplication, where the two different orthographical forms are given in succession, e.g. ‘entendu en temps dû’ (BL 5, *EC*, p. 157), and duplication with variation, as in ‘ah oui les griffes la greffe’ (BL 6, *EC*, p. 158). BL 21, which begins with the injunction ‘n’oubliez pas le travail’ (*EC*, p. 174), refers metapoetically to this homophonic mutation in the speaking mouth as a process of pupation, in which meanings emerge transformed from the chrysalis of words: ‘dans le fourneau bucal un mot mue | et s’épluche’ (*EC*, p. 174). Although the connections and transformations that the poet uncovers are ‘there’ all along in the ‘décharge’ of language, it is through his patient ‘grattage’ and homonymic ‘travail’ that they are brought to the reader’s conscious awareness. Far from being a manifestation of surrealist automatism, therefore, Noël’s puns and homonyms in *Bruits de langues* are a difficult form of constrained, dual writing which thematises its own attention to sounds, and the ‘travail’ on them which allows words to acquire new meaning.⁶¹

Un jeu de lie | et de lu

Once the poet has set out the hollow, empty space that is to receive the verbal material of his text, he must look for ways to fill it, a process described obliquely in BL 14 (*EC*, p. 167):

la forme évide [*est vide*]
art chie vent [*archivant*]
néanmoins le nom
grelot du gain
un jeu de lie
et de lu

Although writing produces only Léon’s nether wind, the value-negated, inverted version of the conceptual ‘air’ that in more positive Noélian contexts mediates communication in the external world, the very process of naming initiates a ‘jeu’ within the formally constrained space (note that the acrostic of this stanza is ‘langue’) which has the potential to result in a saleable text, the ‘grelot du gain’ hinting perhaps sarcastically at material reward.⁶² The pairing of ‘lie’ (dregs from the ‘décharge’) with ‘lu’ introduces an important category of ‘find’ disinterred by Bernard Noël’s homophonic *grattage*: fragments of reading, distorted echos of famous texts which the poet repurposes in the service of his own agenda to ‘déchanter’.⁶³ In the important text ‘Où va la poésie?’, he presents culture as a second human nature and writing as therefore inevitably intertextual:

⁶¹ Compare, from Séquence 4 of *L’Ombre du double*: ‘qu’est-ce que la volonté | [...] | la langue nouée à l’objet’ (*EC*, p. 247).

⁶² According to *TLFI*, the semantics of ‘grelot’ (little bell) are rich: it can allude to madness (the bells on a fool’s bauble), fear (‘avoir les grelots’), or denunciation (‘attacher le grelot’), but the outdated figurative sense ‘voice’ (‘faire entendre son grelot’, i.e. self-advertise) may fit better here.

⁶³ BL 16 (*EC*, p. 169) stresses reading through homonymic repetitions (‘lis ce u lisse u’), with the name of Ulysses spanning between them.

La masse des livres et l'univers presque infini de l'écriture ont également produit un espace, celui d'une nouvelle nature dans la continuité de laquelle s'ouvre notre mentalité. L'événement verbal, qui donne naissance au poème et qui se concrétise en lui, advient à l'intérieur de cette continuité où nous sommes à la fois unis à tous les livres et séparés d'eux suffisamment pour entretenir avec leur écrit le même rapport que chaque homme avec l'espèce humaine.⁶⁴

Jean-Luc Bayard in his seminal article referred to above draws attention to this aspect of *Bruits de langues*: 'mais le grand déchantement annoncé, c'est le pourrissement des poèmes'.⁶⁵ He offers five examples of such 'pourrissement' (understood here in an active sense, as deliberately done), but without identifying the origin (given below in italics) of the distorted echos:

la treizième revient nous gommer le visage (BL 23; EC, p. 177)

[*La Treizième revient... c'est encore la première*] (Nerval, 'Artémis', *Les Chimères*)

eh peaucrite lècheur, mon pareil bookmaker (BL 27; EC)

[— *Hypocrite lecteur, — mon semblable, — mon frère!*] (Baudelaire, 'Au lecteur', *Les Fleurs du mal*)

et je vois quelquefois ce que l'homme a cru voir (BL 33; EC, p. 187)

[*Et j'ai vu quelquefois ce que l'homme a cru voir!*] (Rimbaud, 'Le Bateau ivre', *Poésies*)

et c'est encore l'automne

chiquant sa scie⁶⁶ monotone (BL 35; EC, p. 190)

[*Les sanglots longs*

Des violons

De l'automne

Blessent mon cœur

D'une langueur

Monotone] (Verlaine, 'Chanson d'automne', *Poèmes saturniens*)⁶⁷

il peut avancer parce qu'il va

dans le noir (BL 2; EC, p. 154)

[*il peut avancer parce qu'il va dans le mystère*] (Mallarmé, *Igitur: IV*)

These are all prestigious intertexts from the French 19th-Century poetic canon, but however innovative and revolutionary they may have been in their day, many decades of *explicitation de texte* have turned them into icons of the bourgeois cultural tradition. Further examples of Noël's literary 'borrowings' in *Bruits de langues* will be discussed below: in their majority they are found in the third *séquence*, which is composed, as noted above, almost exclusively in alexandrines.

⁶⁴ *L'Espace du poème*, pp. 146-7.

⁶⁵ 'B.N. rit du rien', p. 160. To repurpose Apollinaire with this active sense in mind, it would not be inappropriate to label the Noël of *Bruits de langues* as 'le déchanteur pourrissant'.

⁶⁶ *TLFI* sub *scie*: 'Chanson, phrase musicale, à la mode et souvent répétée. Synon. *rengaine*'.

⁶⁷ The two preceding lines in the *Bruits de langues* text, which Bayard does not cite, make the identification conclusive: 'au moment des sanglots longs | voici venir les violons'. Noël's derision towards conventional poetry in this text, including a dig at Mallarmé's fans, seems clear: 'si le mot gonfle et bavoche | il y a muse [*anguille*] sous roche || tous les poètes au portail | usent leur petit détail || vous avez la syllabique | à défaut de botte à nique | soulevez donc l'éventail.'

