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Title	Dismantling, sifting, sorting: Valérie Rouzeau's poetics of scrappage
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Publication date	2012
Original Citation	Noonan, M. (2012) 'Dismantling, sifting, sorting: Valérie Rouzeau's poetics of scrappage', Irish Journal of French Studies, 12, pp. 113-137. doi: 10.7173/164913312806739683
Type of publication	Article (peer-reviewed)
Link to publisher's version	10.7173/164913312806739683
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Download date	2026-11-02 15:39:08
Item downloaded from	https://hdl.handle.net/10468/14310



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Dismantling, Sifting, Sorting: Valérie Rouzeau's Poetics of Scrappage

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In order to consider the nature of the linguistic play apparent in the poetry of contemporary poet Valérie Rouzeau, I would like to begin by referring to two studies of the poetic function in writing. In her 1977 text *Polylogue,* Julia Kristeva is motivated by a desire to determine 'ce qui, dans la fonction poétique [...] fait de ce qu'on appelle la "littérature" autre chose qu'une connaissance: le lieu même où se détruit et se renouvelle le code social'.[1] Throughout this work, she cites Antonin Artaud as one of the proponents of a form of writing where semiotic activity can be determined. The potential of the 'poetic function' to disrupt social codes, to unsettle the symbolic control of the Father, was one of the central themes of Artaud's work, according to her reading of him — she quotes, for example, from his essay 'L'Anarchie sociale de l'art' in which he makes a case for art as the place where society can find a release from the 'angoisses de son époque' by 'aimantant, attirant, faisant tomber sur ses épaules les colères errantes de l'époque pour la décharger de son mal-être psychologique'.[2] Artaud is interesting to Kristeva because of his understanding of art's potential to threaten social concord and to 'parle(r) l'inceste'[3] — the incest taboo being the basis of Western society and the premise on which is founded the unconscious and the speaking subject. A resurgence of 'incest' and a reinstatement of the maternal territory within the very economy of language results in art/writing which is 'la cause d'un procès permanent du sujet parlant' (*P* 163), 'qui travaille toute conscience jugeante de sorte que tout ego y reconnaît sa crise' (*P* 167).

1. Julia Kristeva, 'D'une identité l'autre', in *Polylogue* (Paris: Seuil, 1977), pp. 149–72 (p. 158).
2. Artaud, 'L'Anarchie sociale de l'art', in *Œuvres Complètes*, 26 vols (Paris: Gallimard, 1956–), VIII (1957), 287 as cited by Kristeva in *Polylogue*, op.cit., p. 162.
3. Kristeva, *Polylogue*, p. 162, hereafter *P* in the text.

Ultimately, writing that allows for attacks on the speaking subject by the ancient drives is writing that is using the resources of the symbolic to record the *movement between* the semiotic[4] and the symbolic within the subject:

> [...] ni discours imaginaire du moi ni discours du savoir transcendantal, mais intermédiaire permanent de l'un à l'autre, balancement du signe et du rythme, de la conscience et de la pulsion. 'Je suis le père de mes créations imaginatives', écrit Mallarmé. [...] 'Je suis mon père, ma mère, mon fils et moi', postule Artaud. Tous stylistes, ils font entendre la discordance dans la fonction thétique, paternelle, du langage. (*P* 164–65)

In his essay, 'Le Mouvement de l'informe', Pierre Fédida writes of the '*refoulement* subi par les mots d'une langue dès lors qu'est privilégié leur *sens* objectif sur leurs "*besognes*" — certes leur travail mais aussi leur auto-érotisme et ainsi la jouissance de jouer avec eux'.[5] Fédida takes as his starting-point Bataille's definition of the notion of the *informe* — 'Ce qu'il désigne n'a ses droits dans aucun sens et se fait écraser partout comme une araignée ou un ver de terre'[6] — and the 'imaginary dictionary' conceived of by Bataille in order to designate that which is beyond form in such a way that its formlessness would remain intact. Bataille conceived of a dictionary of vocables which would show 'l'envers des choses'; Fédida comments that 'cet *envers des choses* aurait pour particularité non pas de détecter le sens caché derrière le sens manifeste [...] mais d'*émerveiller la chose* et laisser

4. The term semiotic, in Kristeva's work (and particularly in *La Révolution du langage poétique* (Paris: Seuil, 1974), hereafter *LRLP* in the text, and *Polylogue*) refers to the drive-ridden body or *chora* viewed from the shores of language: the semiotic and the symbolic are two *modalities* or ways of being in relation to the signifying process that constitutes language.
5. Pierre Fédida, 'Le Mouvement de l'informe', in *La Part de l'Œil*, 10 (1994), 21–27 (p. 21).
6. Georges Bataille, 'Informe', in *Œuvres Complètes*, 12 vols (Paris: Gallimard, 1970–1988), I (1970), 217.

l'écriture excéder le *nom* de la chose par son *vocable*'.[7] The use of the word 'vocable' suggests a separation of the sound component and the sense or meaning component of words, the vocable being that which is sounded with the voice, from Latin *vox/vocis*. Fédida quotes Barthes as saying that 'les vocables sont des mots sensibles, des mots subtils, des mots amoureux, dénotant des séductions ou des répulsions (des appels de jouissance)'.[8] Bataille's imagined dictionary of vocables, accompanied by photographic images representing the vocables, would, according to Fédida, constitute a document(ation) of the body freed from the functional representations to which it is bound by everyday linguistic usage. This dictionary, which would be impossible to realize, and which is therefore a utopian fantasy, nonetheless establishes the principle of a method of knowing/learning language that does not rule out bodily pleasure.

