WORD PLAY

IN GEORGES BRASSENS

WORD PLAY

IN GEORGES BRASSENS

by

WILLIAM JOHN HODGSON B.A. (Toronto)

A thesis

Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies

in Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements

for the Degree

Master of Arts

McMaster University

April 1977

MASTER OF ARTS (1977) McMASTER UNIVERSITY
(Romance Languages) Hamilton, Ontario

TITLE: Word Play in Georges Brassens

AUTHOR: William John Hodgson, B.A. (University of Toronto)

SUPERVISOR: Professor W. N. Jeeves

NUMBER OF PAGES: v, 68

ABSTRACT: A discussion of the techniques used by Georges Brassens in his songs to make plays on words and phrases.

I would like to express my heart-felt thanks to Professor W. N. Jeeves, whose invaluable interest, guidance and insight contributed greatly to the completion of this paper. I am also indebted to Dr. B. Blakey for his patience and for the time he spent helping me to unravel the mysteries of clarity of expression.

TO DEBBIE

who has contributed more than I could ever say.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

> This kind of analysis, the detailed examination of one stylistic device in all its manifestations, provides a way of commenting on an author's poetics - the way his mind works, how his poems are constructed, how they are related to one another and to the external world....Most valuable of all, a linguistic approach sheds light on the various kinds and various levels of verbal surprise, which in a poem may thrill or may amuse or may do both.[1]

We propose to study the songs of Georges Brassens using a methodology similar to that of Greet in her study of Prévert's poems. Both Prévert and Brassens use language in an unconventional, and at times anti-conventional, way. There are unmistakeable points of similarity between these two, some of which have been recorded,[2] and it seems likely that a few of Brassens' word games were directly inspired by Prévert's (in the course of the paper we have pointed out some of these cases). Such a comparison is important because it helps to situate Brassens in the fabric of French literature and of literature in general, as well as justifying a discussion of his work.

It is unusual to find a formal discussion about an individual who

---

[1] A. H. Greet, Jacques Prévert's Word Games, Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1968, p. 1.

[2] For example: "Since Prévert approached poetry through the chanson de café-concert..., it is possible to find in his poems elements shared by the songs of Georges Brassens or of Flanders and Swann: an easily recognizable decor or frame of reference, the unexpected happening and all too clear dénouement, the satirical or sentimental bent." ibid., p. 5: "However, other poems of Prévert's, containing various kinds of word games have exerted an unmistakeable influence. To a considerable extent, they inspired the songs of Guy Béart (among them, "Chandernagor"), and they have

writes and sings popular songs. The study of popular songs is much more likely to be found as a discussion of one aspect of a nation's culture. But Brassens is a songwriter who has made extensive use of the pun,[3] and also of a humorous technique of adapting fixed expressions to his own purposes. These devices, which do "thrill" and "amuse" us, make the work of Brassens worthy of serious consideration. Our thesis is a study of Brassens as a songwriter who uses language in an unusual way. As Greet suggests, such a study may reveal the attitudes of the writer towards himself, towards others, towards the world.

Previous discussions or descriptions of Brassens and his songs have mostly been limited to different people's opinions of the type of man he is, and the themes he favours in his songs. Some have proclaimed him to be a true poet, while others declare at least as vehemently that he is far from being a poet at all. His award in 1967 of le grand prix de poésie from the French Academy prompted the following comment from Alain Bosquet:

L'Académie française vient de se couvrir de ridicule

---

much in common with those songs of Georges Brassens which combine the playful with the satirical." ibid., p. 79; "Je suis un voyou, c'est la joie de vivre et de faire l'amour chère au coeur de Prévert." René Fallet, Brassens, Paris: Editions Denoël, 1967, p. 63.

[3]According to Paull Baum: "owing to the abuses of punning from time to time it has fallen into disrepute." (Chaucer's Puns, PMLA, LXXI (1956), 226). Properly used, however, the pun can be an effective device for many purposes: "some are feeble or excruciatingly bad, others clever and witty, others again fraught with strong emotion and sometimes bordering on the sublime," says Ullmann (Semantics, New York: Harper and Row, 1962, p. 188). He concludes that while "punning is in many cases a low form of wit...it is perfectly clear that word-play brings an element of ease and suppleness into the handling of language and that, if used with discretion, it can provide a valuable vehicle for humour and irony, emphasis and contrast, allusion and innuendo, and a variety of other stylistic effects." (ibid., p. 192).

> en décernant son grand prix de poésie à Georges Brassens... Je songe au sentiment de honte qui doit aujourd'hui valoir de longues insomnies a des écrivains et des hommes de goût comme François Mauriac, Jean Paulhan, Marcel Achard, Jean Mistler, Thierry Maulnier. Non, il n'est pas possible que ces esprits-là - j'en oublie quelques-uns - prennent pour de la littérature ces textes qui, une fois débarrassées de la pauvre musique dont Brassens les entoure, sont la banalité et la platitude mêmes.[4]

The true value of Brassens' poetry is not a central concern in this paper.[5] The discussion will concentrate, as we have said, on the different methods Brassens uses to disturb the ordinary in language. As with Prévert - although with less intensity and thoroughness - "the satire, directed on one level against bourgeois institutions, is directed also against clichés, euphemisms, and other misleading or meaningless phrases."[6]

---

[4]Alain Bosquet, Injustice, Paris: Editions de la Table Ronde, 1969, pp. 102-103.

[5]The discussion is interesting, however: for example, in answer to the question of whether one could consider song to be poetry, it has been said that while some would answer yes, it is better to say that song represents a certain type of poetry. In particular, since song requires fixed forms - strophes, refrains, rhyme, regular lines - it is unlike much of modern poetry. In line with this comment, modern-day song has been compared to those old popular songs which were a refuge for humour, good sense, and lyricism.