One effect of ‘misappropriating’ and distorting such intertexts may be to shock the reader with the apparent disrespect and cultural vandalism involved, but it also serves to alert him/her to the language games played in the text, by which literary clichés are brought back to life and reinvigorated with an experimental edginess. In this process such rag-picked fragments acquire a dual voice, as both distorted echos from the literary tradition, and metapoetic observations about Noël’s contemporary writing project. In an interview with Bayard in 2005, he ascribes his interest in Baudelaire and Mallarmé to the self-referentiality of their work:

Cela commence avec Baudelaire, mais s’affirme à la génération suivante... celle de Mallarmé. Le sujet se retourne... l’écriture ne traite plus des sujets: elle devient son propre sujet. C’est également vrai de la peinture avec Manet: la peinture devient le sujet de la peinture.⁶⁸

The later 19th Century had already performed this crucial *retournement* of the poetic *sablier* by which the conventional externalisation of ideas turned inwards to focus on the means of their expression (rhetorical structures, figures). A century later, Noël re-inverts the *sablier* to problematise phonetically (and in alexandrines) the language of what had become, in Picabia’s telling title of 1919, ‘poésie ron-ron’.⁶⁹ An early example occurs in the fourth poem from the *première suite*, which adds a scabrous meaning to the ‘aboli bibelot d’inanité sonore’ of Mallarmé’s celebrated ‘sonnet en –yx’ (‘Ses purs ongles...), perhaps also hinting intertextually at Diderot’s *bijoux indiscrets*:

les fentes sont des tire-lire
ébaubies d’être lots (EC, p. 156)⁷⁰

Here, not only the ‘purs ongles’ of the sonnet (virtually present in the distorted phonetic allusion to the original) are subverted by a hint at prostitution, so is the whole notion of sound-play in poetry as a source of aesthetic value and pleasure. BL 7 contains another metapoetic allusion to Mallarmé, again couched in obsessively alliterative language, linking his famous dice-throw to the oblique, conventionally ‘failed’ expression of the phonetic *déchanteur*:

dire détours déboires coups de dé (EC, p. 159)⁷¹

When the die returns in BL 36 the poet warns the reader in unpoetic, colloquial register that it has been tampered with:

rien ne vaut un beau coup de dé
i touchez pas il est truqué (EC, p. 191)

⁶⁸ *En présence...: entretien avec Bernard Noël, conduit par Jean-Luc Bayard* (Coaraze: L’Amourier, 2008) [henceforth *En présence...*], p. 52.

⁶⁹ Francis Picabia, *Poésie ron-ron* (Paris: Pierre-André Benoit, 1919).

⁷⁰ Mallarmé’s text is of course also a virtuosic display of sound-play within a constrained structure (the rhyme-scheme of his sonnet), but done with a cold Symbolist purity which Noël completely subverts. Compare also, from the final text of ‘Le Reste d’un poème’ (1997): ‘une autre tête monte les yeux fermés | beau ballon bourré de bibelots sonores’ (*Le Reste du voyage et autres poèmes*, Paris: Seuil, 2006, pp. 101-13 (p.113)). As early as 1972, the essay ‘L’autre nom’ shows the centrality of this reference for Noël: ‘L’opération poétique consiste peut-être en ce doublement, qui en dé-nommant re-nomme; [...] ainsi Mallarmé, qui réussit avec son aboli bibelot à nous présenter concrètement ce qu’il gomme aussitôt’ (*Treize cases du je*, 2nd edn, Paris: P.O.L., 1998, pp. 33-37 (p. 33)).

⁷¹ Also as a prefix: ‘Élément, du latin *dis-*, qui indique l’éloignement, la séparation, la privation’ (*Petit Robert*).

But it is Noël's own *coup de dé-* that has 'fixed' (distorted, subverted) conventional meaning, repurposing Mallarmé's figure into a metapoetic comment on the text's functioning.

The third *suite* of *Bruits de langues* contains a more sustained rewriting of Mallarméan and Baudelairean intertexts on the 'voyage' theme. BL 24, with its acrostic 'ce secret de l'oeil', offers a violent treatment of Noël's theory of vision and its distortion by knowledge:

ce qui nous leurre est si lié à l'œil qu'il faut
étriper le regard pour ouvrir le tombeau (EC, p. 178).⁷²

The link between vision and the *voyage* is made in the line: 'le visible déjà me prend comme une mer...'⁷³ which recycles the first line of 'La Musique' from *Les Fleurs du mal*: 'La musique souvent me prend comme une mer'. In its next occurrence, the sea has changed value and undergone homophonic slippage (*la mer/l'amer*), as Noël denounces, in distorted marine vocabulary ('claquer [la voile]'), the origin of the mind/body duality in a spurious notion of the poetic ideal, closely associated with Baudelaire's sea imagery:

ô les yeux, les yeux, les yeux qu'on cloue à l'amer
étonnement de voir claquer la fermeture
idéale et l'esprit naître de cette injure (EC, p. 178)

But there is also a structural and phonetic echo, in the triple repetition of 'les yeux', of Mallarmé's negative inversion and deconstruction of the Baudelairean *voyage* trope, 'L'Azur' (1864), which concludes in frustration: 'Je suis hanté. L'Azur! L'Azur! L'Azur! L'Azur!'. Noël's text then ends on an allusion to 'L'Invitation au voyage', reducing the fluent, erotic figurality of Baudelaire's 'luxe, calme et volupté' to dusty, abstract convention: 'lors, tout n'est que signe, humanisme et littérature' (EC, p. 178).⁷⁴ The *voyage* theme re-surfaces again part-way through BL 31 (acrostic: 'empale la realite'), which re-purposes 'Brise marine' into a darkly materialist *art poétique* (including a reference to Mallarmé's own 'Livre') where the sea is a blank sheet of paper:

la chair nous quitte, hélas ! voici venir le givre
ah fuir, vers là-bas fuir! où va naître le Livre

rien, le vide papier invitant les orages
et la langue qu'un vent penche sur les naufrages
afin de vague en vague en égoutter le glas.
le ciel est mort, tant la matière saliva.
il faut, à petits mots, haler vers nos gencives
tout un chuchotement d'organe qui s'avive. (EC, p. 185)⁷⁵

⁷² Also: 'sous ce chapeau moral, les mots prennent des rides' and: 'empiffrée de savoir, la conscience a du bide | tout son caca mental engorge la vision' (EC, p. 178).

⁷³ Cf. Baudelaire: 'Étonnants voyageurs! quelles nobles histoires | Nous lisons dans vos yeux profonds comme les mers!' ('Le Voyage').

⁷⁴ There is also a subversive allusion here to Verlaine's 'Art poétique' (1874), another (nonosyllabic) manifesto for the aesthetic value of sound in poetry ('De la musique encore et toujours!'), which concludes: 'Et tout le reste est littérature.'

⁷⁵ 'Brise Marine': 'La chair est triste, hélas! et j'ai lu tous les livres. | Fuir! là-bas fuir! Je sens que des oiseaux sont ivres | D'être parmi l'écume inconnue et les cieux! | Rien, ni les vieux jardins reflétés par les yeux | Ne retiendra ce cœur qui dans la mer se trempe | O nuits! ni la clarté déserte de ma lampe | Sur le vide papier que la blancheur défend [...]'.