Fédida uses the word *écrasement* to denote a violent force or energy contained in words by virtue of the tension inherent in them between sound, emerging from the pre-social self, and meaning, rooted in the social. The force of *écrasement* of a word designates the visual abyss — 'l'abyme visuel' — which the vocable produces at the site of the word-as-meaning. This (sexual) excess produced by the vocable spills over onto the word, and in turn overwhelms the body of the speaker, bringing about 'un changement dans la vision du corps':

> Prétendre que l'écriture, si elle est entrainée par le mouvement du vocable, ouvre l'accès des mots à la valeur du non-refoulement, c'est faire venir dans l'action physique du langage, le corporel défiant jusqu'au fétichisme de ses propres représentations. [...] L'informe [...] ce serait l'action physique du langage s'effectuant instantanément [...] par contact violent entre le signifiant et le signifié.[9]

7. Fédida, 'Le Mouvement de l'informe', p. 21.
8. Roland Barthes, 'Les Sorties du texte', in *Bataille: Décade de Cerisy, 1972* (Paris: Union Générale d'Editions, 1973), pp. 49–62 (p. 60).
9. Fédida, 'Le Mouvement de l'informe', p. 22.

Fédida is here writing of the inherent power of the voiced vocable or phoneme to 'pulverize' (Kristeva's word) in its sounding, the concept designated by the word, its meaning — as if the sounded vocable were capable of 'undoing' the word before it had time to split (or in the moment of splitting) into signifier and signified, the moment when something is *represented* at the expense of a repression, a loss of presence. Therefore, for both Kristeva and Fédida, words contain the trace of the rupture between sound and sense, between instinct and culture, and the marks of this trace are rhythm, pleasure and violence — the evidence of drive activity (oral, anal, sexual) that is apparent in particular configurations of sounds. This trace of what Kristeva refers to as the 'thetic phase', when it emerges in writing, returns the reader/speaker/listener to the thetic moment of rupture of sound and meaning, the originary moment of language acquisition:

> Toute énonciation est thétique, qu'elle soit énonciation de mot ou de phrase: toute énonciation exige une identification, c'est-à-dire une séparation du sujet de et dans son image, de et dans ses objets […].[10]

Both Kristeva and Fédida locate this trace in the vocable, or sound component of the word, and in forms of writing that adopt a ludic posture in relation to the sonorous and vocal qualities of words and components of words.

For Kristeva, poetic language sets up a movement between the heterogeneity of the semiotic and the univocity of the symbolic, 'il pose son propre processus comme un indécidable procès entre le sens et le non-sens, entre la *langue* et le *rythme*' (*P* 160). The emergence of semiotic heterogeneity in language shows the subject to be 'un *sujet en procès*' (*P* 161); language in its semiotic mode is engaged in a poetic recovery of the maternal body, that diffuse materiality that resists all discrete and univocal signification.[11] In *La Révolution du langage*

10. Kristeva, *La Révolution du langage poétique*, pp. 41–42.
11. Kristeva discusses at length the notion of how semiotic activity manifests itself in

poétique, Kristeva writes at length about the poetry of Mallarmé and Lautréamont. Only a small number of writers, such as these, produce writing that reaches, or triggers, the *chora*[12] to such an extent that it modifies 'les structures linguistiques (Mallarmé, Joyce)' (*LRLP* 85) However,

> Il faudra attendre les années toutes récentes ou les périodes révolutionnaires pour que la pratique signifiante inscrive dans le phéno-texte le procès de la signification, plurielle, hétérogène et contradictoire, embrassant le flux pulsionnel, la discontinuité matérielle, la lutte politique et la pulvérisation langagière. (*LRLP* 85)

Kristeva cites Joyce as an example of a writer who effects a 'pulvérisation langagière' in his work, especially *Finnegans Wake*. Mallarmé, in contrast, does not dismantle the French language at the level of the word. A noted specialist of, and writer on, the English-language writers Wilde, Tennyson, Swinburne, Stevenson and Poe, he may have been influenced by English poetry, but in his own poetry

> Mallarmé ne touche pas au mot. La langue maternelle demeure la valeur primordiale, et l'écho de la langue étrangère n'est là que pour faciliter le 'jeu' et 'l'ouïe' individuels […]. (*LRLP* 541)

'Mallarmé se tient près du français dans ce qu'il a de plus fondamental pour le locuteur natif: le lexique', according to Kristeva (*LRLP* 541). For Mallarmé, recourse to 'l'étrangeté', an essential part

written language in the following works: 'D'une identité l'autre', in *Polylogue*, pp. 149–72; 'Le Père, l'Amour, l'Exil', in *Polylogue*, pp. 137–46; *Des Chinoises* (Paris: des femmes, 1974).

12. For Kristeva, the *chora* is the drive-ridden body, a time-space wherein 'des quantités discrètes d'énergies parcourent le corps de ce qui sera plus tard un sujet'. The drives are organized according to physical need, and therefore connect the child's body to the body of the mother, who fulfils these needs. The defining characteristic of this phase of life is motility or movement. See Kristeva, *La Révolution du langage poétique*.

of his poetic process, was a remedy against 'la lassitude, par abus de la cadence nationale, dont l'emploi, ainsi que celui du drapeau, doit demeurer exceptionnel' (*LRLP* 541). Fascinated by its alterity, Mallarmé courts the strangeness of another language because of its capacity to stimulate the ambivalent pulsional (semiotic) rhythms underpinning his poetry, and to undermine 'les structures et les finitudes données' (*LRLP* 543). However, the discursive or cultural strangeness of another language is never allowed to take root fully in his poetry — the rhythms of the other language serve as a trigger, a stimulant:

> Lorsque l'étranger voudra se fixer comme identité, valeur, continent à soi, le procès qui agit le texte lui refusera ce fixisme et lui indiquera que l''étrangeté' *ne peut pas être*, sinon comme cause du procès (comme négativité). (*LRLP* 543)

Mallarmé's invention in poetry was, for Kristeva, to bring out the semiotic rhythms of the French language through the use of *timbre*: that is, through the manipulation of the distribution of phonemes, Mallarmé highlights the rhythm of phonic differences throughout the poem, distorting syntax and grammar and bringing drive energy into play:

> Un des apports fondamentaux de Mallarmé consiste précisément dans le fait d'avoir décelé cette valeur de 'timbre' propre à la *chora* sémiotique qui sous-tend le système de la langue, et d'avoir organisé la nouvelle rythmicité textuelle sur la base de ces distinctions acoustiques-pulsionnelles (*LRLP* 225).

