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## **LAUGHING MATTER: CHARLES CROS, FROM PALÉOPHONE TO MONOLOGUE**

### **Abstract**

Nineteenth-century poet, savant and inventor Charles Cros is a figure whose endeavours were exceptionally wide-ranging. They include: a proposed instrument which would be the first of its kind capable of recording sound (the ‘paléophone’); treatises on photography and interplanetary communication; poetry, and a body of comic monologues which belong to the current of *fumisme*. This article argues that Cros’s monologues are subtly inflected by his interest in the faculty of speech and technologies of sound reproduction. While they do not explicitly evoke such technologies, they show an acute sensitivity to the quirks and accidents of the spoken word to which neither dramatic convention nor indeed norms of social discourse attribute sense. It is this ill-formed matter, amounting to a kind of discursive ‘noise’, which allows Cros to offer a wry commentary on the pretensions of a *fin-de-siècle* culture preoccupied with the strategizing of utterance and the production of an objectified record of the spoken word.

### **Keywords**

Monologue – paléophone – voice – noise – humour - inarticulacy

## Article

Nineteenth-century poet, savant and inventor Charles Cros (1842-88) is a figure whose creative and scientific endeavours were exceptionally wide-ranging. They include: a proposed instrument which would be the first of its kind capable of recording sound (the ‘paléophone’); treatises on colour photography and interplanetary communication; lyric poetry, and comic experiments, such as his famous poem ‘Le Hareng saur’, or the body of comic monologues which belong to the current of *fumisme*. However, it is the paléophone which remains Cros’s most noted achievement beyond the literary sphere. We can appreciate the extent to which Cros himself regarded his discovery of the paléophone to be emblematic of his entire career if we consider his poem ‘Inscription’. This text was first published in 1885 in *Le Chat noir* and features as the first poem of the posthumous collection *Le Collier de griffes* (1908). A central motif of this piece, in which Cros muses on his scientific achievements and legacy, is the analogy drawn between the burin (that is, the cutting tool used in the art of engraving), and the stylus which features in recording devices such as the paléophone, and which enables the conversion of acoustic signals into units of writing. Through tightly-organized octosyllabic couplets that underscore its connection to the artistic tradition of the keepsake, the poem emphasizes the paléophone’s potential to arrest the flow of time. Moreover, it suggests that the mechanical form of inscription peculiar to the device is allied to the act of writing, and thereby also to the pursuit of musical and artistic forms of creative expression:

Comme les traits dans les camées  
J’ai voulu que les voix aimées  
Soient un bien, qu’on garde à jamais,

Et puissent répéter le rêve  
Musical de l'heure trop brève;  
Le temps veut fuir, je le soumets.<sup>1</sup>

Commenting on this poem, and on Cros's contribution to the history of technology, the media theorist Friedrich Kittler argues that 'Inscription', invokes an atmosphere from which all acoustic events except those of articulate voice, song and music are conspicuously absent.<sup>2</sup> Kittler in this way contends that Cros effectively overlooked the possibilities of his own invention, disregarding its potential to give access to an acoustic real composed of all manner of noises and auditory events, and privileged instead the 'sound' worthy of material record.

In a recent study of Cros's paléophone which seeks, like the present article, to reaffirm Cros's subtle understanding of the expanded acoustic horizons opened by such technologies of sound reproduction, Brett Brehm disputes the contention that Cros's sense of the possibilities of his own invention is limited to the 'contracted acoustic field' of this poem. By contrast, Brehm focuses on Cros's prose text 'Le Journal de l'avenir', a first version of which was published in *Tout-Paris* in 1880. 'Le Journal de l'avenir' describes a future in which telephones and phonographs are used to produce an audio version of the *Chat noir* newspaper for a population which has become illiterate. Presenting an unsettling vision of a world dominated by mass media in which listening devices are capable 'of recording and reproducing the very noise of society, all the daily actualité'<sup>3</sup>, Brehm argues compellingly that a text such as this suggests a highly ambivalent attitude on the part of Cros towards the uses of sound recording technologies, and underscores his awareness of a 'panacoustic' condition peculiar to modernity.<sup>4</sup>

Taking its cue from Brehm's emphasis on the significance of noise for his reading of 'Le Journal de l'avenir' as an invitation to explore other ways in which Cros sought to inflect the

acoustic experience of modernity, the present article argues that the body of comic monologues which Cros composed during the 1870s and 1880s exploit the comic and creative possibilities of various forms of dysfluency and misunderstanding, equating to what might be termed discursive ‘noise’. Amid the asinine declarations, hesitations and inarticulacy of the various *bavards* whom these pieces bring to the stage emerges a creative project that shadows, and indeed also occasionally satirizes, Cros’s own achievements in the scientific domain. As Sam Halliday notes in a recent study which explores the place of sound recording technologies within the history of modernism, it is a distinctive feature of the phonograph that ‘[accidental] or intrusive sounds are [...] raised to a position of fundamental parity with the intended and sought out, resulting in a sonorous democracy where musical and ‘noisy’, natural and man-made, significant and senseless, and all other kinds of sounds have equal claims upon the listener’.<sup>5</sup> It is the contention of this article that Cros’s comic monologues offer an arena characterized by just such a levelling of the relationship between significance and senselessness. In addition to constituting a novel comic repertoire, moreover, it is argued that the monologue presents Cros with a veritable *dispositif* in its own right. For an author who, as André Breton remarks, ‘a vu dans les mots eux-mêmes des “procédés”’,<sup>6</sup> the monologue thus offers a critical and satirical ‘instrument’ with which to sound out the social and scientific pretensions of the fin de siècle.