"These are some of the aspects of song that make it of concern even to the purely literary: that it can refresh the possibilities of metre in poetry; can sometimes leave behind lyrics that enrich the store of poetry in themselves; and that finally, while its melody lasts, it may be that rare thing, a song which is poetry but poetry designed for music, and which has found music that fits it..." Alasdair Clayre, "Words for Music", The Times Literary Supplement, MCDXL (1 Feb., 1968), 104.

"The question is simply whether a song-writer, when he begins, is going to make the start of writing verse which may turn out to be poetry in its turn; or is going to take poetic diction for his medium and cultivate instead the journalism of the weekly trend. Brassens and Brel have made the former choice." ibid.

[6]A. H. Greet, op. cit., p. 79.

By exposing clichés, Prévert negates a tired civilization; he affirms life's essential values by creating new meanings for words or renewing old ones."[7]

Material

All of the word games discussed here are found in one volume, the updated Edition Séghers printed in 1973. In this edition, there are seventy-seven songs with copyrights dating from 1952 to 1962; this time limitation might help retain a certain consistency, but the main reason for using just one text is that there is a limited amount of material in print. Not all of the songs in the text are mentioned, since they did not all contain word games. Also, not all of the songs that Brassens recorded (between 1952 and 1962) are included in this book, because he has put to music some poetry written by others,[8] and these were not included by the editor, Alphonse Bonnafé, in the text.

It happens that minor differences exist between some of the recorded versions and the same songs as written in the text. Sometimes one word is substituted for another, or the order of the verses is different;

---

[7] Ibid.

[8] Here are some of these songs:
Le Petit Cheval, La Marine, Comme hier, and Si le bon Dieu l'avait voulu, by Paul Fort;
La Ballade des dames du temps jadis, by François Villon;
Il n'y a pas d'amour heureux, by Aragon;
La légende de la nonne, Gastibelza, by Victor Hugo;
Colombine, by Verlaine;
La Prière, by Francis Jammes;
Philistins, by Jean Richepin;
Le Verger du roi Louis, by Théodore de Banville;
Marquise, by Corneille.

once in a while, there is a verse missing from the recorded version, or more often the text does not indicate when a line or group of lines is to be repeated. Such small differences matter little for our purposes, especially since most of the songs agree in the two versions, and also some variations - in vocabulary or verse-order, for example - are understandable, considering the nature of popular songs, which are rarely sung in exactly the same way twice.

Another characteristic of the text is the noticeable lack of punctuation after the first fifteen or so songs. Once again this is generally immaterial, except for one example which has been noted in the paper.

Method

It remains to describe how the material for this paper has been ordered. The word games have been divided into two groups, according to the way the play is made. One group consists of the puns Brassens has used, and the other of cases where Brassens has manipulated or adapted different types of fixed expressions to fit the context of the song. How each group is defined, and the ways in which they differ from each other, are taken up in the body of the thesis. Both the puns and the adapted expressions rely on the interplay of meanings for their effects. The reader or listener is forced to recognize the different meanings involved because of his or her familiarity with the French language, its words and fixed expressions and their meanings. Since the play is recognized, some sort of reaction is elicited, whether one is amused by the incongruity the word-play creates or by the cleverness of the writer and the aptness

of the play; or feels contempt because of the word play's simplicity or silliness. The presence of such a reaction on the reader's or listener's part, then, or the recognition that a like reaction could occur, determined the inclusion of the games found here.

Following this introduction are three chapters; they are, respectively, a study of Brassens' puns, a discussion of his method of adapting fixed expressions, and a concluding chapter which summarizes the thesis and includes some general observations on Brassens' word-plays. The two chapters which discuss the techniques Brassens practises contain further divisions within which the examples themselves are listed and discussed. The form of the examples is: (1) A lower-case roman numeral, followed by the lines containing the example (the latter is underlined); (2) in parentheses, the song title in quotation marks, the page number, the verse number in upper-case roman numerals, and the number or numbers of the lines quoted. For example:

ii) Leur auraient mêm' coupe les choses
Par bonheur ils n'en avaient pas

("Hécatombe", 42. VI. 7-8)

Since it is often hard to tell whether or not a group of lines is a verse[9], the roman numeral in these cases refers to the group number; (3) the discussion of the example.

We now proceed with the study of Georges Brassens' word games.

---

[9]This is because the grouping of lines is not always consistent. See, for an extreme example, "Chanson pour l'Auvergnat", pp. 58-59.

CHAPTER I

PUNNING OR PLAY ON WORDS

The play on words as discussed in this chapter involves any use of a word or words that somehow allows more than one way of apprehending the meanings of that word or words. It is, therefore, a very broad notion; we find that when we consider how Brassens makes his puns, the definitions found in Robert for jeu de mots and for calembour are too narrow:

> Jeu de mots, allusion plaisante fondée sur l'équivoque de mots qui ont une ressemblance de phonétique mais contrastent par le sens.[1]

> Calembour. Jeu de mots fondé sur une similitude de sons recouvrant une différence de sens.[2]

Thus these definitions of word play are restricted to words which sound the same but which have different meanings. This is in fact closer to our sense if "mots" in the above two definitions is considered to refer to just one word or phonetic entity with two different senses, as well as to two words or phonetic entities. Otherwise, we would be limited to discussing puns on homonyms, like steal and steel, or sound [valid] and sound [a noise]: Brassens uses very few such puns.

The following definition of the pun from the Oxford English Dictionary approaches our use of the term:

> The use of a word in such a way as to suggest

---

[1] Robert, Dictionnaire alphabétique et analogique, Paris: Société du nouveau Littré, 1960, IV, pp. 119-120.