Noël's own book, laboriously extracted from organic secretions rather than the product of some metaphysical *ennui*, takes death for granted and sees poetry as barely retrieving something minimal from the shipwreck of language. The storm at sea is not just a necessary risk in the search for Mallarmé's 'exotique nature', it is Noël's essential method of composition, the 'orage de tête' which sends the 'éclair' down into the tense, prepared space of his 'vide papier' – then, 'surviene ce qui doit venir'.⁷⁶

Baudelaire's words emerge again out of the *bruits* in BL 27, where we find a phonetic parody of 'Au lecteur', the preface to the *Fleurs du mal*, surrounded by a complex network of phonetic and argotiques coinages, all constrained (until the final sardonic 13-syllable line) within the rhythm and formal alexandrine metre of the original poem:

riant de la risée du branlaboum quoi couac,
il affriol' la résiduance et l'excroisse (EC, p. 181)

Suddenly, in line 9, we hear through the static a familiar but distorted quotation: 'eh peaucrite lècheur, mon pareil bookmaker',⁷⁷ and another in the penultimate line of the text: 'dans nos cerveaux ribote un peuple de motgnons'.⁷⁸ In this latter case, the fact that only the last word is different (Baudelaire's 'démons' morph into Noël's portemanteau, rhyming, 'motgnons') emphasises the shift from the moral and psychological to the linguistic: the *bête à mots* has coined a vision of the poet's head swarming with words which are the deformed, mutilated shadows of reality (*moignons*, 'stumps') but at the same time have a power of aggression (*gnon*, fam. 'a blow, hit'). Nor is Rimbaud absent from this phonetic recycling and reinvigoration of poetic old favourites: the previous poem (BL 26), with its acronym 'en le monde mental', re-writes his famous 'Voyelles' sonnet as a meditation in alexandrines on the workings of language, writing and identity:

e, i, o, u, l'obscur prend os, la diagonale
noue du sens aux ombres et tend la corde vocale,

le sujet sort des choses en regardant leur nom
et maintenant qui suis-je au bord des deux images ? (EC, p. 180)

The vowels here help the 'ombres' of vague ideas to achieve expression ('tend la corde vocale') and become the skeletal 'os' of a text through a process of oblique (i.e., perhaps, non-mimetic) signification, which however divides the object from its name and leaves the (writing) subject in no-man's land between them. Each vowel, for Noël, acquires a dysphoric, deceptive sense quite different from the clear colours of Rimbaud's synesthetic vision:

mourir mâche dessous, je vois la castration
ouvrir l'o de l'oubli pour masquer le saccage
ne pas croire le a qui promet le langage:
déjà il est trop tard, et le i dans raison
emprisonne le cri de la partie sauvage

⁷⁶ Bernard Noël, 'encore', *CT*, pp. 7-11 (p. 9).

⁷⁷ The final line of 'Au lecteur': '– Hypocrite lecteur, – mon semblable, – mon frère!' (bookmaking was long illegal in France; but also, as the 'cher voleur d'sa cervelle', the reader is the author's essential collaborator in 'making' the book): 'Il faut faire un effort pour lire, pour regarder, pour aimer... Il faut faire un effort vers l'Autre. [...] Oui, le lecteur refait le livre. Le lecteur est un interprète... comme le musicien est un interprète. [...] on ne relit pas deux fois le même livre.' (*En présence...*, p. 54).

⁷⁸ 'Dans nos cerveaux ribote un peuple de Démons' (*TLFI* sub **riboter**: 'faire la fête, faire la noce').

‘Mourir’, ‘castration’, ‘saccage’, ‘emprisonne’ and the ‘cri’ the emerges from the ‘partie sauvage’⁷⁹ kill off at birth any promise of rationality in language, while words fall mercifully into the hole of ‘oubli’. The last vowel then makes its appearance in the final stanza, again in a (sexually) disappointing mode (‘entre les jambes d’u ne se tapit aucune | nudité’), to ruin any further hope of a mimetic correspondence between words and things.

The penultimate text in the collection, BL 43, provides a metatextual decoding of this whole enterprise of inversion, distortion, and parody (we remember that the acrostics of this and the final text read: ‘et je le dis | en parodies de moi’):

et maintenant qu’ici tourne rond le ronron
tant de papier mâché me fait triste bidon

je debout motdissant bien équarri de l’aile
et là-dessus toujours la sueur culturelle

le dégoût de soi-même agite un vieux mouchoir
en très vide papier et tel qu’un entonnoir

déjà l’appeau est si pervers qu’il s’en inverse
il faut s’offrir des vers mythés à la renverse
sans vers le haut tomber dans le divin crachoir (EC, p. 198)

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Once again the distorted intertext here is ‘Brise marine’ (we hear Mallarmé’s ‘adieu suprême des mouchoirs’, but also the recurrent ‘vide papier’), representing for Noël a ‘sueur culturelle’ (itself a concrete-abstract, physical-mental *sablier*) exuded from the ‘décharge’ of language, with the attendant risk of the ‘divin crachoir’ of idealism. His own enterprise, the result of chewing up and digesting other people’s texts, is to produce ‘des vers mythés à la renverse’ – inverted, but also shabby, moth-eaten (*mités*) versions of ‘mythical’ lines (*mythés*, a portemanteau coinage, being itself a homophonic *sablier*) by churning the sounds of words (in ‘tourne rond le ronron’, the insistent phonetic reduplication both expresses and enacts the spinning hourglass). In the case of *Bruits de langues* the *appeau* (decoy, lure or calling bird) which starts the poetic process, ‘calling’ the poet’s words down onto the tense, expectant expanse of the paper, is an inverted, perverse intertext and the blank paper itself, in a return to the earliest manifestation of the *sablier* in Noël’s writing, becomes again an *entonnoir* into which pour fragments of language.⁸⁰ Quite different from his cultural predecessors haunted by *ennui* or *idéal*, the poet can only stand there speaking/cursing a mutilated language (‘motdissant’, a further *sablier* coinage), his wings well and truly clipped.⁸¹

These echos from the poetic tradition are just some of the more instantly recognisable examples to be found in *Bruits de langues*, and are discussed above for what they tell us about Noël’s inversions of the canon. In each case, a key metafigural text (i.e. one which speaks, among other things, about how poetry uses language to construct its relationship with the self and the external world) is

⁷⁹ Compare the opening of canto 2 of *L’Été langue morte*: ‘la bouche devient sauvage | elle insulte la tête | qui l’enferme | étroite étroite et cependant | ouverte’ (CT, p. 89); also, ‘raison’ = ‘rai[e] + son’.

⁸⁰ See my article ‘Et ma logique va en rond’, esp. pp. 110, 114, 123.