### **VOCAL PEDAGOGY AND *LE BIEN DIRE***

Between 1860 and 1863, Charles Cros was employed as a *répétiteur* at France’s Institution nationale des sourds-muets in Paris. As Louis Forestier relates in a note contained in the collected works of the author, this young man who would go on to achieve a notoriety as a poet, *savant* and inventor, had during this period envisaged supplying his pupils with a novel learning aid. The

device in question, which Forestier terms a ‘utopie’, would allow deaf pupils to play back excerpts featuring a stock of recorded everyday phrases, thus presumably enabling them to negotiate everyday situations, and thereby contribute to their social integration (*ÆC*, 626). Like most of Cros’s later scientific endeavours, which included treatises on colour photography and interplanetary communication,<sup>7</sup> this proposed learning aid was never realized in practice. However, it nonetheless is indicative of what was an enduring fascination with auditory phenomena on the part of the young man, one which would inform his most famous scientific achievement over fifteen years later. In a *pli cacheté* delivered to the Académie des Sciences in April 1877, entitled *Procédé d’enregistrement et de reproduction des phénomènes perçus par l’ouïe*, Cros outlined the principle behind a projected new recording device which he christened the paléophone (from the Greek terms *palaios*, meaning ‘old’ and *phone*, ‘voice’) (*ÆC*, 523-24). Cros’s announcement preceded by a matter of months Thomas Edison’s public demonstration of a working model of the phonograph in November 1877. Although the phonograph bears some similarities to the paléophone, history has credited Cros’s American counterpart with the invention of the first device capable of recording sound.

While Cros’s declared early interest in developing a mechanical learning aid for the deaf deserves to be considered within the context of the history of technologies of sound reproduction, it can also be placed within the broader context of a culture of vocal pedagogy which came to flourish during his lifetime. In the exam answers which he produced while still a student at the Institution nationale des sourds-muets, the young Cros declares conversation to be one of the foremost means to knowledge available to humanity:

Or, il existe pour les sourds-muets un obstacle qu’on ne pourrait aplanir que bien difficilement, obstacle relatif à l’acquisition d’idées nouvelles et au *redressement*, si je puis m’exprimer ainsi, de celles qu’ils ont

déjà. Cet obstacle consiste à la fois dans la difficulté que les sourds-muets trouvent dans l'étude de la langue usuelle et dans l'impossibilité de prendre part à la conversation, à laquelle, il faut le dire, nous devons la majeure partie de ce que nous pouvons savoir.<sup>8</sup>

Such sentiments are in tune with then-emergent language ideologies which prescribed correct or authoritative usage of spoken French. Katherine Bergeron argues that it was in the 1890s that the pursuit of 'diction expressive' became most concerted in France under the imperatives of Republican education policies and state monolingualism.<sup>9</sup> Nonetheless, even over a decade prior to this, when Cros was composing his monologues, vocal pedagogy had already acquired considerable popularity. Manuals and guides devoted to questions of diction, pronunciation and pedagogy were produced in abundance, and their titles often emphasized the social and professional value of *le bien dire*.<sup>10</sup> In one formulation drawn from a work published later in the century, the emphasis is primarily on lucidity of expression: 'L'art de la Diction sert à faire saisir nettement le sens exact de la pensée, à interpréter, par la distinction du parler, par des inflexions de voix infiniment variées, par des nuances extrêmement délicates, les sentiments qu'exprime l'éloquence'.<sup>11</sup> Meanwhile, in other such manuals, such as that by Henri Dupont-Vernon, the author of a guide to pronunciation which was already in its third edition by 1888, there is an emphasis on the vocal production of speech:

Bien dire, c'est d'abord grouper les mots d'une phrase dans un ordre déterminé à l'avance et toujours le même, terminer ou suspendre une inflexion, selon que le sens de la phrase est lui-même terminé ou suspendu, détacher les incidents de la phrase principale par une double respiration et un changement dans la tonalité, calculer le nombre et la durée des temps d'arrêt à observer dans le cours de la phrase, en prenant le plus souvent pour base de ce calcul la ponctuation; c'est ensuite prononcer purement les

voyelles, articuler nettement les consonnes, avoir souci des longues et des brèves, tenir compte des accents et n'en pas créer arbitrairement, etc.<sup>12</sup>

At issue in both of the preceding examples is an emergent cultural preoccupation with the performativity of voice, and on speech as a production, in both the vocal and communicational senses. Whether its emphasis be on the articulation of sound (through the modalities of diction, inflection or intonation), or on the capacity to demonstrate clarity of reasoning and a capacity for persuasion, such literature underscores the social value, and indeed necessity, of the effective manipulation of discursive matter and of strategizing the spoken word.

As Arnaud Bernadet notes in passing, it was against this broader cultural context of a preoccupation with *l'art de bien dire* that Cros composed the body of monologues for which he achieved fame in Parisian cabaret culture.<sup>13</sup> Recent work by Bernadet, Françoise Dubor and Rae Beth Gordon allows us to locate Cros's monologues and their performance by Coquelin Cadet at the Chat Noir cabaret at the heart of exchanges between popular spectacle, *fumisme* and psychiatry.<sup>14</sup> However, the present article proposes a further hypothesis which, while complementing these studies, situates Cros's monologues both in relation to contemporary attitudes towards language practice and to the author's interest in the provision of records of sense phenomena.

## **HUMOUR AT THE *FIN DE SIÈCLE***

In 1867, the first public reading took place of Cros's famous comic poem 'Le Hareng saur', a piece which went on to feature in the repertoires of many monologue performers. However, it was during the 1870s that Cros produced the majority of his monologues, a set of works



composed in the farcical spirit characteristic of the Cercle des Hydropathes, to which he belonged, together with Alphonse Allais, Émile Goudeau and others. These were most notably popularized in performance by Cros's collaborator Coquelin Cadet. For Cros, as for other specialists of the genre such as Félix Galipaux and Charles Moncelet, the interest of the monologue lies in the comic possibilities of probing the limits of what makes an utterance sayable and socially intelligible. However, this aspect of his work acquires an even greater resonance when considered in the context of his interest in acoustic phenomena and the faculty of speech.