[2] Ibid. I, 606.

> two or more meanings or different associations, or the use of two or more words of the same or nearly the same sound with different meanings, so as to produce a humorous effect; a play on words.[3]

For play on (or upon) words, the same source gives:

> a sportive use of words so as to convey a double meaning, or produce a fantastic or humorous effect by similarity of sound with difference of meaning; a pun.[4]

We note the inclusiveness, then, of play on words, which is a better way to approach Brassens' puns than from the point of view of a jeu de mots or calembour alone. Also different from these two is the notion that the pun can be played on different senses of the same word, which is just what Brassens does most of the time. Further support comes from Empson, who says of the pun - which in his terms is ambiguity of the third type: "An ambiguity of the third type, considered as a verbal matter, occurs when two ideas, which are connected only by being both relevant in the context, can be given in one word simultaneously."[5]

Within the set of examples of word play that we found in Brassens' songs, we see a division into two different types. In the first group, the word play is based upon two different types of fixed expressions. Both cases contain a potential ambiguity of meaning - an obvious prerequisite for punning - which Brassens, of course, exploits to produce his play on words. Also in both cases, we note that there is always some mechanism -

---

[3]Murray, Sir James, ed., A New English Dictionary on Historical Principles, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1909, VII, 1594.

[4]Ibid., 973.

[5]Empson, Seven Types of Ambiguity, New York: H. Wolff Book Manufacturing Co., 1955, p. 117.

a word, the title of the song, its subject, or the like - which triggers the play, and without which the play would not occur.

The first type of play in this starting group is the pun on clichés. A cliché consists simply of a way of expressing a very common and often-recurring idea. Such an expression is considered to be a cliché when it has reached the point where, from frequent repetition over time, the literal sense of the words which form the phrase is extremely weak. When we use a cliché, like "s'il vous plaît" or "How do you do?", the real meanings of the individual terms are not given a thought. The possible ambiguity in this case can be partially illustrated by considering what a person whose native tongue is not English might think of upon hearing the greeting cliché "How do you do?" Assuming that the foreigner knows the words individually, he would have trouble understanding the use of the cliché because he would no doubt try to understand the phrase literally. The opposition between the meaninglessness of the words when combined to form the new unit, i.e. the cliché, and the actual literal meaning of this phrase when its terms are considered as individuals with individual meanings, collected together and joined side by side, is the ambiguity upon which Brassens makes his play. We found only two such cases in our book of songs, but Prévert has given us a very good and more explicit example than those of Brassens, which will allow us to save the discussion of Brassens' two plays until later:

GASPARD-ADOLPHE
(excédé)

Oh! vous, je vous en prie!

LE PLOMBIER
(les yeux au ciel)

Ce n'est pas moi qu'il faut prier.[6]

The weak, almost empty meanings of the terms in the cliché "Je vous en prie!" are, because of the stage direction "(les yeux au ciel)", promoted to a much stronger sense. In this case, this stage direction is the spark which revitalizes the cliché's literal, religious sense, faded from over-use. The exasperated or impatient "Je vous en prie!" of Gaspard-Adolphe is misunderstood by the plumber; the reader, however, recognizes both senses, Gaspard's because that is the usual sense of the phrase, and the plumber's because of the resonance between ciel and prier.

The other type of fixed expression in this first group of word plays has a number of variations to it, but there are some common characteristics among them: in each case, the two or more words form a unit, in that when they are found in their particular arrangement they refer only to one idea or thing, whatever it happens by historical accident to have become; the meaning is not simply the sum of the literal meanings of the components, but rather it is a different idea which is a synthesis of the terms. It is like the baking of bread, where yeast, flour, sugar, salt and so on are combined and heated to produce bread, which is not like any of its components. But the ingredients are not completely lost: there remain the smell of the yeast, the colour of the flour and the taste of the salt and sugar. This comparison is limited, however, because in each case the expression is given a different sense, as well as retaining the original, because of some element in the song which focuses our attention on a part or on all of the expression. Thus in the song about the girl

---

[6]Prévert, La Pluie et le beau temps, Paris: Gallimard, 1955, p. 198.

who seduces all the men in town, Embrasse-les tous, the following phrase occurs: "Coeur d'artichaut tu donnes un' feuill' à tout l'monde" (119. I. 6). The word "feuill'" forces us to consider the literal sense of "coeur d'artichaut" as well as its figurative one [fickle-hearted].

The above is a description of the first type of play on words. Because of the nature of the puns, i.e. that the original or the literal sense of a fixed phrase in one way or another is revived, we call this group Revitalization.

Whereas the above group consists of cases where the punning occurs with respect to fixed expressions, the second group is based on single, lexical units. This is the main difference between the two groups, but it is a difference which has further implications. In particular, the first group was a discussion of revitalization, so that it had to consist of more than one word, in the form of fixed expressions, in order for Brassens to be able to revitalize them. This second group, based on one semantic entity, must make for a different process in punning, because it is difficult to revitalize a single lexical unit. The only way that it might be fixed and practically devoid of meaning is in terms of its syllables or parts, as for example in a word like cupboard or a group like cul-de-sac, and then it can be revitalized; however, these puns are single lexical units, which have two or more separate meanings that Brassens brings into play. A good example of the play in this section is the following:

> Ces furies à peine si j ose
> Le dire tellement c'est bas
> Leur auraient mêm' coupé les choses
> Par bonheur ils n'en avaient pas.
>
> ("Hécatombe", 42. VI. 5-8).

The pun is a means of linking contexts: here, as often in Brassens' songs, the two associations are not only related by being parts of the reference of the same phonetic entity, but also are related etymologically. The concrete [in a low place] and the abstract [of low or vile nature], or physical and moral, senses of the word bas are both brought out.