⁸¹ ‘Bien équarri’ is complex: on the one hand, it is the inversion of ‘mal équarri’, a building term meaning ‘rough-hewn’ (a stone block not yet squared off), but on the other, the sense of *équarrissage*, ‘abbattage et dépeçage des animaux impropres à la consommation afin d’en retirer tout ce qui peut être utilisé’ (*Petit Robert*) undermines a lofty conventional metaphor of poetic inspiration, the poet’s *aile* (see e.g. Baudelaire’s ‘L’Albatros’) by reference to the violent and undignified recycling of intertextual carcasses.

hijacked and its figures reversed to reveal and deconstruct the assumed values of Romanticism and Symbolism. This is true not just for individual poems but for the whole developing tradition of the *voyage* theme as it flows through the works of Baudelaire, Rimbaud and Mallarmé. By inverting/distorting their marine thematics of escape, inspiration and the *idéal*, Noël articulates a complete anti-poetics in which sounds are used to rescue language from the abstractions of meaning and repatriate it to the sexualised and secreting body from which it originates – ‘un culossal pas-plouf, car dico n’est grand’mer [*grammaire*]’ (EC, p. 181).

Un jeu de zob au zib⁸²

While many of Noël’s *Bruits de langues* texts exploit citational homonymics to repurpose canonical fragments of language for his own metapoetic purposes, another type of homonymic ‘game’ played repeatedly in the collection serves to link two conventionally separate domains, writing and the body (‘un corps qui pense | est toute la pensée’ (BL 3, EC, p. 155)), in a further metapoetic thread of frequently sexual or scatological content. BL 39 presents writing as a bodily secretion, the product of physical effort, using a mass noun (as in ‘du poème’, above) to suggest that it is the banal and repetitive response to an existential dilemma:

il faut sueur du mot dans le pétrin
rien ne palpite en nous sans le crincrin (BL 39; EC, p. 194)⁸³

In BL 16 (EC, p. 169), the idea of language as secretion combines with the etymological sense of ‘texte’ to form an image of the poem spun like a spider’s web from saliva in the mouth,⁸⁴ with the desiccated corpses of words, sucked dry of their referential relation to the world, entrapped among its lines:

tissant des fils de salive
une glaire glacée

nid de nuit

autant de cadavres
sur chaque lèvre

Elsewhere, the bodily product is excremental, as in BL 9 where the textual body that is also the poet’s emerges as a ‘cri’ from the ‘raie’ of Léon’s posterior:

⁸² BL 39; EC, p. 194. The *Dictionnaire du français non conventionnel* of Jacques Cellard and Alain Rey (Paris; New-York etc.: Masson, 1981) [henceforth *DFNC*] indicates synonymy: ‘**zib** (voir **zob**)’, the latter entry also mentioning an older third form, ‘zeb’ – all from Arabic ‘*zobb*’ = penis. The derived verbs ‘ziber’ and ‘zober’ can also mean to con someone, screw them over.

⁸³ ‘Pétrin’, a baker’s kneading machine, connotes routine and repetition, but also has the familiar sense of ‘trouble’. Compare the ‘sueur culturelle’ of BL 43 (above), and also, from ‘De la sueur de mots’: ‘Le poème s’écarte de son poète pour ne garder que la trace de la sueur dont il tend à être, et seulement, le suaire...’ (*La Vie en désordre*, pp. 7-15 (p.13)). ‘Cricrin’, Verlaine’s ‘violons de l’automne’ and the ‘scie’ of poetry’s ‘ronron’, suggests the poet going through the motions of composing in the hope that something of value will emerge.

⁸⁴ ‘Le langage est un outil qui se fabrique dans le corps comme le fil de l’araignée. Quand la toile est tissée, qui pense encore au corps?’ Jean Frémon, Bernard Noël, *Le Double Jeu du tu*, p. 111.

raie crie [*récrit*] le monde
en corps [*encore*] une fois (EC, p. 161)⁸⁵

BL 36, with its resigned acrostic ‘autan n’écrire plus’, also links writing with excretion:

à chaque livre s’acoquine
un trou pas net de nos pensées
trouver le troc ou la trombine
ah pouët pour s’en dépoisser
nul n’est cochon qui se débine

néant n’y fait plus que fessée (EC, p. 191)

Here, the book emerges from the ‘trou pas net’ of Léon the ‘pouète’ (a disparaging near-homonymy between ‘poète’ and an onomatopoeic fart), as he plays with linguistic permutations (‘le troc’) to create an identity (‘trombine’) in the text, cleaning himself up (‘s’en dépoisser’) with the paper on which it is written (a retrospective sense of ‘s’acoquine’), and punished for his incontinence like a child (‘néant n’y fait plus que fessée’) by the nothingness of text and existence.⁸⁶

However, the punning soon takes a sexual turn as the texts develop multiple analogies between the writer’s pen and his penis – ‘Vit ou plume font l | e meme’,⁸⁷ declare the acrostics of BL 40 and 41 (EC, p. 195-6). Thus BL 27 uses a fusion of *prépuce* and *manuscrit*, along with homophonic allusions to *bite* and *l’écriture*, to express the urgency of composition:

Il faut qu’un prépuscrit se débite au galop
tans les cris durs de plume en font très feinte affaire (EC, p. 181)

In in BL 36 the poet plies his phallic instrument, Don Juan-like, from one blank page to the next, rogering his muse deconstructively to generate the poem:

et de plume à plume on calibre
ce qu’il faut pour bander la fibre
rien ne vaut un beau coup de dé (EC, p. 191)

and in this case the efforts of the ‘pouète’ to sustain his textual ‘érection syllabique’ (BL 26, EC, p. 180) appear gratified by a mental orgasm, with attendant physical side-effects: ‘pâmoisons et molles guibolles’ (= legs). BL 15 (EC, p. 168), with its acrostic ‘le nu puis l’intime’, again figures writing as a phantom linguistic copulation with the muse, to deliver an inverted progeny, the vertical text, from the ‘vulva’ of the poet’s mental space and of the page:

n’as-tu jamais baisé
une ombre

pieds en avant

⁸⁵ A reading of ‘raie’ supported by the feminine agreement and references to a gaping hole in the following (final) lines, on the acrostic ‘betes’: ‘bée | en | tout | et béant le trou | sans fond’. Compare: ‘ta bouche-trou pète une ombre qu’on a repeinte’ (BL 29, EC, p. 183).

⁸⁶ Compare, from Noël’s very early text ‘Contre-mort’ (1954), this anti-Cartesian Cogito: ‘JE SUIS BIEN QUE JE PENSE | et que je me regarde penser | m’obligeant à me chier moi-même dans la merde de ma pensée’ (EC, p. 11, emphasis original).