In other words, Mallarmé prioritized sonorous differences at the level of the phoneme, and played with the displacement, condensation, transposition and repetition of sounds in order to return the reader to the period of language acquisition when drive activity dominated the production of sounds.

In constructing poetry largely on the basis of timbre, on the play of vocables and phonemes, the French poet Valérie Rouzeau can be

seen to take the Mallarmean project as her starting point. And yet she also moves this project forward, for she is no respecter of the word, and dislocation at the level of the phoneme is one of her signature features. Closer stylistically, perhaps, to the Surrealists, to Apollinaire and Desnos, than to Mallarmé, Rouzeau (b. 1967)[13] is one of a small number of post-Mallarmean French poets whose poetic writing has embraced 'le flux pulsionnel, la discontinuité matérielle, la lutte politique et la pulvérisation langagière' (*LRLP* 85), making the work a place of sonorous mayhem, where social codes are unsettled. Her dismantling of the French language, at the level of the word, as well as at the level of the syntactical unit, is radical. Her poetry incorporates English words, phrases, lines of verse. But above all, she explodes the law of the French language, distorting words, inventing words, combining and condensing words (her penchant for 'mots-valises' or portmanteau words). In Rouzeau's poetry, the sound of the vocable and the sonorousness generated through metre and rhyme take precedence in the construction of the poem.

Ironically, in *Pas Revoir* (1999),[14] the collection that first brought her to the attention of a wider public, she dismantles the mother-tongue in order to find her way back to the body of the father, whose sudden death (in his fifties) the collection mourns.

> Mon père était récupérateur, son travail consistait donc à 'récuperer': ferrailles, papiers, chiffons, métaux, pneus usagés, etc. et pour les voitures vieilles ou accidentées, le carton en vrac

13. Valérie Rouzeau has published some 13 collections of poetry since 1989. In 2009, *Cold Spring in Winter* (Todmorden: Arc publications, 2009), an English translation by Susan Wicks of Rouzeau's 1999 collection *Pas Revoir*, was nominated for the Griffin prize in Canada. In addition to these collections, Rouzeau has translated Sylvia Plath's *Ariel* (she is Gallimard's Plath translator, and is working on a Collected Works) and has published a monograph on the poet. She has also translated Ted Hughes and William Carlos Williams. She has written poetry for children, and edits the magazine of children's poetry *Dans la lune*.
14. Valérie Rouzeau, *Pas revoir suivi de Neige rien* (Paris: Éditions de la Table Ronde, 2010). All quotations from *Pas Revoir*, hereafter *PR* in the text, will refer to this edition. None of the poems have titles, and none exceed a single page in length. The original edition appeared in 1999 and was published by Le Dé bleu.

> il les pressait avant de les livrer sous forme de dés à jouer de cinq cents kilos aux usines de recyclage. J'avais fait cela avec les mots, quasimodo! […] En hommage à mon père, j'avais écrit dans une sorte de langue paternelle![15]

The poems came out in a rush, had the form of her breathing, according to Rouzeau. She had been writing and publishing poems for ten years, but her poetry changed spontaneously at this moment — 'ce chaos de langue a commencé'. The breaking or dismantling, and subsequent reconfiguration of scraps, performed at the level of the word, became the signature feature of her writing from then on:

> Toi mourant man au téléphone pernoc-
> tera pas voir papa.
> Le train foncé sous la pluie dure pas
> mourir mon père oh steu plait tends-moi me
> dépêche d'arriver.
> Pas mouranrir désespérir père infinir
> lever courir – *(PR 13)*

Linguistic dislocation, invention and play are much in evidence in the opening poem of *Pas Revoir*. Words are invented, deformed (lengthened, shortened, condensed); rare or obsolete words are included ('pernocter' — to last/spend the night); homonymic play is central — here, for example, 'pas', containing the sound of the abbreviation of 'papa' as well as the negative form; use of slang, idiom and colloquialism pervades — this is the spoken language, written in the rhythms of Rouzeau's own speech ('oh steu plait tends-moi me dépêche d'arriver'); play on double meanings — 'pluie dure pas' — the father is both dying and holding on, 'tends-moi' signalling both the verb 'attendre' and the verb 'tendre', reach or hold out (a hand);

15. Valérie Rouzeau in interview with Serge Martin, 'Chronique poésie Valérie Rouzeau ou le poème libre', *Le Français aujourd'hui*, 2.149 (2005), 105–10<www.cairn.info/revue-le-francais-aujourd-hui-2005-2-page-105.htm>[accessed 9 September 2012].

the portmanteau words ‘mouranrir’ containing both ‘mourant’ and ‘mourir’, ‘désespérir’ containing ‘désespérer’ and ‘périr’, and ‘infinir’ containing both ‘finir’ and ‘infini’. The effect of the entirety of the opening poem is to bring the reader to a place where the father is both dying and already dead, simultaneously, which is the half-way place the narrator is inhabiting in these lines. Rouzeau’s linguistic inventiveness creates the conditions for the collision of — and slippage between — two temporalities. Throughout the collection, Rouzeau the child and Rouzeau the adult stand side by side in relation to the father, and the poems veer dramatically between past and present:

> Mon père son camion roule sur la terre,
> le soleil chauffe ses métaux bien triés
> empilés: le cuivre et l’alu, le zinc et l’étain.
> De là-haut les pies n’arrêtent pas de
> saluer.
> La grue à chenilles creuse des ornières où
> l’eau de pluie se trouvera belle.
> L’herbe a des insectes verts qui chantent
> juste partout sur elle.
> Et elle danse. *(PR 16)*

This is the child’s perspective on the world, seen from below, full of mystery and potential for adventure and surprise. The father is a mythical figure with strong telluric overtones, the movement of his truck over the earth associating him strongly with earthly energy. Perhaps it is not an exaggeration to say that the father evoked occupies the ground traditionally attributed to the feminine or maternal positions. The movement between the present moment of mourning and the father of her childhood is generated successively, in a range of different forms throughout the collection:

> Nous n’irons plus aux champignons le
> brouillard a tout mangé les chèvres blanches

et nos paniers. […]
Nous n'irons pas nous n'irons plus pas
plus que nous n'irons que nous ne rirons
pas que nous ne rirons plus que nous ne
rirons ronds. *(PR 25)*

As the reader moves through the collection, the portrait of the father that emerges is that of a man who loved to laugh, to play games, who loved the natural world, animals, flowers. The poems play with the sounds of words to evoke the man's 'joie de vivre', and the child's contact with him. But the chaotic frenzy of language released from grammatical and syntactical strictures is also very powerful in its evocation of the grief lying below the surface of the words, pressing for a hearing. The above poem begins with a catalogue of the places to which they will no longer go — 'Ni au cinéma ni au cirque, ni au café-concert ni au courses cyclistes' — until the measured listing of negatives goes off the rails in the final frenzy of negatives around 'going' and 'laughing', with 'pa' in the midst of the whirlwind.

The collection shuttles back and forth in time, with no apparent order, intercutting poems set in the weeks or months before the father's death with poems charting the months following it, as the poet tries to assimilate the fact of his death — 'Ce n'est toujours pas toi ce cadavre/ comme si toi tu aurais tenu en place comme/ ça comme si tu savais plus dire bonjour/ toi si courtois./ Et si gracieux mon père qu'on te reconnaît au sourire' (*PR* 53). The later poems focus on the poet's awareness of the condition of her father's body beneath the earth, as she makes her regular pilgrimage to his grave:

Les roses les roses je les loue j'en prends
que ça comble les trous humaines roses par-
dessus tout.
Me pique pour tes yeux tes genoux pour
toi voilà des roses partout sans peur des
loups sans peur des trous.

Un pot je pose sur ta joue et tourne
autour de ce feu fou a ta joue c'est le plus
beau rouge. (*PR 76*)

The above poem contains echoes of fairy tales — 'Snow White and Rose Red', 'Little Red Riding Hood'. Rouzeau's poetry regularly features elements of fairy tale and nursery rhyme, the sonorous, mnemonic world of the child re-surfacing in the adult's writing. Here, the bringing of roses to the grave summons images of the father's body in the earth (the 'rosy' cheeks of the father who was a keen gardener, grower of flowers) and the daughter's distress. The dislocation of the language at the level of word and phrase causes the father's and the daughter's body to become indistinguishable one from the other in the earth:

Oh mon père mon jardin et tout comme
bonjour les roses et la boue et le coeur sens
dessus dessous humaines roses rouges de tes
joues. (*PR 76*)

In a frenzy of association, the pot of red roses she has brought to the grave evokes the red-cheeked father, now in the earth, digging the earth of his garden (with his head for a spade) — the father who was the teller of stories to the child, stories such as 'Hansel and Gretel', perhaps, where the children try to find their way back to the father by following a trail of pebbles through the forest. This poem is exemplary of the work of the sequence as a whole, in that it enacts, simultaneously, the father dying, the father dead, and the aftermath of his death:

Tête-bêche et le coeur qui fait bouh
parmi les roses lourdes comme tout parmi
les flammes et les loups vieilles histoires
pleines de cailloux.
Ça y est j'ai mis roses partout te laisse
mon père faire ton trou dans ma mémoire. (*PR 76*)

Parent and child, separated, are fused, irrevocably, in the chaosmos of roses and bodies and earth, of vocables, phonemes, syllables. 'Trou' rhymes with 'joue' and 'loups', even 'bouh', and 'cailloux' throughout, in the movement between the grave-hole and the hole in the poet's memory that the father must now become.

The collections that followed *Pas Revoir* are all marked by the breaking of linguistic strictures that began with that collection. The collection published in 2009 — *Quand je me deux*[16] — takes this radical undermining of grammar and syntax, with its concomitant ludic freedoms, to new heights. Here, the ego is multiple, diffuse, and the reader grapples to find a foothold in poems that are based on slippages of positions and meanings. The title itself is a play on words, combining the rare or obsolete verb, 'se douloir' ('je me dueulx') — to grieve or mourn, with a coinage suggesting 'to split oneself in two'. The title poem, 'Quand je me deux', evokes the lost world of childhood, through the metaphor of the wrecked van Rouzeau's father once gave her as a birthday present, a 'demeure' in the garden that became a childhood hideaway, a place of play and adventure for her and her siblings. The poem, dedicated to her brother, possibly on the occasion of his birthday, plays on the words 'est-ce ta fête' and 'estafette':

> L'estafette peugeot il y pleut encore il y peut je l'eau: est-
> ce sa ma ta fête? (*QJMD 34*)

The opening lines play, typically, with the homophonic resonances of the words. The personal pronoun is always mobile in Rouzeau's poetry, 'je' being the source of doubt and hesitation ('Il y a ce "j'euh…" magnifique d'Antoine Emaz entre les lignes, je lui aurais bien volé').[17] The self is a membrane self, closer to the condition of the auditory than to the singular, unitary self of vision. In the above line, the

16. Valérie Rouzeau, *Quand je me deux* (Paris: Le Temps qu'il fait, 2009), hereafter *QJMD* in the text. All quotations are from this edition.
17. Valérie Rouzeau in conversation with Thierry Guichard, *La Matricule des anges*, 131 (2012), 'Dossier Valérie Rouzeau', 18–27 (p. 24).