As Daniel Grojnowski has argued most compellingly, the *fin de siècle* bore witness to the emergence of a peculiarly modern form of laughter. This was typified by movements such as *fumisme* and the Hydropathes, and by authors such as Allais or Félix Fénéon, culminating in the latter's *Nouvelles en trois lignes* (1906). Founded by Émile Goudeau, the Hydropathes were an association of artists and musicians who had their headquarters at Rodolphe Salis's *Chat noir* cabaret. So supposedly averse were they to water, that they only accepted alcoholic beverages. For the Charles Baudelaire of *De l'essence du rire*, laughter had been revelatory of the essentially compromised or fractured character of a humanity at grips with its fallen state.<sup>15</sup> While they arguably shared an idea of laughter as issuing from contradictory sentiments, the carnivalesque Hydropathes showed little affinity with the postlapsarian metaphysics of Baudelaire. Displaying an attitude of mockery towards prevailing societal norms, the Hydropathes rather engaged in pranks and provocations rooted in the cabaret culture of popular bohemia.<sup>16</sup> Their pursuits were shared also with *fumisme*, a movement characterized by Goudeau as 'une sorte de dédain de tout, de mépris en dedans pour les êtres et les choses, qui se traduisait au dehors par d'innombrables charges, farces et *fumisteries*'.<sup>17</sup>

Frequently discordant and subversive in the tropes they mobilize, movements such as these, which are typical of *le rire moderne*, reject the classical opposition of the tragic and the comic, and exploit qualities of ambiguity and indeterminacy. The cardinal traits of *le rire moderne* are those of humour, mystification and ‘le non-sens’, according to Grojnowski.<sup>18</sup> Grojnowski’s emphasis in his understanding of the latter term of course privileges the semantic connotations of ‘sens’ in French; for instance, the kinds of indeterminacy he explores are exemplified by the rhyming homophonic couplets, or *holorimes*, of Alphonse Allais. However, in the context of the present analysis, the connotations of ‘sens’ might be seen in relation also to sensory perceptions. Indeed, much of the comic value of *fin-de-siècle* humour derives from the fact that it exploits uncertainties within the sensory realm. The disorienting effect of Allais’s *holorimes*, for instance, is as much sensory as semantic, since the latter exploit the contrasting meanings that can be yielded from identical phonetic sequences. Witness the following example from the ‘Sept brefs poèmes’ section of Allais’s *Vers holorimes*:

**Un grand seigneur anglais se guérit du spleen par l’exercice en plein air**

Sir Eveil – il paraît – chasselas détraqué, Se réveille!

Il part et chasse, las d’être à quai.

(Sir *se prononce seur*. Et ta *sœur*?)<sup>19</sup>

On this point, it was Cros’s fellow ‘poète maudit’ and member of the Cercle des poètes zutistes, Arthur Rimbaud, who, in his letter to Georges Izambard of 13 May 1871, declared that ‘Il s’agit d’arriver à l’inconnu par le dérèglement de tous les sens’.<sup>20</sup> Rimbaud’s famous assertion, by dint of its double allusion to a disruption of consensus in language and to a form of extreme sensory disorientation, can also be understood from the perspective of this growing preoccupation with the dislocation of *le sens*.

Meanwhile, in the field of visual arts, the *Incohérents* movement led by Jules Lévy brought together a group of artists whose works pilloried the conventions of the beaux-arts tradition. Their creations similarly exploited verbal and visual forms of indeterminacy. In a series of preposterous *salons* hosting works ‘exécutés par des gens qui ne savent pas dessiner’,<sup>21</sup> members of this group elicited a new attention to the pictorial canvas, frame and title as elements of a symbolic field laid open to different kinds of playful decomposition. If it is an expectation of the art-consuming public that aesthetic work should showcase unique skill or accomplishment, the *Incohérents* drew comic value from the subversion of that expectation. A work which featured in an 1886 catalogue of work by the *Incohérents*, Paul Lecuit’s ‘Le Repassage de la mère rouge’, for instance, plays on a particular phonetic sequence which draws associations with the biblical scene of the Crossing of the Red Sea (‘mer’). However, any such sacred connotations are dispelled when the viewer comes to discover an unsophisticated line drawing of a domestic ironing scene featuring a mother and her child.<sup>22</sup>

### **AT THE LIMITS OF SOCIAL DISCOURSE: THE MONOLOGUE**

One of the factors which allows us to situate Cros within the above strand of humour is the fact that his compositions similarly draw on an altered perception of spoken communication; Cros’s monologues blend conventionality with those quirks and accidents of speech to which neither dramatic convention, nor norms of social interaction, attribute sense. ‘Je recueille la parole et j’ai une machine qui parle’, Cros is said by his friend Jacques Bernard to have announced with regard to the paléophone.<sup>23</sup> It is the contention of this article that Cros’s monologues present a repository of utterance of an analogous kind to that evoked in this putative remark. However, Cros’s monologues constitute a repository which displays a more complex and ambivalent

attitude to its object than the paléophone, since what they prompted Cros to ‘collect’ and preserve were the accidents of disordered speech.

The essential object of Cros’s ‘enquiry’ in this regard, if we may so term his experiments in the monologue genre, encompasses both imperfect spoken delivery (for instance, hesitation and repetition) and the functioning of those mechanisms which organise the sayable, according to Marc Angenot. For Angenot, in his study of social discourse of the year 1889, such mechanisms operate at the most tacit level in the discursive production of a society:

Le discours social: tout ce qui se dit et s’écrit dans un état de société; tout ce qui s’imprime, tout ce qui se parle publiquement ou se représente aujourd’hui dans les médias électroniques. [...] Ou plutôt, appelons “discours social” non pas ce *tout* empirique, cacophonique à la fois et redondant, mais les systèmes génériques, les répertoires topiques, les règles d’enchaînement d’énoncés qui, dans une société donnée, organisent le *dicible* – le narrable et l’opposable – et assurent la division du travail discursif. Il s’agit alors de faire apparaître un système régulateur global dont la nature n’est pas donnée d’emblée à l’observation, des règles de production et de circulation, autant qu’un tableau des produits.<sup>24</sup>

According to Angenot’s sociodiscursive approach, among the functions of social discourse are that it confers legitimacy on certain opinions, that it implies a hierarchical ordering of utterance, and thus that it more generally marks out the discursive territory of the sayable. While it is the case that the monologue, through its emphasis on a panorama of social ‘types’,<sup>25</sup> demonstrates a remarkable receptiveness to that ‘cacophonous’ sum-total of social utterance invoked here, Cros’s texts also inflect the limits of social discourse through a series of monologues by characters incapable of disciplining their speech according to discursive norms.