⁸⁷ The analogy of form is captured in the argot expression ‘tailler une plume à quelqu’un’ (= to fellate).

une naissance
inverse
sexe du sommeil

The sexual parallel continues in BL 17 (*EC*, p. 170), where the mental copulation remains a parodic and frustrated desire, as the poet dons the false nose and pen of another writer's style and resorts to masturbation of the muse ('passer la main | où la quête quête', with its orthographic similarity to 'queue') to achieve his textual 'menu moment':

tas bleu de désirs
rivés au vide
on met un faux nez
une queue mentale

dis entre quels jambages
user tout ça

n'y a qu'à passer la main
où la quête quête
mon menu moment

la braderie du corps
au mot à mort

This verbal *petite mort*, however, betrays the real (producing) body in the generation of a textual one, as 'mot' morphs into 'mort'.

A more sustained development of the parallel between sex and writing (also captured in the verbal-visual pun on 'jambages' above) occurs in the opening text of the third *suite*, written in rhyming alexandrines replete with distorted echos from the canon, where writing is again stalled in frustration:

ô mot-mac, tous les dessous pillés te vaudront
un lit vide en la bouche et l'hallali au rond
tant le temps fait retour pour nous damer le fion

on guéguéroie de langue et ça crée du poème
foutre à blanc fait fureur quand queue est en carême (BL 23, *EC*, p. 177)

Here, language is the poet's pimp ('mac'=*maquereau*),⁸⁸ with a track-record of helping him plunder the 'dessous' of his and other writers' muses, but now the 'bed' of his verbal copulations is empty and the productive rectal 'rond', rhyming with 'fion' (argot for anus) and its pun on 'damer le pion',⁸⁹ is obstructed. The only outlet for the poet's frustrated 'queue [...] en carême' is deconstructive play with language, again imagined as cunnilingus with the muse (a potential new sense of 'guéguéroie de langue'), which turns to dark parody:

⁸⁸ 'Mot-mac' also hints productively at 'micmac', meaning both a shady deal and a terrible mess.

⁸⁹ 'Damer le pion à quelqu'un', fig. 'to trump.' 'Hallali' is the 'mort' sounded at the end of a hunt with hounds, when the quarry is about to be put to death.

mais qu'est-ce que la voix qu'on fêle dans la voix?
entre mes dents, un peu d'azur moque mon choix

ah! ne jamais sortir des Nombres et des Êtres!
nous écrivons le monde à travers la fenêtre
d'un zobjectif gobant maya à plein urètre!

The devout peroration of Maupassant's religious 'Le dieu créateur' ('Un peu d'azur au ciel, au cœur un peu d'espoir')⁹⁰ is here mocked and inverted by the verbatim final line of 'Le Gouffre' from *Les Fleurs du mal*, while the 'doigt savant' of Baudelaire's 'Dieu' becomes a portmanteau projecting lens and phallus (argot 'zob'), the poet's pen; meanwhile, the 'gouffre' which floods inwards to inhabit the earlier poet's nightmares ('Je ne vois qu'inifini par toutes les fenêtres') is inverted into an ejaculatory expulsion onto the page.⁹¹ After another detour via Nerval ('la treizième revient'), the poem concludes on a note of encouragement from the muse, apparently not unhappy with this treatment:

nu-nu, fait la muse, et pouèt prend ton vit sage
et porte-plume-moi jusqu'à m'en équarrire⁹²

In the punning 'jeu de zob au zib' of Noël's *Bruits de langues*, writing thus equates to a copulation with an apparently consenting muse, after which the French language and its literary canon both end up 'équarries', literally knackered.

As the third *suite* advances, the dual sexual-metapoetic strand becomes more frantic and densely entwined with distorted intertexts. The penultimate poem starts safely enough with a literal quotation from Mallarmé's 'L'Après-midi d'un faune', before lurching into a phallic re-write of the final section of Baudelaire's 'Le Voyage' ('Ô Mort, vieux capitaine, il est temps! levons l'ancre'), playing on the same homonymy 'ancre/encre' to erect the ship's mast into an instrument for derisive cosmic composition:

Une sonore, vaine et monotone ligne...

eh l'homme, regonflons! que toute la mâtüre
lève l'encre afin d'écrire à contre-ciel
le mignon lèchemort que nous font la nature
et le temps. a bas l'alibi spirituel. (BL 32, *EC*, p. 186)

The next stanza (acrostic: 'écrit') throws all aesthetic niceties to the wind as the poet becomes a quaintly Sadian but frustrated 'fouteur' who, as he 'rempile au rut', in this instance seems intent on both sodomising his muse and, in the portmanteau coinage 'cacadavrer', excreting the corpse of his next poem:

enduit de bave en raie, on se met phalle indu
cacadavrant maxi et chiquant du tutu

⁹⁰ Maupassant, *Poésies diverses*, 1868).

⁹¹ *TLFI*, sub **maya**: 'Ensemble des illusions qui, selon le bouddhisme, constituent ce monde.' In *Le 19 octobre 1977*, the narrator describes a numerological system for counting time which he calls 'maya-moins-un' and which is related to Noël's fetish number 19 (pp. 23-4).

⁹² *DFNC*, sub **nunu** (adj.) gives 'Sot(te); crédule, innocent(e)', as well as the reduplicated sense of 'naked'. Compare, from BL 30: 'eh chère épine à muse amuse-toi en corps' (*EC*, p. 184).

rempile au rut, plum' prêt' à juter son pissuis-je:
il faut du carburant même pour les prodiges
tout fouteur est un cru qui se taste à la tige.⁹³

The poet's phallic writing instrument, his 'plume', swells with seminal 'pissuis-je', tonally-inverted ink combining 'pisse' with the eternal poetic question of identity, about to spurt onto the page, and we might hypothesise that the 'carburant' required for the operation is intertextual, while the archaising 'se taste à la tige' implies masturbation. The final stanza then narrates the 'menu moment' of the poem's production, as the copulation with the muse reaches its climax:

au trou l'a mis, ruisselle et se vide en saccades,
i secouant les vers rangés pour l'enfilade
nue de nuque à talon et réclamant du clou,
sa beauté se feuillette à grande galopade:
ia de l'inspiration alentour qui s'ébroue.