'peugeot' is dismantled to reveal the dubious 'I', hiding among others — 'sa ma ta fête' —, in the realm of childhood memory. As so often in her poetry, Rouzeau makes the reader inhabit the past and the present simultaneously, through the sounded — voiced — word. The magic world the siblings created inside the 'estafette', including, one assumes, the celebration of childhood birthdays, is now dissipated, the players scattered — 'Aujourd'hui nos maisons sont loin/Quand je me deux' (*QJMD* 34). Yet the poet can still create scenes of familial merging and separation through linguistic slippage and dislocation. The poetic consciousness is diffuse, dispersed among a multiplicity of entities, including the wrecked van:

> L'estafette peugeot une île en chantier un baleine échouée
> un petit lyré au feu à la neige un épave jamais (*QJMD 34*)

In a sustained indeterminacy that includes both time and space, a recurring refrain gives the poem, which is devoid of punctuation, a vestigial structure:

> À la feuille à la plus grande oreille
> À nos ongles en deuil
> À l'œil (*QJMD* 34)

The birthday toast refers to an eclectic collection of objects and body parts which both evokes the private world of the family, with its shared visceral and physical memories, and enacts a visual and aural performance for the reader. All of the phrases here beginning with 'à l'' have at least two meanings: the world of the 'estafette' came to the children 'à l'oeil', that is, it cost nothing, was there for the taking; 'la feuille' is a slang word for 'ear'; 'ongles en deuil' means 'dirty finger nails'. The idioms work to create the familiar, intimate world of shared speech, but also to invoke the body in bits and pieces — the pre-oedipal, non-individuated body. In the space of family memory, bodies and identities merge and separate. In addition, the rhyming of

feuille, *deuil* and *œil*, sets up the expectation of rhyme with *oreille,* but this is not delivered. This faulty, limping rhyme works visually, but not aurally, and creates a disturbance in the language of the poem, one of many. The ludic dimension of Rouzeau's poetry almost always serves the purpose of keeping painful feelings of loss at arm's length. But the dislocatory technique in operation at the level of phoneme, word and syntax, combined with indeterminacy of time and space, creates a significant level of disturbance for the reader, who never quite knows where she is with Rouzeau's 'dubious subject-in-process':

> Mon estafette pigeon cassé je vole genoux mercurochrome
> un manteau d'épines saturnien et crac la pie qui chante
> une dent en moins (*QJMD* 34)

Within the metamorphic world of the poem, the wrecked van is a pigeon with a broken wing, the child can fly (though her resultant bruises and gashes are treated with mercurochrome) and the screeching magpie is also a boiled sweet that causes teeth to fall out ('la pie qui crac' was a hard-boiled sweet given to children).

Meaning is always on the move within the hermetic world of childhood evoked by this poem — a world that is both locked in memory, and therefore unavailable in the present, and susceptible to being fractured into a multiplicity of meanings, through the dislocatory power of Rouzeau's invocation of the pre-verbal space. The little house that the van became for the children is now inside the skull, is a metaphor for both the subjective and poetic processes. In the world of Estafette, sister and brother are part of the jumble, they have not yet become 'deux':

> Demeure sous le crane émotif parmi le trafic des fourmis la
> folie des herbes coupantes les tas de ferraille ordinaire le
> bon vent et le vent mauvais la mémoire d'Estafette
> Estafette ses portées de chats bellettes rats musclés
> Estafette mon petit soulier
> Estafette ta grande chausette (*QJMD* 35)

By dismantling and reconfiguring slang, idiom and baby-talk ('Papa dit qu'il a des soucis/ Maman aussi/ Mémé dit que ça fleurit jaune') (*QJMD* 35) and puns, as well as brand names such as 'La Pie Qui Chante', in the context of a poem with virtually no punctuation until the final full stop, Rouzeau sets up a visual and auditory metamorphosis, and unsettles the roots of the French language in such a way that the poem is virtually resistant to translation. The intimacy of the memory of days lived playing in the Peugeot Estafette van, and the underlying pain of their loss, is resistant to translation because Rouzeau is raiding the semiotic, pre-verbal domain of her auditory imagination — the source of her own idiolect. This is language striated with instinctual drive, which, according to Kristeva, is 'located in the matrix of the sign', and which 'refers back to an instinctual body, which ciphers the language with rhythmic, intonational and other arrangements, nonreducible to the position of the transcendental ego even though always within sight of its thesis'.[18]

Another family member is evoked in 'L'Armoire est vide'.[19] In this poem concerning the death by suicide of an aunt, the reader can never be certain if the wardrobe at the centre of the poem is real, or a figment of the poet's memory or imagination:

> L'armoire est vide pas de morts pas de pain
> À glace en date de naissance d'aïeule sombre
> Comme un immense couffin quoi va partir
> Là-dedans si la galère flambe. (*QJMD* 11)

The language suggests that the object, which might have arrived at the same time as a baby, is now empty. The inherited wardrobe had belonged to the poet's great-aunt, was the same age as her. What will go up in flames if the wardrobe does?