Whether it be personal hygiene, property, sportsmanship or travel, each of the incorrigible *bavards* who feature in Cros’s compositions are in the grip of a particular *idée fixe* which blurs their perception of the real. From the capitalist, to the ‘homme raisonnable’ to the property

owner, these various stock characters are whimsically inept at negotiating the protocols that govern the socialized subject. If, still according to Marc Angenot, ‘l’étude du discours social fait percevoir [...] la production sociale de l’individualité, de la spécialisation, de la compétence, du talent, de l’originalité’,<sup>26</sup> then the comic monologue offers an exceptional space in which the character’s expression is no longer limited by the presence of an active addressee and in which the aforementioned mechanisms of social production are subject to more or less systematic disruption.

As we saw earlier, a dominant pedagogical culture increasingly impressed upon the public a sense of the theatricality of social exchange, and Angenot’s comments here point to the normalization of a set of attitudes towards the production of speech and the performance of social distinction. By contrast, Cros’s monologues offer a counterpoint to this societal evolution in that they repeatedly draw the spectator’s attention to their own lack of accomplishment as dramatic representations. In their pursuit of *le mal dire*, they thus partake of that same elevation of ineptitude and incoherence peculiar to the farcical salons of Jules Lévy and the *Incohérents*. Although the vaudevilles of authors such as Eugène Labiche and Alfred Hennequin had already exploited the comic value of misunderstandings and farcical elements of the kind found in the work of Cros, the sheer brevity of the form in the case of the *fumiste* monologue is such that there is little scope for intrigue or even characterization beyond the most stock elements.

In this way, the effect on audiences of listening to such bungling interlocutors was one destined to solicit hilarity, but it also led to moments of restlessness and irritation – a point which is indirectly acknowledged in the piece entitled ‘La Famille Dubois’ (*ŒC*, 231-34). This composition features a jaded *flâneur* figure who recalls an unexpected meeting with an insufferable acquaintance who engages him in conversation over the course of an afternoon,

during which, to the extreme irritation of the narrator, the acquaintance speaks in the most bafflingly convoluted terms possible about the relationships between various generations of a family named Dubois. Indeed Coquelin Cadet, in a guide to monologue performance, describes the character as an ‘être écœurant de banalité’.<sup>27</sup> While in this context, the brevity of the genre (Cros’s texts typically range between two and three pages) becomes something of a virtue for the listening public, this aspect of the compositions is indicative of a deliberate attempt to test the limits of an audience’s attention.

Setting aside the uncertainties around its mode of operation or ultimate efficacy, Cros’s early vision of a device which would enable deaf students to manipulate a repertoire of recorded phrases is of significance here. This is namely because it betrays a highly modern sense of dialogue as a form of competency inherently based on the manipulation and exchange of platitudes.<sup>28</sup> Similarly, Coquelin Cadet, in his discussion of monologue performance in *Le Monologue moderne*, seems alert to this redefined understanding of social exchange. Cadet is aware of the latter’s comic possibilities, since he identifies distraction, self-absorption and inattention as key facets of modern conversation: ‘Vous causez avec un ami : vous croyez qu’il vous écoute ? Pas du tout ! Il pense à ce qu’il va vous dire ; vous faites chacun votre monologue. Le monologue est partout’.<sup>29</sup>

Seen in the light of his later invention of the paléophone, for Cros, the functions of hearing and speech henceforth take place within an evolving acoustic and discursive context re-illuminated by the presence of technologies of sound reproduction. Just as the capacity to record speech could hold communicative benefits for deaf students of the kind imagined by the young Cros, conversely, the ability to recall speech on demand and the possibilities of repetition presented by sound recording technologies conceivably rendered him exceptionally alert to the

proclivity of speech to harden into cliché or for language tics to impede utterance. In this way, involuntary repetitions and banalities are scattered throughout the monologues ('C'était un jour vilain comme aujourd'hui' ('La Famille Dubois', *ÆC*, 232); 'Je suis comme ça' ('L'Affaire de la rue Beaubourg', *ÆC*, 236)), as are grating exclamations and verbal tics ('Ah!' ('Le Voyageur', *ÆC*, 241); 'pgt!' ('L'Homme raisonnable', *ÆC*, 264), and circular reasoning ('La propriété, c'est avoir quelque chose, avoir quelque chose c'est posséder, et quand on possède on est propriétaire' ('L'Homme raisonnable', *ÆC*, 265)).

Cros's studies had equipped him with an understanding of spoken language as decomposable into words and syntactical units available to recall and repetition.<sup>30</sup> However, as the above examples reveal, moreover, he had a fascination with what amounts to the auditory and discursive remainder generated by the corrective effects of social discourse. A further case in point is 'L'Homme raisonnable', a piece which features an individual who trusts only what he can deduce from his observations and from what amounts to a reasonable and socially valorized judgment. Conscious of the social obligation to avoid any affectation – as the manuals of the era advised<sup>31</sup> – the character repeatedly qualifies each one of his utterances to an absurd extent.

J'aperçois une petite femme, vous dire qu'elle était jolie...Pgt! non, n'exagérons pas, enfin elle tenait sa robe comme ça (*Geste*) elle était...(Eil.) non! elle n'était pas (*Eil.*)...enfin vous comprenez. Je ne suis pas comme ces gens qui nous disent: les femmes, les femmes! ils en ont plein la bouche! Je ne suis pas non plus comme ceux qui se frisent la moustache, et qui disent: les femmes, les femmes! Je dis simplement: les femmes. (*ÆC*, 264)

Cros here explores the comic and creative potential of various kinds of discursive 'noise' originating in the narrator's inarticulacy and his excessive repetition of 'les femmes'. Part of the comic effect turns also on the unwitting irony of 'en avoir plein la bouche' with its dismissive connotations of verbiage; yet what is at issue here is ultimately a breakdown of spoken

communication. Amid hesitations, repetitions and aborted declarations, there are upsurges of affect, manifesting themselves through gesture, through the verbal tic ‘Pgt!’, and through the gaze, as the character struggles to account for his experience in socially intelligible terms. Moreover, at a more tacit level, a form of discursive microdisruption occurs through the character’s garbling of the contemporary injunctions towards specialization and originality present within social discourse.