The above is a description of the second type of play, which, because it involves plays on lexical units instead of an expression, we call Play on Lexical Units.

Therefore, the structure of this chapter is as follows:

1. Revitalization

   - two cases of clichés being revived
   - fixed, figurative expressions are revived

2. Play on Lexical Units

   - one group including all examples of play on just one word

1. Revitalization

Our first two examples are the cliché type of fixed expression. As we mentioned above, only two of this type were found in Bonnafé's text of Brassens' songs.

i) Que ces messes
   Basses cessent
   Je vous prie

   ("La Marguerite", 156. IX. 1-3):

the cliché "Je vous prie" [please] is a lexical unit whose modern day usage has lost sight of the original significance of prier. It is, in general, the subject of the song - the supposed sentimental attachment of a priest - and in particular the reference to "messes", a religious ceremony, which make us think of the religious connotations of prier. This

case is very similar to Prévert's, mentioned earlier (cf. pp. 9-10). Once again the context contributes to a return to the strong literal meaning of "je vous prie", and away from the weaker meaning of simply "please" with no emphasis on any of the individual terms. The almost meaningless prier of the cliché is promoted to a more distinct level of meaning.

ii) Le ciel en soit loué je vis en bonne entente
Avec le Pèr' Duval la calotte chantante

("Les Trompettes de la renommée", 144. V. 1-2):

we no longer consider the actual literal meaning of "le ciel en soit loué" [thank heavens], but because of the specific reference to Père, a man of the church, "ciel" and "loué" are revitalized. In this example, as in many that follow, we find that the term or reference which trips the wire occurs after the word play. Thus it is in retrospect that we notice the strengthening of the meaning. The phrase is a very innocent one in terms of word games, and would not stand out had "le Pèr' Duval" or some such religious reference not been made.

iii) Coeur d'artichaut tu donnes un' feuille à tout l'monde

("Embrasse-les tous", 119. I. 6):

this is the first case of a number of examples in which the play is very simple and straightforward. To possess a heart like the one described above is to be fickle, according to the figurative sense of "coeur d'artichaut". The line refers to a girl who makes love to all of the men in the vicinity, and thereby destroys them, in her search for the right one for herself. Since an artichoke has many parts or leaves, the mention of donner une feuille immediately recalls the literal sense of "coeur

d'artichaut", and the expression is thus revitalized. It is interesting that Brassens has found a way to suggest how the literal meaning could be imagined to be like the figurative one, i.e. "un coeur d'artichaut" [an artichoke heart] is like "un coeur d'artichaut" [a fickle heart] in that there are many parts which can be given to a lot of different people.

iv) Se retournant
Incontinent
Ell' souffleta, flic, flac
L' garçon d'honneur
Qui par bonheur
Avait un' tête à claqu'

("Tonton Nestor", 138. III. 1-6):

in this case of revitalization, Brassens takes a fixed expression and gives it a literal sense that is as comical and nonsensical as the whole song. Tête à claques [an unpleasant or irritating face] is figurative, and applies well enough to the context, in that it is not absurd for the best man to have an unpleasnat face. However, the proximity to this line of "souffleta" recalls its synonym, claquer [to slap or hit], because of the related "claqu'". The literal sense thus forced into play is humorous because unexpected and almost nonsensical: the best man is not only endowed with an unpleasant face, but he has a head that gets hit (which is unlucky for him but lucky viewed impartially because he deserves it with his "tête à claqu'").

v) [Vous chanteriez]
Que prendre sur le champ l'ennemi comme il vient
C'est de la bouille pour les chats et pour les chiens

("Les Deux oncles", 167. XI. 3-4):

this is a particularly good example of the type of word play we are discussing here; sur-le-champ [immediately] has completely lost the sense

of its individual components. Rather, it is like a polysyllable whose component syllables can easily be used separately as meaningful individual terms (cf. a word like cul-de-sac). But here, on the one hand because of the general context of the song - its subject is one of the great wars - and on the other because of the particular mention of "ennemi", "champ" evokes a battlefield, making sur-le-champ into a literal phrase describing a place, "sur le champ". In effect, both figurative and revitalized meanings are retained. Jacques Prévert breaks up sur-le-champ as well, but by making it refer to an activity which occurs in a specific place (i.e., in this case, a field):

> Donnez-lui un cheval une hache un canon un lance-
> flammes un cure-dents un tournevis
> Mais qu'il fasse son devoir sur le champ.[7]

vi) Tous les sam'dis j'vais à confess'
M'accuser d'avoir parlé d'fess'
Et j'promets ferme au marabout
De les mettre tabou
Mais
Craignant si je n'en parle plus
D'finir à l'Armée du Salut
Je r'mets bientôt sur le tapis
Les fesses impies

("Le Pornographe", 101. III):

the revitalization in this case is centred on remettre sur le tapis [to bring up again for discussion]. The element which triggers the play is "Les fesses": the figurative phrase achieves a literal sense because these particular objects are not unlikely to be found on the carpet - with someone attached - in a song about "Le pornographe".

vii) Je ne fais voir mes organes procréateurs
A personne excepté mes femm's et mes docteurs

---

[7] J. Prévert, "Sur le champ", Spectacle, Paris: Gallimard, 1951, p.221.