18. Julia Kristeva, 'From One Identity to Another', in *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1981), p. 146.
19. Rouzeau, 'L'Armoire est vide', in *Quand je me deux*, pp. 11–12.

L'ivre bateau que ça devient l'armoire rappelée si soudain
jusqu'à la mer bleue rouge noire loin —
Draps dépliés toutes voiles hissées
Les fantômes bernés de l'histoire —
Tu penches, la vie
Vers quel infini quel oubli. (*QJMD* 11)

From Moses basket, evoking the idea of a basket containing an abandoned baby floating on a river, the wardrobe naturally morphs into Rimbaud's drunken boat. The wardrobe is now a boat sailing on the ocean, its sails the sheets it has held, and it is carrying the ghosts of those abandoned by history. The contents of the wardrobe are gone, eaten by moths. If it's heat that's needed (and if the family cannot afford to buy fuel, perhaps), why not saw it to pieces?

La mite a mangé le mouton
Allons
Si l'or vaut moins que le charbon
Scions scions! (*QJMD* 11)

Through a series of metaphoric transmutations, the wardrobe comes to incarnate both the aunt and the process of memory itself. The reader struggles to find her way among the sequence of metamorphosing images, as the poem works principally through image, rather than through the usual word-play. The experience of the poem, for the reader, is that of the effort, not simply to bring back to memory what has been forgotten, but more specifically, the effort to piece together an image of the past that was never possessed in the first place. The terrain inhabited by the poem is that of early, aural memory. The great-aunt — and her wardrobe — at the centre of the poem was known to the poet only through family stories, through the oral heritage of the family. The poem invokes a space of communication that pre-dates understanding. What is it like to be in this place, where complex feelings and ideas are apprehended, but not controlled or within the scope of articulation in

language? Through a harnessing of non-sequential images, a sustained oscillation between past and present and the dissolution of temporal and spatial boundaries, the space of early memory is invoked.

> L'arrière tante s'est jetée sous un train par amour
> Le cœur que j'ignore d'elle
> N'arrange à l'intérieur les affaires personnelles
> À ta vie atavisme tata
> Sur le quai les métros et l'RER à moi. (*QJMD* 11)

As the poem unfolds we can see that there is absolute slippage between past and present, aunt and wardrobe. The poet is at a distance, perhaps on a station platform, thinking of the aunt, and remembering also the wardrobe, which is no longer present. Past and present tenses are used simultaneously to describe aunt and wardrobe. Arranging one's personal things in the wardrobe is elided with the arrangement of the heart's affairs. The reader is drip-fed the details, so that it is only gradually that she discovers how to place herself within the poem. The play on the word 'atavisme', while generating a playful resonance with 'tata', also suggests a strong connection to the ancestor the poet did not meet, so that poet and aunt are also elided.

> Mobilier défermé a perdu son mouchoir
> Ses miettes de biscuit lu ses cols roulés trous ses foulards
> ses fichus
> Corniche quelle proue si l'on si juche émue
> Il n'y a plus d'oiseau pour siffler dans ce bois. (*QJMD* 12)

The wardrobe is both the aunt and the place of her death, as it becomes a ledge (recalling the ledge of the station platform), the prow of a boat, something on which to perch, troubled, ready to jump. The wood of the wardrobe, once a part of life, is now an emblem of death.

> Chavire en mémoire courte chêne massif lourde armoire
> Étagères chositude

Penderie hébétude
Miroir exactitude
Dans sa plus jolie robe elle danse elle a seize ans. (*QJMD* 12)

Memory is short, the wardrobe capsizes, and with it sinks the life that was lived around, contained by, the wardrobe. Only in the final stanza does it become clear that the aunt's wardrobe, given as a wedding present, perhaps to the poet's parents, was burned for firewood as soon as she was buried.

C'était il y a longtemps qu'un ange passe maintenant
(Le meuble de mariée servit à faire du feu sitôt feue tata
claire
Fouie sans corset ni yeux). (*QJMD* 12)

The juxtapositioning of the detail that she was buried 'without corset or eyes' with the immediate burning of the piece of furniture that bore her date of birth increases the shock effect. Only at the end of the poem is the reader given a detail that makes the poem's disparate and disjointed elements cohere. This is a common strategy: Rouzeau frequently allows the reader to feel her way in the dark, moving between possible meanings, none of which are stable. The angry energy of this poem is generated through the urgency of the unpunctuated lines, the erratic rhymes, but above all through the unrestrained wildness of the image-associations. This wildness is suggestive of buried violence, straining to find release through the words, trace perhaps of an originary violence but, more simply, the violence of the aunt's death and of the subsequent violent erasure of her memory. The status of the wardrobe within the poem remains indeterminate, slipping between presence and absence, between past and present, as memory itself does.

In her work on poetic language and process, discussed earlier, Julia Kristeva writes that the *chora*, or pre-verbal body viewed from the shores of language, 'est préalable à l'évidence, au vraisemblable, à la spatialité et à la temporalité. […] Ni modèle ni copie, elle est

antérieure et sous-jacente à la figuration donc à la spécularisation, et ne tolère d'analogies qu'avec le rythme vocal et kinésique' (*LRLP* 23–24). Therefore, semiotic or pre-verbal experience is marked above all by rhythm, and an absence of boundaries in space and time. Writing of sonorous experience, Édith Lecourt, building on Didier Anzieu's work on psychic envelopes,[20] states that sonority is characterized by an absence of boundaries in space (sound reaches us from everywhere, and goes through us, sounds escape both voluntarily and surreptitiously from our own bodies); absence of boundaries in time: there is no respite from sonorous perception, which is active day and night and only stops with death or total deafness; lack of concreteness: sound can never be grasped, only its sonorous source can be identified. She defines the sonorous experience as one of 'une simultanéité omniprésente'[21] in which sensation, perception, emotion, interpretation and imagination mingle in connection with stimuli made up of sounds and silences. She also describes 'l'enveloppe sonore' — one of the layers or components of the primitive 'moi peau' or 'skin ego' outlined by Anzieu — as having two sides: a verbal side and a musical side:

> La face verbale, plus linéaire (dans le temps), univocale, fil apparent de la trame, est tournée vers l'extérieur. La face musicale, en épaisseur, tissée de voix (dans l'espace comme dans le temps), plurivocale, est plus tournée vers l'intérieur.[22]

The intersection between Kristeva's work on the semiotic and poetic language, and Lecourt's work on the 'sound envelope' seems

20. [23] For Anzieu, the skin ego is a containing, unifying envelope for the self; a protective barrier for the psyche, a filter of exchanges and a surface of inscription for the first traces, a function which makes representation possible. The skin ego, then, consists of a number of protective 'psychic envelopes', psychic representations based primarily on tactile and auditory experience. 'L'enveloppe sonore' is chief among these psychic containers, according to Anzieu. See Didier Anzieu, *Le Moi peau* (Paris: Bordas, 1985), and Didier Anzieu et al, *Les Enveloppes psychiques* (Paris: Dunod, 2000).
21. Edith Lecourt, 'L'Enveloppe musicale', in *Les Enveloppes psychiques*, pp. 223–46 (p. 223).
22. Lecourt, 'L'Enveloppe musicale', p. 236.

to be the notion that pre-verbal experience of self and world is more or less analogous to sonorous experience, and that being in sound means being in a place where there is an absence of boundaries in space and time, and where there is an omnipresent simultaneity of experience of sensation, emotion, perception and imagination. This pre-verbal or semiotic tension between two simultaneous modes of contact between self and surrounding sound-group and environment — 'l'une est "nous", l'autre est "je", rappelant les bases groupales de leurs structurations, l'une plus tournée vers le groupe interne, sa cohésion, l'autre vers le groupe externe, et la différentiation'[23] — is precisely what Rouzeau is summoning in her poetry, the 'espace sous-jacent à l'écrit' which, according to Kristeva, is 'rythmique, déchainé, irréductible à sa traduction verbale intelligible; il est musical, antérieur au juger, mais retenue par une seule garantie — la syntaxe' (*LRLP* 29). In order to access this poetry, the reader is called upon to enter the space of slippage between spatial and temporal boundaries, a threshold space at the limits between interiority and exteriority.

The poem entitled 'TRR…'[24] is dedicated to Rouzeau's family, and takes as its subject the origins of her poetic idiolect in early auditory experience:

> Voici d'iliade longtemps j'étais petite enfant
> Et je touchais à tout
> Alors « la trafiquante » mon père me baptisa
> Ou plutôt me rappela. (*QJMD* 13)

The metaphor of trafficking is a good one for the poet — lifting things from one place, moving them to another. In fact, it is the definition of metaphor — 'metafora' — transporting meaning from one site to another, via the vehicle of the image or word. What she evokes here is a miniature world, the world of the child, who makes her own of whatever is within reach, at arm's length — a miniature menagerie. But

23. Lecourt, 'L'Enveloppe musicale', p. 237.
24. 'TRR...', in *Quand je me deux* (Paris: Le Temps qu'il fait, 2009), pp. 13–16.

it is also, and above all, a poem about sound, about how the nascent poet begins to hear the music of words:

> Avec ce sobriquet
> Je devins fière fière fière comme une bougie
> Tout s'éclairait même le crapaud pisseur
> Caché trrès au fond de mon cœur. (*QJMD 13*)

The name conferred upon her by the father is what sticks, what lodges in her auditory imagination, and the sound of this word becomes her signature tune: trr… Her second name authorizes — legitimizes — her enterprise.

> Je trafiquais des éléphants microscopiques
> Des fourmis géantes du vrai Moyen-Age
> Aux pattes griffues de griffon
> À la crinière de lion
> À la queue de poisson
> Des balais élastiques une ménagerie tactique. (*QJMD* 13)

As noted above, the auditory and the tactile are very close in primitive psycho-physical experience, and the sustained repetition of sounds in this poem evokes this synaesthesia. In the above stanza, for example, the rolled 'r' sounds engage in a ludic dance with the 'on' sounds, as microscopic elephants mingle with griffins and plastic brushes in the child's tactile menagerie. The child emerges as a creature highly susceptible to sounds and touch sensations.

> Trafiquante puisque j'embarquais la porcelaine
> Les couteaux-qui-coupent
> Les dents de la grand-mère
> Et je me rougissais au géranium au chant d'oiseau
> Me verdissais en sauterelle m'ébleuissais ciel ciel. (*QJMD* 13)

The child's world is the world of house and garden, and of the small creatures — ants, crickets, birds — that inhabit this small domain. The world evoked is tactile, and auditory, first and foremost, but it is also a world full of colour, a place apprehended through the senses. The child-poet is dazzled by the natural world around her, and in a move similar to Keats's impulse to become the sparrow, to be what one is not,[25] Rouzeau takes on the green of the cricket, the blue of the sky — becomes cricket, becomes sky, through the word.

> Convoquais la grenouille la tortue la laitue
> L'escargot l'escarpin
> Volé vermeil talon pas mal
> À ma mère elle aussi trafiquée par mes soins
> Aiguilles et pomme de pin
> Cachous crachats crachin. (*QJMD* 14)

The child's wonder at the strangeness of language is evoked through sound-association. The substantives in the above stanza are all summoned on the basis of phonemic harmonies ('tortue/ laitue, escargot/ escarpin, cachous/ crachats/ crachin'). It is sounds that are trafficked in the poetry — the phoneme is one of the essential building blocks of her poetic universe. For Rouzeau the poet, words can, above all, be dismantled and reassembled in different configurations, on the basis of homophony. The child-poet goes where she should not — meddling, pilfering, breaking the rules.