The presence of tics, exclamations and repetitions, both in terms of the lines to be spoken and the stage instructions to be followed by the performer draw our attention here to the embodied qualities of performance. In recent work on the emergence of modernist aesthetics in the theatre and cinema, Anthony Paraskeva has shown how modernist performance exploits an unresolved tension between a dramatic representation’s performative and textual elements, often through undermining a pervasive critical and conceptual bias in favour of the latter. In eliciting this tension through an analysis of selected works of modernist film and drama, Paraskeva argues that ‘the prevailing dominance of the textual paradigm tends to obscure and erase the fluid, uncategorizable presence of the actor, whose gestures cannot simply be reduced to a form of writing’.<sup>32</sup> Featuring a character who is painfully aware of the performativity of social relations, ‘L’Homme raisonnable’ can itself be seen as indicative of the tension elucidated by Paraskeva. The text’s somewhat loose stage instructions (‘*Geste*’, ‘*Œil*’), together with the character’s repeated utterance of the non-semantic expression ‘pgt!’<sup>33</sup> and his grotesque affectation of others’ laughter ‘hi ! hi ! hi !’ or tearfulness ‘heu ! heu ! heu !’ (*ŒC*, 264) all point to performative intensities that produce a kind of literal and discursive noise. Together, these aspects of the monologue privilege the contingency and materiality of performance over the conventionality or readability of script.



A similarly unwitting character to the ‘homme raisonnable’ features in ‘L’Homme qui a voyagé’. This figure is keen to impress the originality of his travel experiences upon his audience, but is nonetheless incapable of offering any coherent account of the places he has visited:

Un jour j’étais en Poméranie, non, en Herzégovine, dans un petit endroit auprès de Pesth... alors ce n’était pas en Herzégovine, non, je confonds, c’était en Crimée, c’est ça, en Crimée. J’étais sur une route où j’ai vu un paysan; vous savez de ces gens qui travaillent la terre; la terre où on plante et où ça pousse (il faut voyager pour avoir une idée de ça). Ce paysan plantait des choux; et bien c’était curieux de voir comme il plantait ses choux, il les plantait...il avait un geste...enfin on sentait là toutes les mœurs, toute la couleur locale de la Sicile, non, je veux dire de l’Herzégovine. (*ÆC*, 271)

Here, despite the character’s combination of assurance and appeals to the audience’s shared knowledge (‘vous savez’), his ultimately illocutionary incompetence is underscored by his confusion over placenames, just as much as it is by his veering from prosaic details of cabbage planting to the aborted lyrical flights of expressions such as ‘toute la couleur locale de la Sicile’, or the pleonastic ‘la terre où on plante et où ça pousse’. A salient feature of many of the compositions is, in this way, how they track the misadventures of the spoken word. In ‘Le Maître d’armes’, for instance, a fencing master repeatedly loses his train of thought: ‘Alors un soir—à son cercle—je ne sais pas quelle idée lui prend, c’était pour une histoire de femme...non, une histoire de cartes...non, non...une histoire de femme...à moins que...enfin ça ne fait rien’ (*ÆC*, 259).

In ‘La Propriété’, a student of law is revolted by the proprietary leanings of Monsieur Dubois, a bourgeois *pater familias* in whose house he has been a regular guest, and to which he has sworn never to return. Notwithstanding the irony that, at the start of the performance, the young man sends a servant to fetch an overcoat which he has left behind him in the Dubois

household and from which he cannot bear to be parted, he proceeds to express his disdain for the Dubois family's attachment to their material possessions. The character's abhorrence of material possession is in fact so great that he undertakes to boycott possessive pronouns, without however managing to avoid falling into the verbal trap he has thereby set himself:

Oh, là, là qu'est-ce que je dis, mon chapeau, ma canne, mon pardessus; je deviens donc propriétaire! C'est chez eux que j'ai attrapé cette maladie! Si je remets les pieds dans cette maison-là...je veux perdre MON nom, non, pas MON, *le...le...nom!* j'en mettrais MA main au feu – non LA main au feu. (*ÆC*, 346)

Here, as elsewhere, the repeated undermining of illocutionary force introduces hesitation, circularity and repetition into the narrator's speech.

#### **'AUTREFOIS': PALEOPHONIC PARLANCE**

While the majority of Cros's monologues dwell on the individual plights of hapless or spectacularly inept individuals, one of the most unusual compositions muses on the notion of material progress and on its own status as dramatic narrative in a manner both comic and abstractive. The text and its title are all the more singular and suggestive, firstly, since it is the work of an author who is associated with a watershed moment in the history of technology, and, secondly, since the peculiarity of the device for which Cros won fame was that, as even its name announced, it held out the possibility of capturing the very flow of time. Jules Legoux's monologue 'Par téléphone' of 1883 would go on to directly feature the similarly new communication apparatus of the telephone in the context of a tale of marital jealousy, exploiting the comic value of the potential gaps in conversation and misunderstandings associated with early versions of that device.<sup>34</sup> However, working through Cros's 'Autrefois', a text first published in 1878, is arguably a more subtly articulated ambivalence towards the cultural reception of his own

invention, as well as towards the claims made on behalf of the products of material progress.

From the first lines of the piece, the narrator's opening statement denotes recourse to one of the most familiar devices known to narrative: 'Il y a longtemps...'. However, from the outset, the speaker's pointedly frustrated repetition of 'longtemps' betokens a straining of language that sets the tone for the remainder of the piece:

Il y a longtemps —mais longtemps ce n'est pas assez pour vous donner l'idée... Pourtant comment dire mieux?

Il y a longtemps, longtemps, longtemps; mais longtemps, longtemps.

Alors, un jour... non, il n'y avait pas de jour, ni de nuit, alors une fois, mais il n'y avait... Si, une fois, comment voulez-vous parler? Alors il se mit dans la tête (non, il n'y avait pas de tête), dans l'idée...