Dois-je pour défrayer la chroniqu' des scandales
Battre l' tambour avec mes parties génitales

("Les Trompettes de la renommée", 143. III. 3-6):

a grotesque scene, to mock an idea that is comtemptible to the singer. It has been suggested to the singer that he reveal his private life, and allow the media to disseminate exaggerated accounts of it to the public. One aspect of his private life would be the women with whom he spends time, and the suggestion to publicize this part of his private affairs prompted him to employ "Battre le tambour" [to publicize, to spread news about something], a figurative phrase. But with the mention of something with which he might hit a drum, as he suggests, i.e. "mes parties génitales", the figurative phrase is made literal as well.

viii) Comme nous dansons devant
Le buffet bien souvent
On a toujours peu ou prou
Les bas criblés de trous
Qui raccommode ces malheurs
De fils de toutes les couleurs

("La Femme d'Hector", 112. II. 1-6):

a song in praise of "la femme d'Hector", who is considered a good woman and who cares for the hungry, the outcasts, and so on. Danser devant le buffet is a figurative phrase meaning to be hungry; Brassens starts with this meaning, it seems, and then takes off on a different tangent, making the phrase literal by telling us that their socks are full of holes from so much dancing. The heroine of the song therefore fixes their socks and relieves their hunger all at once, using threads of all different colours.

ix) Les vivants croient que j' n'ai pas de remords
A gagner mon pain sur l'dos des morts
J' suis un pauvre fossoyeur

("Le Fossoyeur", 34. II. 1-2, 5):

this song is about a gravedigger who does not like his job, but needs it to earn a living. "Sur le dos" [because of, with the support of] is a figurative expression, but there is a literal sense evoked here as well. Now, this literal sense is not explicit, so that we must use our imagination in considering what the singer wants to say, but because the man is a gravedigger, he does have a physical relationship with the people he buries. Therefore, since sur le dos when taken literally expresses such a physical relationship, and since the gravedigger spends his time above the dead, if not actually on their backs, there is a hint of literal sense to the expression as well as the figurative one.

x) Et plus j'lâche la bride à mon émoi
Et plus les copains s'amus'nt de moi
I'm' dis'nt: "Mon vieux par moment
T'as un' figur' d'enterr'ment
J'suis un pauvre fossoyeur"

("Le Fossoyeur", 35. IV. 1-5):

this joke, at the gravedigger's expense, gives the expression "figur' d'enterr'ment" a double reference. On the one hand, it has a figurative sense because of its similarity to Faire une figure d'enterrement [to look sad]. On the other hand, because the singer is a gravedigger and is thereby involved regularly with burials, the phrase has a literal quality to it. Although, as in the preceding example, which is drawn from the same song, the literal sense is not easily understood, Brassens' intention is clear: he has made a play on words by juxtaposing two terms which have a special relationship between them, "enterrement" and "fossoyeur".

xi) J'ai plaqué mon chêne
Comme un saligaud
Mon copain le chêne

Mon alter ego
On était de même bois

("Auprès de mon arbre", 75. I. 1-5):

Brassens laments the loss of his oak tree, his pipe, his wife and his house, all of which he abandoned, according to the song. Etre du même bois que means to be made of the same stuff as, or to be two of a kind, and is a fixed, figurative expression; the subject of the stanza is the singer's tree, with which he compares himself, suggesting that his sturdiness and strength are comparable to the oak's. Because of the subject of the stanza, and of the preceding mention of "chêne", this fixed phrase is given a literal application, is revitalized.

xii) Des bateaux j'en ai pris beaucoup
Mais le seul qui ait tenu le coup
Qui n'ait jamais viré de bord
Mais viré de bord
Naviguait en Père Pénard

("Les Copains d'abord", p. 176. VII. 1-5):

"viré de bord" is a fixed phrase with a figurative meaning [turned traitor]. But in this song Brassens uses an extended metaphor to compare friends and friendship to boats and their crew; thus, he forces the reader or listener to perceive a literal meaning as well. It is in particular the proximity of "Des bateaux", along with the theme of the song in general, that puts the literal sense into play.

xiii) Car même avec des pieds de grues
Fair' les cent pas le long des rues
C'est fatigant pour les guibolles

("La Complainte des filles de joie", 132. 2. 1-3):

"pieds de grues" brings to mind two or three meanings that are related to each other. Faire le pied de grue [to stand and wait for a long time] is one meaning that seems to be suggested by the song's phrase;

it can refer to the way prostitutes are said to perform their unique activity, standing at a chosen spot until a client buys their favours. "Une grue" is a popular term for a prostitute, as well as meaning a crane. As a result of these interconnected references, recalled when we hear "pieds de grues", the phrase is a mixture and interplay of meanings; while it seems to be figurative due to its similarity to faire le pied de grue, the use of "grues" in connection with prostitutes makes it a literal term, simply being a synonym for prostitute on a more popular level. The final effect is that "pieds de grues", a fixed figurative expression, is revitalized, due to the reference to "les filles de joie".

xiv) Bien que ces vaches de bourgeois
Les appell'nt des filles de joie
C'est pas tous les jours qu'ell's rigolent

("La Complainte des filles de joie", 132. I. 1-3):

"filles de joie" is a fixed phrase whose meaning is a very restricted one, referring specifically to prostitutes. Through the comparison of the phrase with "rigolent", Brassens makes the reader consider the fixed phrase meaning prostitutes in a new literal light, and we wonder expectantly what "filles de joie" might mean in literal terms of pleasure or fun.

xv) Maintenant que c'en est fini des querelles d'Allemand

("Les Deux oncles", 165. III. 4):

the fixed, figurative expression "querelles d'Allemand" [a quarrel without a good reason] is made literal. This is done by referring to a war, where Britain and France were enemies of Germany: l'oncle Martin, as indicated by a reference in stanza two to Verdun and in stanza three to John Bull, was on the Allies' side; l'oncle Gaston, according to a reference in the first stanza to "les Teutons", favoured Germany. Because

of these references also, with Germany being one of the antagonists, "querelles d'Allemand" becomes literal as well as figurative.

xvi) Ça manquait de marquise on connut la soubrette
Faute de fleur de lis on eut la pâquerette
Au printemps Cupidon fait flèche de tout bois

("Les Amours d'antan", II. 151. 4-6):

faire flèche de tout bois [use any means possible to achieve one's goal] is situated in such a way that its figurative sense - which is also its usual one - is joined by a literal meaning. This is achieved by using the cliché with Cupid as its subject; because his trademark is his arrows, which he uses to make people fall in love, we accept as literally true the "fait flèche" part of the expression.