> Je trafiquais idem la soupe c'était trrop louche
> Toute cette tignasse d'ange qui y baignait
> Avec les cubes en or en soit jeté le sort:
> Cours à toutes jambes bouillon

25. A reference to Keats's notion of 'negative capability', whereby the poet has the capacity to be what he is not. In a letter to Benjamin Bailey, dated 22 November 1817, Keats wrote: 'The setting sun will always set me to rights, or if a sparrow come before my window, I take part in its existence and pick about the gravel.' See *The Letters of John Keats* (Whitefish, MT: Kessinger Publishing 2004), p. 54.

Ou brûle mon pantalon! (*QJMD* 14)

Through word — and sound — association and repetition (notably the repeated rolled 'r' sound), the poet travels from her childhood garden, through the digitalis flower to the England of foxgloves and wellington boots and back again to the child splashing in puddles in the garden, watching the clouds rolling overhead. The word 'passage' introduces the notion of change, of the passage of time.

Je trafiquais itou les yeux de l'ours ronds ronds
Le chiffon de poupée la passoire l'écumoire
La digitale poison nommée gant-de-renard
Dans l'Angleterre profonde comme les bottes de pluie
Où sautais à pieds joints les bons matins trrempés
Attraper la merveille des nuages de passage
Et changer moi pareil. (*QJMD* 14)

The sound of the adult world is the sound of 'trr...', a sound that, for the child, contains all the mystery of a world that she wants to enter, but is still outside, on the threshold. The sound 'trr…' is a mnemonic sound trace by which the poet was so marked that it can trigger involuntary memories of the time when she first began to hear it, when it was part of her soundscape.

Trafiquante solitaire tout au fond du jardin ou le nez dans
l'armoire
Les parents faisaient « trr… trr… trr… »
C'étaient d'étrranges créatures pApache ma Manche
Je crois que je les aimais bien
Dans ce temps aux couleurs simples élémentaires
Idiotes comme si vraiment le soleil était jaune. (*QJMD* 15)

The parents are strange creatures, like the strange words heard, or perhaps read in books — Apache, Manche (the capitals may also be the

initials of both parents, of course). It is clear that the poet-child's world is a secret world, a place of fantasy and magic, sourced from images and words seen and heard, in books, songs, nursery-rhymes.

> Trr… trr… trr…
> Je grillonnais pour porter de la chance
> Ou quoi de trrès heureux trrès trrès trrès (*QJMD* 15)

The sound in question — 'trr' — could be the sound made by the indoor cricket, always taken in rural places to be a bearer of good luck. It is also the sound of the intensifier, 'très'.

> Parfois le satellite sélène de la terre me souriait
> Alors je m'allumais je me balançais haut
> Comme la plus petite araignée qu'autrefois je croyais
> Suspendue dans le vide. (*QJMD* 15)

The point of view of this poet is often that of someone in satellite, orbiting the earth, or looking at the earth through a telescope, as one might look at the moon.

> Trr… trr… trr…
> Je crayonne je chiffonne
> Trr… trr… trr…
> Trr… trr… trr…
> Je note je grigrillone
> Tant que la vie m'étonne
> Trr… trr… trr… (*QJMD* 15–16)

As the poem telescopes in, we discover that the sound 'trr' is, finally, the sound of a pen or pencil scratching on paper — the child has become a writer, bearing witness to the surprising place she inhabits. The poem is a magic spell (gri-gri), as the griffin (griffon) becomes a cricket (grillon) becomes a scribble (grifonner), and the child has grown.

'TRR…' is a key to the work as a whole, in that it demonstrates how Rouzeau inhabits the threshold between the Kristevan semiotic — the pre-verbal — and the symbolic — in her poetry. Through persistent mining of the soundscape of the child's world, the poet undermines, mole-like, the static fixity of the adult's linguistic terrain. The Kristevan *chora*, or drive-ridden body, based on rhythm and rupture of rhythm, 'est préalable à l'évidence, au vraisemblable, à la spatialité et à la temporalité', it is 'antérieure et sous-jacente à la figuration donc à la spécularisation, et ne tolère d'analogies qu'avec le rythme vocal ou kinésique' (*LRLP* 23–24). The trace of the pre-verbal body is to be found in the rhythm, pleasure and violence of vocal energy, and in forms of writing that privilege the sonorous and vocal qualities of words. Rouzeau's poetry is rooted in a diffuse — sonorous — energy that resists all discrete and univocal signification.

Rouzeau mines the sonorous terrain of her own auditory memory and imagination to unearth her poetry, which performs the Kristevan 'sujet en procès' (*P* 161). Poetic language sets up a movement between the heterogeneity of the semiotic and the univocity of the symbolic, 'il pose son propre processus comme un indécidable procès entre le sens et le non-sens, entre la *langue* et le *rythme*' (*P* 160). Rouzeau prospects on the threshold of language and the visible world, where symbolic homogeneity is never stable for very long, where words are striated with the rhythms of the pre-verbal, where fluctuation — motility — is a permanent condition. It is a place from which a world of violent energy is apprehended, but not yet understood. According to Guy Rosolato, it is voice that navigates the space between body and language.[26] Rouzeau's poetry adopts vocalic modes (idiom, colloquialism, slang) and rhythms, and dismantles the sounds of voiced language, in order to (re)assemble an unstable, diffuse poetic matter that resists all discrete, univocal meaning.

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26. Guy Rosolato, 'La Voix, entre corps et langage', *Revue française de psychanalyse*, 37.1 (1974), 75–94.