Needless to say, the 'beauté' of the intertexts that have 'inspired' the poet's 'clou' into action is sarcastic, their 'vers rangés' getting comprehensively shafted in the process.⁹⁴

After these distortions of Baudelaire and Mallarmé, the final text in the *troisième suite*, BL 33 (*EC*, p. 187) is placed under the almost verbatim patronage of Rimbaud, opening with a line from 'Le Forgeron' ('regarde-donc le ciel! – c'est trop petit pour nous...') and closing on a tense-shifted line from 'Le Bateau ivre' ('et je vois quelquefois ce que l'homme a cru voir!'), taking the linguistic experiments of his visionary poetics to their logical subversive extreme (the poem's ironic acrostic is 'un nouveau monde'). 'La dérision de la chiervelle' (combining *chier*, *chair* and *cervelle* to evacuate the term 'esprit')⁹⁵ and 'la vie est la farce à mener par tous' establish a mood of pessimism about the life of the mind, before the conjoined themes of writing and copulation recur in an extraordinary stanza (acrostic: 'nouveau') which presents the linguistic copulation of 'papoésie' as an obligatory, if hopeless, response to the existential void ('n'expir' sauf...'):

n'expir' sauf au clap-clap de battante quenelle:
ordons-nous à limer parmi la lie des mots.
un cri qu'est peu écrit: la chiennerie du beau.
vers en viande vaut-il vit en vénus vissé?
être mort et tenir toujours boutique en pieds,
ah, n'est-ce point cela notre immortalité?
une brise d'amour dans la nuit a passé.

The onomopoeic 'clap-clap' is the poet bugging the muse⁹⁶ with his furious 'quenelle' (literally a dish of elongated fish balls, but with an obvious homonymy with *queue* and also said to resemble a

⁹³ *DFNC*, sub **chique** gives (by visual analogy with a plug of chewing tobacco) '*Pousser sa chique, déféquer*', but also '*Tirer sa chique, coïter, tirer un "coup"*'. The same source helpfully glosses **tutu** as 'anus ou vulve', which does little to resolve the ambiguity.

⁹⁴ Again ambivalently, the *DFNC* glosses **enfiler** as 'Pénétrer dans une relation hétérosexuelle: [...] Ou homosexuelle'.

⁹⁵ Compare 'un corps qui pense est | toute la pensée' (BL 3, *EC*, p. 155), and 'pour un peu d'esprit | on a vendu sa viande' (BL 10, *EC*, p. 162).

⁹⁶ *DFNC*, sub **limer**: 'Dans un coït, faire aller et venir longuement le pénis érigé dans le vagin, soit par impuissance à éjaculer, soit pour amener à l'orgasme une partenaire peu active', with an example from Sade.

suppository),⁹⁷ soiling himself (*order*, from OF *ord*, dirty) amidst the dregs of language, and calling on others to do the same, to express his ‘cri’ against aesthetics in a ‘vers en viande’ (verse as homonymically maggoty meat). The poet’s derisory immortality is only to act as the madam in the verbal brothel of the text, which the ‘peaucrite lècheur’ visits to ‘prendre son pied’ – without being put off, as BL 3 puts it, by the intervention of embarrassing bodily *bruits*: ‘ris du rot qui détraque | tout l’amoureux convoi’ (*EC*, p. 155). Nevertheless, with ironic allusions to Leiris and Rimbaud’s ‘alchimie du verbe’ as well as the ‘bateau ivre’, and articulated in an argot which deprecates the poet’s craft (‘poèmeux’, ‘crachoir’, ‘croasse’ and the *verlan* ‘rapoisse’ for ‘paroisse’), the text concludes on a defiant declaration of commitment to this form of writing:

motsère, j’y desserre une peu chère angoisse
on a les poèmeux qu’on peut dans ma rapoisse⁹⁸
nana ou pas nana, je mets dans le crachoir
des alchimies où la syllaberie croasse
et je vois quelquefois ce que l’homme a cru voir!

However his dalliance with the muse may go (‘nana ou pas nana’), he will keep gobbing out his cacophonous verbal fragments into the relational ‘crachoir’⁹⁹ of the page in a derisive ‘alchimie’ which may or may not yield Rimbaldian visions.

This depends of course partly on the reader. In what we may now recognise as a classic Noélian *sablier*, just as the muse and the culture she represents are screwed by the poet in the production of the text, so the text must necessarily screw the reader’s expectations if it is to be made productive and yield up its meaning:

le texte est un vit tout venteux
un peu d’air dans la tête vole
son va et vient nous troue les yeux (BL 36, *EC*, p. 191)

The textual ‘vit tout venteux’ constructed by the poet during his ‘rut du rien’ with language (BL 8, *EC*, p. 160) penetrates the reader’s gaze and mental space, ejaculating into it the ‘air’ of verbal meaning.¹⁰⁰ However, prior to this climactic point, as the conclusion of BL 26 (the ‘Voyelles’ re-write)

⁹⁷ This old argot sense of *quenelle* remains productive in the 21st century: thus the online Wiktionnaire refers to the gesture popularised by controversial French comedian and political activist Dieudonné M’bala M’bala: ‘Bras d’honneur “bien profond dans le cul du système” pour ses ouailles ou ersatz de salut nazi à peine déguisé pour ses détracteurs, la “quenelle” de Dieudonné est à la fois un signe de ralliement et un message subliminal’ (Guillaume Gendron, ‘Les “quenelles” de Dieudonné laissent un sale goût’, *Libération*, 12 September 2013). (<https://fr.wiktionary.org/wiki/quenelle>; consulted 9/12/2018).

⁹⁸ Compare, in a similar register of mock-disappointment: ‘on a les dam’s du temps jadis - qu’on peut’ (Georges Brassens, ‘Les Amours d’antan’, <https://www.paroles.net/georges-brassens/paroles-les-amours-d-antan>, consulted 8/12/2018).

⁹⁹ Compare the expression ‘tenir le crachoir’: ‘monopoliser la parole, ou faire à soi tout seul les frais de la conversation’ (<https://fr.wiktionary.org/wiki/crachoir>, consulted 8/12/2018). Michael Bishop writes of the second *suite*: ‘The poet becomes a producer of slimy, glutinous globs of sense [...], weaving together threads of ‘biological’/‘semantic’ saliva to create a kind of congealed glair or mucus which is his work’ (*The Contemporary Poetry of France*, p. 108).

¹⁰⁰ Compare the opening lines of BL 12, in which dipping the pen in ink takes on a sexual connotation: ‘on va on vient | nuit de l’encrier’ (*EC*, p. 165). This same *displacement* of sex into verbal creativity is seen in ‘Sur le peu de corps’, Part III of *L’Ombre du double* (1993): ‘l’élan se lève en tête | oublie le sexe | et lui ressemble || il s’agit toujours d’aérer | le désir | en déplaçant | la place de l’amour || un foutre pensif | perpétue ses coups | avec un membre de fumée’ (*EC*, p. 290); and, tonally-inverted: ‘La lumière, au fond, est un jet de foutre. On pourrait dire ça. Mais c’est notre regard qui est pénétré...’ (*L’Espace du poème*, p. 100).

makes clear, the reader must be prepared to engage in mental foreplay with the text's verticality and the authorial corpse encoded within:

texte en avant! l'érection syllabique est une
amorce à bouche, et pour cette fellation-là
l'auteur doit un cadavre qui ne sente pas (EC, p. 180)¹⁰¹