There is also a pun here on fleur de lis: on the one hand, it is an emblem of royalty in France; on the other hand, because it is opposed in the line by "la pâquerette" - which, although also meant emblematically here, is also a type of flower [daisy] - "fleur de lis" also refers to a flower [lily].

xvii) Je sais que les guerriers de Sparte
Plantaient pas leurs épées dans l'eau
Que les grognards de Bonaparte
Tiraient pas leur poudre aux moineaux

("La Guerre de 14-18", 149-150. III. 1-4):

the two underlined expressions mean essentially the same thing, that the warriors in question did not waste their efforts.[8] Normally figurative phrases, in this song about wars, the reader or listener tends to imagine a

---

[8] "Tirer sa poudre aux moineaux: se donner du mal en pure perte..." Robert, op. cit., V, 510.

"Donner un coup d'épée dans l'eau: faire un effort inutile, vain." Ibid., II, 1658.

literal sense, Spartans who did not thrust their weapons into water, and Frenchmen who avoided wasting powder on sparrows. Brassens shows his talent for situating figurative expressions in contexts from which they might easily have originated: it is appropriate - and it triggers the play - to use "grognards" and "guerriers de Sparte".

xviii) N'aie crainte que le ciel ne t'en tienne rigueur
C'est la face cachée de la lune de miel

("Pénélope", 129. V. 1, 5):

Brassens has linked two ideas which are unrelated except for the common term, "lune". La face cachée de la lune refers to the side of the moon that is not seen from earth. La lune de miel is a phrase which is as fixed as the one-word English equivalent, honeymoon, and is figurative rather than literal. That is to say, la lune in the latter expression does not refer to the moon in the sky. When the two phrases are combined, they form a curious sort of literal-figurative expression. It is a fusion and a confusion of two ideas, the result being something like "It is the hidden side of the honeymoon". This is a feasible explanation because the song is about Pénélope, "l'épouse modèle", who has never had a love affair, and the singer is reassuring her that this hidden activity is not a terrible sin.

xix) Et oui je suis cocu j'ai du cerf sur la tête
On fait force de trous dans ma lune de miel

("Le Cocu", 106. II. 1-2):

like the preceding example, this line is based on "lune" as a pun linking two otherwise unrelated expressions. As the excerpt indicates, the song is about a man whose wife has many lovers. It is in this context that we understand "on fait force de trous dans ma lune de miel":

"lune de miel" represents the singer's marriage; the rest of the line is based on faire un trou à la lune [to abscond without paying one's debts], which in this song no doubt refers to the irresponsible freedom with which the lovers come and go. We note also that the resultant alloy of these two expressions has a literal quality to it, so that "on fait force de trous" refers to the physical activity, integral to lovemaking, as a means by which the marriage is destroyed.

xx) En ce temps-là je vivais dans la lune
Les bonheurs d'ici-bas m'étaient tous défendus

("P...de toi", 71. I. 1-2):

upon hearing or reading "je vivais dans la lune", the phrase être dans la lune [to daydream, to wool-gather] which is a fixed, figurative phrase comes to mind, possibly because we need to somehow explain to ourselves a meaning for the song's line, which is a physical impossibility. Brassens uses the expression to suggest figuratively that he lived alone, isolated himself from other people. But the opposition of "la lune" with "ici-bas" makes us recognize the literal sense of "je vivais dans la lune"; furthermore, this fantasy is reconfirmed at the end of the song (72. VII. 1-3):[9]

> Ç'était fini, t'avais passé les bornes.
> Et, r'nonçant aux amours frivoles d'ici-bas,
> J'suis r'monté dans la lune en emportant mes cornes...

The following two examples are based on the repetition of one of the elements of the fixed expression.

---

[9]Alasdair Clayre uses the first and last verses of this song as an example of the following point: " Brassens has a more fantastic manner, reminiscent of Laforgue or of Edward Lear." "Words for Music", The Times Literary Supplement, MCDXL (1 Feb., 1968), 104.

xxi) Quand j'crois' un voleur malchanceux
Poursuivi par un cul-terreux;
J'lanc' la patte et pourquoi le tair',
Le cul-terreux s'retrouv' par terr'

("La Mauvaise réputation", 31-32. III. 1-4):

Brassens, in his ever-contrary way, trips up the victim of the theft, "le cul-terreux" [farmer (pejorative)], instead of the thief. Once again we are taken back to the original formation of a group that is composed of two words which no longer are considered separately and literally. But the two words are made to be considered in this way here by the use of repetition of "terr'", the root of "terreux". This repetition focuses our attention on the second term of the lexical unit, thereby giving it, as stated above, a literal sense.

At the beginning of the chapter we noted that the only way a lexical unit could be revitalized would be if its syllables could normally be taken separately, as is the case here.

xxii) Chez ses parents le lendemain
J'ai couru demander sa main
Mais comme je n'avais rien dans
La mienne, on m'a crié va-t'en

("Comme une soeur", 104. VII):

"demander sa main" [to ask for her hand (in marriage)] is like the preceding example, a cliché consisting of terms that have become inseparable, frozen. The whole sense of the cliché is not the sum of the meanings of its parts. "Main" is emphasized, however, because of "dans la mienne". He was poor, had nothing in his hand, so that his request for the girl's hand was denied. Once again there is a repetition, but this time it is based not on exact reproduction of sound, but rather on similar sound plus exact reproduction of sense ("Sa main", "la mienne").