Oui, c'est bien cela, dans l'idée de faire quelque chose. (*ÆC*, 261)

From the outset, here, it is noticeable that the status of the tale's narrator *as* narrator is radically uncertain, for by contrast with Cros's other published monologues, 'Autrefois' is the only one in which this role is identified as a 'récitant' in the *dramatis personae* rather than in terms of a named character. Yet, even his status as 'récitant' seems tenuous given that his speech no longer squares with a single, isolated voice ('comment voulez-vous parler?'). According to a sort of reverse linguistic idealism (the philosophical notion according to which nothing can be taken to exist unless it has been spoken about), the narrator finds himself repeatedly confronted with the principle that nothing can be spoken about prior to its having been invented: 'C'est que vous ne pensez pas qu'il a fallu inventer tout ça, que ce n'était pas encore fait, que le progrès a marché. Oh! le progrès!' (*ÆC*, 261). The speaker thus elicits numerous narrative scenarios only to be constrained to dismiss them henceforth, because it is anachronistic to assume the existence of any of the elements of which they are comprised. In these conditions, the spectator's focus shifts from

the diegesis to the accumulation of narrative departures, each of which is ultimately aborted. Since narrative never in fact takes hold here, the comic interest of the piece derives from the increasingly agitated fits and starts of the narrator's iteration, and is marked by a shift from the values of textuality (the story to be told, or the script to be recited) to those of performativity (the contingencies of telling). The narrator's jettisoning of an entire repertoire of diegetic scenarios (drinking, eating, singing, dancing, sleeping, loving, fighting and dying) has an exhaustive effect as whole sequences of characters, objects and places to which each action is linked are summarily discarded:

Peux pas chanter; impossible? Eh bien je vais danser. Mais danser où? Sur quoi? Pas de parquet ciré, vous savez pour tomber. Pas de soirées avec des lustres, des girandoles aux murs qui vous jettent de la bougie dans le dos, des verres, des sirops qu'on renverse sur les robes! Pas de pères ronfleurs, pas de mères couperosées pour empêcher de danser en rond! (*ÆC*, 262)

After so many forced detours which shift attention away from story or event and instead towards the unfolding present of narration, the narrator's invocation of the progressive watchword 'moderne' paradoxically becomes associated with the retraction of knowledge rather than its extension:

Alors il ne voulut rien! (*Plaintif.*) Quelle plus malheureuse situation!... (*Se ravisant.*) Mais non, ne pleurez pas! Il n'y avait pas de situation, pas de malheur. Bonheur, malheur, tout ça c'est moderne!

La fin de l'histoire? Mais, il n'y avait pas de fin. On n'avait pas inventé de fin. Finir, c'est une invention, un progrès! Oh! Le progrès! Le progrès!

*Il sort stupide.* (*ÆC*, 262)

Just as the narrative never commenced, nor can it end in anything other than wordlessness, marked by the exit of the narrator from the stage. Whereas storytelling conventions are such that

anteriority is normally the very condition of iterability and narrative, in ‘Autrefois’, it paradoxically becomes their obstacle. In this way, the conflicted, self-problematizing manoeuvres of this piece acquire even greater ironic distortion when one considers that they are the work of an author whose ambition was, through the creation of the paléophone, to give expression to ‘la voix du passé’. If the imaginative framework of a poem such as ‘Inscription’ assumes that the recorded sound stands in secondary relation to its source, a text such as this invites us to consider the limits of that paradigm, just as it revels in undermining the notional primacy of text over performance. Through this paradoxical spectacle of the failure of a narrative representation to take hold, ‘Autrefois’ thus offers a striking illustration of what Françoise Dubor describes as the *fumiste* monologue’s ‘mise en danger de la théâtralité’<sup>35</sup> and shows Cros to have been attuned to the crisis of mimesis that would come to envelop the *fin-de-siècle* stage in the work of Maurice Maeterlinck and Alfred Jarry.<sup>36</sup>

## CONCLUSION

Returning to the matter of the paléophone itself, while Cros’s own writings on the device are primarily limited to technical descriptions of its composition and functioning, one of the earliest examples of vulgarization around his discovery was by the abbé Lenoir, a friend of Cros and columnist for *La Semaine du clergé* who wrote under the pen name Le Blanc. It was in a piece dating from October 1877 that Leblanc elaborated on potential applications of the new device, which he elected to describe as a ‘phonographe’:

Par cet instrument que nous appellerions, si nous étions appelé à en être le parrain, le *phonographe*, on obtiendra des photographies de la voix comme on en obtient des traits du visage, et ces photographies, qui devront prendre le nom de phonographies, serviront à faire parler, ou chanter, ou déclamer des gens, des

siècles après qu'ils ne seront plus, comme ils parlaient ou chantaient ou déclamaient, lorsqu'ils étaient en vie. Le *phonographe* ne reproduira pas sans doute toutes les déclamations, paroles, chansons, etc., de l'être pendant qu'il vivait, mais il reproduira ce qui aura été fixé par lui de ces discours, chants et autres sons. Ce seront des échantillons qui en seront conservés.<sup>37</sup>

It is noticeable here that Le Blanc's account – which is in many ways indicative of early commentators on the phonograph – promotes an essentially naturalistic account of phonographic representation, in other words, one which considers the phonographic recording as essentially replicating the natural experience within consciousness of the acoustic event to which it refers (in a manner that is evocative of what Roland Barthes would later see as the '*ça a été*' of photographic representation).<sup>38</sup>

However, it is worth contrasting the passage from Le Blanc with one from Cros's own œuvre which is indicative of the author's pervasive unease about the reduction of experience (and of scientific enquiry) to the empirical record which is made of it. In Cros's 'La Science de l'amour', a satirical tale first published in 1874 in *La Revue du Monde Nouveau*, a young man embarks on a quest for a scientific formula for amorous passion; in one passage, the narrator delivers what is effectively a *reductio ad absurdum* of the empiricist drive of the sciences in the modern period:

J'ai pensé toujours, d'accord avec la cohorte serrée des savants modernes, que l'homme n'est qu'un sténographe des faits brutaux, qu'un secrétaire de la nature palpable; que la vérité conçue non dans quelques vaines universalités, mais dans un volume immense et confus, n'est abordable partiellement qu'aux gratteurs, rogneurs, fureteurs; en un mot qu'il faut être fourmi, qu'il faut être ciron, rotifère, vibrion, qu'il faut n'être rien! pour apporter son atome dans l'infinité des atomes qui composent la majestueuse pyramide des vérités scientifiques. Observer, observer, surtout ne jamais penser, rêver, imaginer: voilà les splendeurs de la méthode actuelle. (*EC*, 199)

Echoing Charles Baudelaire's condemnation of practitioners of photography whom the poet of *Les Fleurs du mal* says '[se prosternent] devant la réalité extérieure',<sup>39</sup> Cros's narrator takes issues with a scientific practice which is limited to the empirical apprehension of phenomena by means of observation. For Cros, this restricted approach necessarily leads to the ruination of the interior life, a phenomenon which is suggested through a sequence of unflattering entomological comparisons. Such strongly articulated scepticism about empirical methods of enquiry is of import to our analysis, not least since it affirms Cros's conviction in the potential of literary work to deflect back critically on dominant epistemological paradigms.