Once the text's erotic 'appetiser' has been accepted and the reader is hooked,¹⁰² full copulation can take place through reading until, as presented in BL 15, the new life of the poem's meaning emerges into the world in a 'naissance | inverse', a reversal of the sexualised act of writing, as the reader extracts it from the 'sexe du sommeil' of *oubli* in a necessary, if less painful, process of parturition than the poet's:

lire lire lire

il en est qui souffrent davantage
nous voyons nos mains
tout à coup au travail (EC, p. 168)

Thus the demise of the author, literally enacted in the act of writing, gives rise to new life in language, figured in BL 29 as a death-rattle as the author gives up the ghost in a final fart:

nul ne s'identifie, et l'auteur est au texte
allongé sous les mots dont il fut le prétexte.
ta bouche-trou pète une ombre qu'on a peinte
un mort inachevé
rôle (EC, p. 183)¹⁰³

This 'ombre', expelled by Léon's inverse nether mouth before being tarted up for public consumption, is the scatological inverse of the writer's death-mask image developed in a more poetic register in *L'Ombre du double*,¹⁰⁴ while the disintegration of the poem's metrical system at the end mirrors the 'rôle' of the expiring 'je'. To recover the poet's 'ombre' from the text ('tout s'asticote sous vers', remarks BL 27 (EC, p. 181), requires a complicit replication of the poet's multifarious sexual engagements with the muse and the French language by the 'peaucrite lècheteur' who, in seeking the gratification of a subversive meaning, necessarily becomes his accomplice – 'et

¹⁰¹ Compare: 'sucer sa | canne à cancan | industrie de bouche comme | une autre' (EC, p. 173). 'Industrie de bouche' normally refers to the catering and hospitality sector, not poetry.

¹⁰² 'Amorce' as fishing bait links up to the thematics of the 'leurre' and decoy-duck used elsewhere by Noël to characterise the way he 'lures' meaning into the pre-constrained space of the text, but it has a wide range of technical senses to do with getting a process started off – the sense of explosive fuse for a canon is equally pertinent.

¹⁰³ Compare BL 11, where bodily decay leaves behind the immortal skeleton of the text in a form of cyclic return: 'cette vie-là | on passe la charrue | mort engraisse | mimant un modique retour | éternel | | ne fuis pas | os qui blanchit | n'est plus mortel' (EC, p. 163).

¹⁰⁴ BL 28 also links 'ombre' to rectum via a pun on the title of Verlaine's confidential homoerotic (and, like *suite* 3, regularly metrical) collection *Hombres*: 'autant dans chaque trou ne voir que le moyeu, | un arc-en-ciel étrange entoure ce puits sombre | tout va se loger là comme va vit à l'homme.' (EC, p. 182). The middle line here is humorously repurposed from Nerval's 'Le Christ aux Oliviers', where the 'puits sombre' is the empty 'orbite' of the divine gaze, not the 'trou du cul', but the cosmic intertextual connection ('Dieu est mort! Le ciel est vide...') is highly pertinent to Noël. Poem 28 continues with a distorted intertext from 'Artémis' and a concluding allusion to the gaze of the *deus absconditus*: 'roses blanches, tombez! vous insultez nos pieux | et quel regard s'accroît sous l'écorce des yeux...'

j'ai du sens [*sang*] sur les mains' (BL3, EC, p. 155) – or, as Baudelaire put it, 'mon semblable, mon frère.'

Sablier

The foregoing analysis has aimed to show that *Bruits de langues* is anything but a random phonetic assemblage designed to offend gratuitously against taste. To read it productively requires reverse-engineering the complex processes of its composition to understanding the twists and inversions ('détours déboires') that the poet has discovered in / imposed on his language. Reading is the mirror-image of writing, and the reader needs to engage in foreplay with the text in order to recover the meaning with which the poet has inseminated it. The collection turns out to be more deeply rule-governed ('la loi'), and correspondingly less driven by sound-associations ('les bruits'), than casual acquaintance might suggest, as the requirements of multiple systems of self-imposed constraints (numerology, acrostics, versification and rhyme) are all satisfied simultaneously. Initial inspection might identify some of the numerical constraints (11 poems of 15 lines per *suite*, the alexandrines in *suite* 3 and mixed metres in 4), and the reader who detects the first level of acrostics opens up a new dimension of signification which interacts with the ostensible meanings of the surface texts. However, the second set of 'kernel' acrostics, the generative key to the thematics of the collection, remains steganographically concealed, while the way the first-level acrostics determine the stanzaic structure and sense-divisions of the surface texts, and their relationship to the pattern of end-rhymes that a casual reader might well perceive, is also not immediately apparent. And while a French reader would immediately fall into the rhythm of the alexandrines that govern the third *suite*, with all its distorted emanations from the *décharge* of French literary culture, the regular systolic-diastolic expansion and contraction of the metrical pulse in the fourth is likely to go unnoticed. It is not just this overarching and multi-level organisational structure that constrains the collection, however, for the *bruits* themselves, even when they express most sarcastically the *dérision* of language and the human condition, are governed by a structural principle of their own – that of homophony. An original manifestation of Noël's dialectical *sablier* method of composition, homophonic writing involves sustaining two (networks of) meanings simultaneously, requiring a dual reading which oscillates irresolvably between and ultimately transcends them. Sometimes both sounds and written forms are duplicated (homography); more often, one written form and its pronunciation generate the virtual orthography of a second sense; while the distorted echos of Baudelaire, Mallarmé, Rimbaud, Nerval and others set up a dialogue by which their canonical texts are rejuvenated and repurposed in the service of Noël's own metapoetic agenda – to characterise and understand writing as a bodily process (in this enterprise, *Bruits de langues* can be seen in the continuity of the early volume *Extraits du corps*).¹⁰⁵ The different types of homophonic cross-wrings of sound and sense are theorised by the poet as bodily products, instinctive and enraged responses to the existential condition which well up from the historical *oubli* of the French language and its rich *argot*, rather than the spontaneous production of some surrealist Unconscious. Once the censorship of poetic propriety is lifted from the somatic-linguistic *langue*, the resulting homophonic meta-figures tend to the scatological (Léon's uttering arse) and obscene (the muse rogered), and reconstructing them is a subversively-playful activity into which the texts lure a complicit reader, hypocritical if offended.