The above twenty examples of this type were easy to understand and categorize. As is inevitable in a study where some classification is necessary, we have a final four examples, which involve extra care.

xxiii) Les femm's de bonne vie ont le coeur consistant
- - - - - - - -
Mais le coeur de Lisa, le grand coeur de Lison
Aime faire peau neuve avec chaque saison

("Les Croquants", 82. III. 1, 5-6):

the song is about some of the differences the singer sees between socially acceptable women and prostitutes: in this cliché, "faire peau neuve" to turn over a new leaf , the word "peau" has a special significance besides the role it plays as a part of the fixed phrase. The singer says that Lisa likes to change her skin often, reminiscent of a snake which sheds its skin periodically, and this is the sense of the cliché. But is this all it means? No: with the reference to "le grand coeur", [generous heart], Brassens makes a reference to Lisa's occupation, i.e. selling her favours. Thus, we guess at the meaning of "peau", because besides its figurative sense as a part of a figurative expression, it also appears to refer to the men with whom she goes to bed. In other words, "peau" has another literal sense.

xxiv) Oncle Archibald d'un ton gouailleur
Lui dit: Va-t'en fair' pendre ailleurs
Ton squelette

("Oncle Archibald", 85. IV. 1-3):

it is "sa Majesté la Mort" who has come for Uncle Archibald. Qu'il aille se faire pendre ailleurs is defined by Robert as an expression which "se dit en parlant de quelqu'un dont on a à se plaindre, mais dont on ne veut pas se venger..." Its form as found in this song is slightly changed, with "Ton squelette" replacing the reflexive pronoun te; since there is

a pause at the end of the line after "ailleurs", however, before the completion of the thought, the listener tends to compensate automatically for the missing pronoun until he hears the following line. As a result, there are two meanings evoked, i.e. the one represented by the fixed expression in its incomplete but deceptive form, and the one evoked by the reverberations between "pendre" and "squelette", with reference to "La Mort".

xxv) Quand la saint' famill' machin
Croise sur son chemin
Deux de ces malapris
Ell' leur décoche en passant des propos venimeux
N'empêch' que tout' la famille
Le pèr' la mèr la fille
Le fils le saint esprit
Voudraient bien de temps en temps pouvoir s'conduir' comme eux

("Les Amoureux des bancs publics", 48. IV):

in this example, we in fact have a case of an inversion of the revitalization process. "la saint' famill'" is a popular or familiar term for a self-righteous family, and we do not stop to consider its sense in any other way. But then, Brassens introduces some further elements which make us reconsider this phrase, i.e. "Le pèr' la mèr' la fille/Le fils le saint esprit". As a result, because of the similarity of these elements to the composition of the Holy Family and the way it is usually designated, "la saint' famill'" recalls la Sainte Famille as well. The implications which result from the suggestion that the Holy Family is envious of "les amoureux des bancs publics" are humorously naughty.

xxvi) J'tombai sur un boisseau d'punais's de sacristie
Me prenant pour un autre en choeur elle m'ont dit

("Le Mécréant", 118. IX):

we have left this example to the end of this section for two related reasons, first of all that it is actually a case which could be included in either the first or the second group, and secondly because it is the only case which includes a revitalization and has a triple, instead of just a double, reference. As a figurative phrase its meaning is all together; because of the song's context, there are two other possibilities, the first being the literal sense upon which the image mentioned above is based [as a choir, or in chorus], and the second one that is not grammatically correct but which is evoked nonetheless, of a choir as part of the church's structure. But the play could also be described as a play on a lexical unit with two meanings, which means it could also belong to the second group. We chose to keep it here because the revitalization process is more successful than the play on the one meaning which involves a grammatical defect.

2. Play on Lexical Units

i) Ces furies à peine si j'ose
Le dire tellement c'est bas,
Leur auraient mêm' coupé les choses
Que par bonheur ils n'en avaient pas

("Hécatombe", p. 42, VI. 5-8):

this song begins with a noisy brawl among some women at the market. The police, "mal inspirés" as Brassens sings it, attempt to stop the quarrel, causing the women to join forces against the police and beat them soundly. The above are the last few lines of the song. The pun on "bas" is achieved through the linking of the concrete and the abstract; on the one hand, these ladies are prepared to commit a vile act, and, on the other hand, the act itself would be centred upon the lowest part of the torso.

Therefore, two meanings of bas are brought together in one mention of the word. The tone of the pun is one of mock indignation (Dare I repeat such a thing!), as is the case for the whole verse.

ii) Une femme du monde et qui souvent me laisse
Fair' mes quat' voluptés dans ses quartiers d'noblesse
M'a sournois'ment passé sur son divan de soie
Des parasit's du plus bas étage qui soit

("Trompette de la renommée", 143. IV. 1-4):

Brassens uses the same pun here as in the preceding example. Once again "bas" can mean vile or at a low location. In this occurrence of the pun, the shift between one meaning and the other causes a corresponding shift in the meaning of "étage"; thus it refers either to the body, or to the character of the parasite, depending on the sense of "bas" being considered at a given moment.

iii) Faut s'lever de bon matin pour voir un ingénu
Qui n't'ait pas connue

("Embrasse-les tous", 119. I. 3-4):

this song is about a girl who destroys all the men she loves, in her search for "le vrai merle blanc", the one she will finally marry. Thus, besides the modern sense of to have met, Brassens also elicits the Biblical one of carnal knowledge, a knowledge which results from making love. All the men have met her, and she has known all of them, according to the song.