As we have seen, vulgarizing discourses around the paléophone, such as that by Le Blanc, may tend to consider human speech as an isolated fact, one straightforwardly available to empirical capture. Yet for the Cros of the monologues, speech is not a simple matter for inscription like any other, but assumes its own dynamizing, performative force in the accidents of disordered speech. The link between the productions of the phonograph and the enduring value of the written word was something which Cros himself sought to promote through the motif of inscription, in his poem of that name. And yet 'inscription' may not be the sole or the most appropriate means to capture the singularity of his accomplishments in the monologue, since the term tends to subordinate performativity (and associated ideas of gesture, materiality and sensory uncertainty) to the values of textuality (readability, conventionality, reproducibility). If anything, the monologue, which nonetheless links to Cros's long-held interest in speech, hearing and technologies of sound reproduction, signals a subtle displacement of the centrality of text as the dominant paradigm of creative engagement. In compositions that dramatize the collapse of the integrity and autonomy of the individual voice (and which, moreover, feature multiple failures of

observation<sup>40</sup>), Cros in various ways implicitly problematizes the notional direct passage from orality to legibility and alerts us to the irrepressible slipperiness of language.

By dint of a distinctively *fin-de-siècle* humour which plays on gaps in the continuity of our understanding and our sensory impressions (gaps which are necessary to the fluid exchange of social discourse, and which technologies of sound reproduction only bring into greater relief), Cros's monologues have in common with other humorous and poetic creations of the time that they foreground a certain negativity as generative of the comic.<sup>41</sup> Offering their own wry corrective to the aspirations of a culture increasingly preoccupied with the strategizing of utterance, one where the greatest prize of the pioneers of sound technologies was to produce an objectified record of the spoken word, the comic monologue draws our attention to a very human incapacity to effectively manipulate our words and to accord our full attention to everything we hear.



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- <sup>1</sup> Charles Cros, *Œuvres complètes*, ed. by Louis Forestier and Pascal Pia (Paris: J.-J. Pauvert, 1964), p. 135. Future references to this edition of Cros's *Œuvres complètes* in this article will take the following abbreviated form: (*ŒC*, 135).
- <sup>2</sup> Friedrich A. Kittler, *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*, transl. by Geoffrey Winthrop-Young and Michael Wutz (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), p. 22.
- <sup>3</sup> Brett Brehm, 'Paleophonic futures: Charles Cros's Audiovisual Worlds', *Nineteenth-Century French Studies*, 45:3/4 (Spring-Summer 2017), pp. 179-197, (p. 191).
- <sup>4</sup> Brehm, 'Paleophonic futures', p. 192.
- <sup>5</sup> Sam Halliday, *Sonic Modernity: Representing Sound in Literature, Culture and the Arts* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013), p. 15.
- <sup>6</sup> 'Charles Cros a vu dans les mots eux-mêmes des "procédés", procédés qu'il a chéris au même titre que ceux dont la découverte, puis l'application, marquent les étapes du progrès scientifique'. André Breton, *Anthologie de l'humour noir* (Paris: Jean-Jacques Pauvert, 1966), p. 206.
- <sup>7</sup> See: Haun Saussy, 'Interplanetary Literature', *Comparative Literature*, 63:4 (Fall 2011), pp. 438-447.
- <sup>8</sup> Tristan Corbière, Charles Cros, *Œuvres complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1970), p. 356.
- <sup>9</sup> Katherine Bergeron, *Voice Lessons: French Mélodie in the Belle Époque* (Oxford: OUP, 2010).
- <sup>10</sup> See: Louis Becq de Fouquières, *Traité de diction et de lecture à haute voix: le rythme, l'intonation, l'expression* (Paris: Charpentier 1881); Alfred Cauvet, *La Prononciation française et la diction* (Paris: P. Ollendorff, 1881); Émile Guillaïn, *Essai sur la voix et la diction au barreau* (Paris: A. Lemerre, 1881); Eugène Monrose, *Études sur l'art de la diction: lecture à haute voix, débit oratoire, diction dramatique, cours théorique et pratique* (Bruxelles: A. N. Lebègue, 1883); Henri Dupont-Vernon, *Principes de diction* (Paris: P. Ollendorff, 1882).
- <sup>11</sup> Paul Esquier, *Traité pratique de diction française: prononciation, action oratoire, art de la scène à l'usage des écoles, des gens du monde et des étrangers* (Gand: Librairie générale d'Ad. Hoste, 1898), p.1.
- <sup>12</sup> Henri Dupont-Vernon, *L'Art de bien dire (principes et applications)*, 3rd edn. (Paris: P. Ollendorff, 1888), pp. 2-3.
- <sup>13</sup> See: Arnaud Bernadet, "'Un air idiot à jouer": aux marges de la poésie, la dramaturgie du mal dire', *Dire la poésie*, ed. by Jean-François Puff (Nantes: Éditions Nouvelles Cécile Defaut, 2015), pp. 33-57, (p. 37). Indeed, Cros's collaborator Coquelin Cadet, together with his elder brother, was responsible for a manual devoted to the comic genre for which Cadet and Cros were both renowned: Coquelin Ainé & Coquelin Cadet, *L'Art de bien dire le monologue* (Paris: Paul Ollendorff, 1884).
- <sup>14</sup> See: Françoise Dubor, *L'Art de parler pour ne rien dire: le monologue fumiste fin de siècle*, (Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2004) ; Arnaud Bernadet, 'La contagion de l'écho: "L'obsession" de Charles Cros', *Nineteenth-Century French Studies*, 43:1-2 (Fall-Winter 2014-2015), pp. 63-78; Rae Beth Gordon, *Why the French Love Jerry Lewis: From Cabaret to Early Cinema* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001), pp. 85-86.
- <sup>15</sup> 'Le rire est l'expression d'un sentiment double, ou contradictoire ; et c'est pour cela qu'il y a convulsion', *Œuvres complètes*, ed. by Claude Pichois, 2 vols (Paris: Gallimard, 1975-76), II, p. 534.
- <sup>16</sup> See: Mary Gluck, *Popular Bohemia : Modernism and Urban Culture in Nineteenth-Century Paris* (London: Harvard University Press, 2005).
- <sup>17</sup> Émile Goudeau, *Dix ans de bohème Suivi de Les Hirsutes de Léo Trézenik* ; intro. by Michel Golfier et Jean-Didier Wagneur (Seysse: Champ Vallon, 2000; repr. Paris: Librairie illustrée, 1888), p. 149.
- <sup>18</sup> Daniel Grojnowski, *Aux commencements du rire moderne* (Paris: José Corti, 1997), p. 250.
- <sup>19</sup> Alphonse Allais, *Par les bois du Djinn: Parle et bois du gin: poésies complètes*, ed. by François Caradec (Paris: Gallimard, 1997), p. 51.
- <sup>20</sup> Arthur Rimbaud, *Œuvres complètes*, ed. by Pierre Brunel (Librairie Générale Française: 1999), p. 237
- <sup>21</sup> Jules Lévy, 'L'incohérence: son origine – son histoire – son avenir', *Le Courrier français*, 12 March 1885.
- <sup>22</sup> *Exposition des Arts incohérents: catalogue illustré* (Paris: Georges Chamerot, 1886), p.139.
- <sup>23</sup> Quoted in: Paul Charbon, *Ils ont inventé...la machine parlante* (Strasbourg: Éditions Jean-Pierre Gyss, 1981), p. 21.