For Bernard Noël, writing too is a game, but one played in earnest, as he explains to Bayard in an interview in 2005:

¹⁰⁵ Paris: Minuit, 1958.

tout dans le poème procède d'un sentiment ludique... et enfantin: jouer avec les mots... Jouer avec les mots est grave, mais ce n'est pas sérieux. La nuance est importante: il s'agit ni de se prendre au sérieux, ni de prendre la chose au sérieux... mais de la prendre gravement parce que... c'est difficile à dire, parce que le fait d'écrire engage gravement quelque chose comme la vie. Comme l'équilibre. Comme la folie, au fond... Il y a une sorte de danger dans l'acte d'écrire...¹⁰⁶

'Jouer avec les mots': this is the enterprise constantly under theoretical scrutiny in the metapoetic commentaries of *Bruits de langues*, and in the experimental practices of its rule-governed but transgressive language-games that are the only possible response to the human condition: 'il faut écrire au | milieu du désastre' (BL 5, *EC*, p. 157). As BL 8 puts it, writing may be a 'rut du rien', but it is also a game of combination, displacement and inversion, analogous to the castle move in chess:

roquer quand même
au bout
le noir le blanc
le oui le non

qui use qui
une langue tire un
immense abus

tu regrettes le
un
et le nu (*EC*, p. 160)¹⁰⁷

Despite the chaos, the poet continues ('quand même') to play the verbal permutation game that is poetry, sticking out his 'langue' to convention and propriety by creating a *sablier* form of writing in which sounds, meanings and identity (noir/blanc, oui/non, qui/qui, un/nu)¹⁰⁸ are inverted from one verbal-figural chamber into the other and back again. For, as Michael Bishop notes, *Bruits de langues* is characterised by 'a constant ebb and flow of disfiguring and re-figuring', in which 'the disfiguration and destruction is counterbalanced by a strong streak of constructive, intensely creative functioning.'¹⁰⁹

A remarkable extension of the writing game is to be found in the Réserve des Livres Rares of the Bibliothèque Nationale de France, which houses the 'exemplaire de tête' (a particularly suitable term in this case) of a 'livre d'artiste' limited edition of the first *suite* of *Bruits de langues*.¹¹⁰ Each of the eleven poems (which contain a few variants from the current editions) is accompanied on the facing page by an engraving by artist and publisher Jean-Paul Héraud (b. 1943), but perhaps most interesting for present purposes is the unique protective case. Containing the original manuscripts as

¹⁰⁶ *En présence...*, p. 52.

¹⁰⁷ Michael Bishop highlights the dual meaning of 'échec(s)' as chess and failure (*The Contemporary Poetry of France*, p. 108).

¹⁰⁸ Compare Nonoléon's careful acrostic arrangement of 'u' and 'n' (see my article 'Noël, Nonoléon, Jabès', p. 152).

¹⁰⁹ *The Contemporary Poetry of France*, p. 109.

¹¹⁰ Published on 28 March 1975 in 50 copies (Couze: Moulin de Larroque).

well as the printed edition, along with two hand-made ‘reliefs’ in papier mâché and an original drawing, this is described in the colophon as ‘une boîte obscure à géométrie variable’.



Some 40cm long and 7cm deep, the box is tricky to open: a catch in one corner allows the hinged side-panels to be separated one at a time from the small pegs holding the lid in place until it can finally be removed. Like the texts it contains, the box is thus hermetically ‘obscure’, and its unexpected ‘géométrie variable’ also mirrors the articulations of their unconventional figurality. It is strikingly covered in a thin layer of varnished wood eaten away with worm-holes some 2-3mm in diameter, a play on the accidental French homonymy of ‘vers’ which can be read as a reference both to the active ‘pourriture’ of language performed in the poet’s ‘vers mythés’ (BL 43, *EC*, p. 198), and also the subterranean connections (tunnels) between concepts and domains brought about by his homophonic plays; while the lumps of papier mâché that block up some of the holes may allude to the line ‘tant de papier mâché me fait triste bidon’ in the same text – even though it was not published until five years later, it may well have been in gestation. The narrator of Bernard Noël’s second novel, *Le 19 octobre 1977*, describes a book as a ‘boîte à mots’,¹¹¹ and ‘Poème à déchanter’ refers to the poet’s head as a ‘boîte d’os’ (*EC*, p. 104): the metapoetic box in the BNF containing the box-book that is *Bruits de langues* alludes not just to the language games played within, but also to the passage of their material, by way of multiple *sablier* inversions and linguistic wormholes in the fabric of linguistic *oubli*, from the poet’s head to that of the reader, one ‘boîte obscure’ to the next.

The opening words of the ‘en tête’, ‘Aurai-je le temps de finir?’, may suggest that in 1980 Noël regarded *Bruits de langues* as unfinished, and fourteen years later, in the second Sampiero interview, he indeed describes it as ‘un livre que je n’ai plus, [...] un livre qui n’est pas fini dans le trajet qu’il se proposait’.¹¹² In 2005 the second of seven texts in ‘Poème en désordre’ on themes closely related to those of *Bruits de langues*, ends with this same apparently regretful acceptance:

estropié en morceaux vomi
aucun truc pour que ça dure
qui peut vivre sa putréfaction

envie de manger le squelette
d’en finir avec tous les restes
pas de pitié pour les lambeaux

¹¹¹ Paris: Gallimard, 2006, p. 50.

¹¹² *L’Espace du poème*, p. 47.

partout pustules et petit peu
la pensée telle une dent creuse
et les nerfs les nerfs déjà cuits.

ô tout ce monde qui n'est plus
ne fut jamais qu'en vocabulaire
ou bruits de langues pas finis.¹¹³

This is confirmed in the same year in Noël's interview with Bayard: '*Bruits de langue* [sic.], il me semble que je n'y toucherai plus' (*En présence...*, p.67). Yet in the interim, what might be regarded as a fifth *suite* had appeared, its gestation going back to 1979, when we saw Nonoléon in the early stages of composing two poems in the same fifteen-line, acrostic-governed format as the original *Bruits*. The first acrostic on which he starts work, 'dire un cri ne puis', highlights a theme that runs right through Noël's writing: the instinctive, pre-semantic scream, in this case of the body in pain and under torture.¹¹⁴ In *Bruits de langues*, the paradoxical requirement to write such primal inarticulacy generates a homophonic meta-theme, the poet urging himself on, in the opening of BL 17: 'et cris | travaille la charpie' (*EC*, p. 170) – 'charpie' alluding to bandaged injuries, but perhaps also to white paper. Although the ending of BL 21, 'et cris vains' (*EC*, p. 174), implies inevitable failure, the effort of expressing this 'cri' would give rise to *Sonnets de la mort*, finally published in 2003¹¹⁵ – but therein lies another story.

¹¹³ *La Vie en désordre*, pp. 31-32.

¹¹⁴ See my 'Noël, Nonoléon, Jabès', p. 138, esp. note 59.

¹¹⁵ Originally in a limited edition with seven lithographs by Ladislav Kijno (Paris: Maeght, 2003); then repr. in a plain edition (Les Cabannes: Fissile, 2007) and again in 2012 in a 'nouvelle édition non définitive' by the latter publisher. See 'Noël, Nonoléon, Jabès', pp. 140-142.