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- <sup>24</sup> Marc Angenot, 'Chapitre 1. Le discours social : problématique d'ensemble', *Médias 19* [En ligne], A. Préliminaires heuristiques, Publications, 1889. Un état du discours social, mis à jour le : 08/05/2014, URL : <http://www.medias19.org/index.php?id=11796>.
- <sup>25</sup> Such types include: a capitalist ('Le Capitaliste'); a maid ('La Bonne'); a scientist ('L'Homme qui a trouvé') and a musician 'Le Violon'.
- <sup>26</sup> Marc Angenot, 'Chapitre 49. Fonctions du discours social', *Médias 19* [En ligne], O. Pour conclure, 1889. Un état du discours social, Publications, mis à jour le : 08/05/2013, URL: <http://www.medias19.org/index.php?id=12750>.
- <sup>27</sup> Coquelin & Coquelin, *L'Art de bien dire le monologue*, p. 90.
- <sup>28</sup> As Michel de Certeau declares: 'La conversation est un effet provisoire et collectif de compétences dans l'art de manipuler des "lieux communs" et de jouer avec l'inévitable des événements pour les rendre "habitables"'. Michel de Certeau, *L'Invention du Quotidien: I Arts de faire* (Paris: Union Générale d'Éditions, 1980), li.
- <sup>29</sup> Coquelin Cadet, *Le Monologue moderne* (Paris: P. Ollendorff, 1881), pp. 30-31.
- <sup>30</sup> Cros's own observations on language acquisition in early childhood dating from his time at the Institution des sourds-muets emphasize the importance of observation and repetition: 'L'enfant qui jouit de tous ses sens [...] retient, dans son esprit, des assemblages de mots, qu'il a entendu prononcer et à l'occasion desquels, il a vu se passer certains faits, qui se reproduisant ont amené de nouveau à la répétition des mêmes mots', Charles Cros, *Inédits et documents*, ed. by Pierre E. Richard (Remoulins: Atelier du Gué/ Jacques Brémond, 1992), pp. 37-38.
- <sup>31</sup> See, for example: Frédéric Hennebert, *Cours élémentaire de lecture à haute voix et de récitation* (Tournai: J. Casterman, 1856), p. 134.
- <sup>32</sup> Anthony Paraskeva, *The Speech-Gesture Complex: Modernism, Theatre, Cinema* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013), p. 6.
- <sup>33</sup> Cros's own footnote to the published version of the monologue states that 'pgt!' is 'un petit claquement des lèvres et de la langue sur les dents, qui exprime la suprême sagesse' (OEC, 263).
- <sup>34</sup> Jules Legoux, 'Par téléphone', *Anthologie de monologues fumistes*, ed. by Françoise Dubor (Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2005), pp. 174-79.
- <sup>35</sup> Dubor, *L'Art de parler pour ne rien dire*, p. 9.
- <sup>36</sup> See: Patrick McGuinness, *Maurice Maeterlinck and the Making of Modern Theatre* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000) and Jill Fell, *Alfred Jarry: An Imagination in Revolt* (Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2005).
- <sup>37</sup> Quoted in: Paul Charbon, *Ils ont inventé...la machine parlante* (Strasbourg: Éditions Jean-Pierre Gyss, 1981), p. 24.
- <sup>38</sup> For other early accounts by pioneers of sound recording technology such Cros, or his contemporaries Edison and Léon Scott, see Charbon.
- <sup>39</sup> Baudelaire, *Œuvres complètes*, II, p. 619.
- <sup>40</sup> A case in point is 'l'Homme qui a trouvé', a monologue in which (with some degree of self-mockery on the part of Cros), an amateur scientist recounts his blinkered pursuit of his passion. In this text, the character vaunts his capacities for observation and continually repeats the axiom 'Observez ! Observez ! c'est comme ça qu'on découvre'; nevertheless, he is all the while oblivious to various indicators of his wife's infidelity (*ŒC*, 299).
- <sup>41</sup> See, for instance, Henri Scepi's discussion of the humour of Jules Laforgue in his *Poésie vacante. Nerval, Mallarmé, Laforgue* (Lyon: ENS Éditions, 2008).