iv) J'suis issu de gens
Qui étaient pas du gen-
re sobre

("Le Vin", 99. I. 7-9):

"Le Vin" is, not surprisingly, a drinking song. "Sobre", like its English counterpart sober, can either refer to character - serious-minded,

self-limiting, or to one's physical state, as the opposite of drunk. Usually, when speaking of the people from whom one is descended, as in "J' suis issu de gens...", it is their character that sober describes, not their drinking habits; as we see above, however, Brassens makes both meanings apply by joining the two contexts, i.e. drinking and the character of his parents.

v) Que ces messes
Basses cessent
Je vous prie

("La Marguerite", 156. IX. 1-3):

in Trésor de la langue française, we find the following: "Fig. et fam. Dire, faire des messes basses. Dire quelque chose en aparté, à voix basse à l'oreille de quelqu'un, en présence d'autres personnes."[10] Brassens knew of this sense of messes basses, and consciously made a pun on the term. The expression fits both the context of religion, because the song concerns a love affair in a convent, and the context of the scandal inherent in such an affair. Thus it evokes the literal "low mass" as opposed to "high mass", and the figurative "rumours".

vi) Mais les croqu' morts qui étaient de Chartres
Funeste erreur de livraison
Menèrent sa dépouille à Montmartre
De l'autre côté de sa maison

("La Ballade des cimetières", 131. V. 9-11):

a song about a man who sells different types of tombs, and whose dream it is to finally have one of them put in the Montparnasse cemetery, close to his own home. When he dies, although he is supposed to be taken to Montparnasse cemetery, he is instead delivered to another cemetery,

---

[10] Imbs, P., directeur, Paris: Centre national de la recherche scientifique, 1975, IV, 220.

Montmartre. This ironic situation is supported by "funeste", which in the circumstances - this being a song about cemeteries and tombs and the casket-seller's own death - is a pun: both the meaning "deadly", because the song is about death; and "unfortunate" or "unlucky", because the coffin was delivered to the wrong place, apply in the context. There is also an incongruity, which creates humour, between the serious or ominous expression and the light-hearted situation to which it refers.

vii) Contr' un pot de miel on acquit
Les quatre planches d'un mort qui
Rêvait d'offrir quelque douceurs
A une âme soeur

("Grand-père", 94. VI. 5-8):

grandfather's children are finding it difficult to put the old gentleman to rest in a decent grave, due to a lack of money for a coffin. They manage to trade a pot of honey for the used coffin of a dead man. There are two levels of meaning here, linked by puns on "douceurs" and "âme soeur": first, the dead soul is happy to trade his coffin like this, because he wants to offer these "douceurs" or sweetmeats to a kindred spirit; secondly, these "douceurs" are also sexual favours, which the dead man dreams of offering to a sister soul, i.e. another ghost, but a female this time. Le Robert gives, for "âme soeur": "se dit d'une personne qui est faite pour en bien comprendre une autre, de sexe opposé."

viii) Bien qu' tout' la vie ell's fass'nt l'amour
Qu'ell's se marient vingt fois par jour
La noce n'est jamais pour leur fiole

("La Complainte des filles de joie", 133. VII. 1-3):

"se marient" is made to have two meanings in this song. To get married is the literal sense, and even though it does not fit the sentence

and the overall meaning exactly - it is absurd to say that a prostitute gets married twenty times a day, although not impossible - this sense is without a doubt intended to play its part here. But Brassens also uses se marier figuratively to mean to copulate, which is what "les filles de joie" do for a living. And this pun is supported by another on "La noce", which besides its reference to marriage, also has one, described as follows by Robert: "Partie de plaisir, de débauche...Vie dissipée consacrée à la débauche, au plaisir" (IV, 788).

ix) Faisant la révérence aux souverains anglois
Vous êtes patatras tombée assise à terre
La loi d' la pesanteur est dure mais c'est la loi

("Vénus Callipyge", 162. VII. 2-4):

a humorous comment on Vénus Callipyge having fallen as a result of her weighty behind. There are several possible meanings to this line, because of the context: first, that the law of gravity is difficult to accept, but there is no way around it; second, that the law of weightiness is difficult to take, but there is no way around it; third, that the consequences of this law are hard, because falling to the hard ground is not a pleasant sensation; and finally, the meaning of "loi" changes from natural laws ("la loi d' la pesanteur") to man-made legislation ("c'est la loi"). Therefore there is a pun on "loi", which can mean either natural or human laws; there is a pun on "pesanteur" [gravity; weightiness]; and there is a suggestion of a pun on "dure" [difficult, hard].

x) Votre dos perd son nom avec si bonne grâce
Qu'on ne peut s'empêcher de lui donner raison

("Vénus Callipyge", 160. I. 1-2):

as the title suggests, this song is about a certain lady's voluminous behind. Brassens effects a pun on "grâce" by treating the way the back

"loses its name" (to become the derrière) as having two aspects: first, with respect to the curvature of that part of the body, "grâce" means attractiveness[11]; secondly, he personifies the back, saying it has such good manners to be able to lose its name (as if it were an affair of honour or dignity) so graciously. The pompous note contrasts directly with the subject of the song, so that humour is created both with the pun and with the contrast between style and content.

xi) Guerres saintes guerres sournoises
Qui n'osent pas dire leur nom

("La Guerre de 14-18", V. 3-4):

there are puns in this passage both on "saintes" and on "sournoises". "Saintes" as a modifier of "guerres" is normally taken to mean Holy, and this is one way in which it is taken here, because Brassens is comparing in this song the First World War to other, different types of wars. Brassens then opposes this type of war with "guerres sournoises" - as he puts it, wars which are malevolent and sneaky, not daring to reveal their names. In the light of this personification, "saintes" also has a personifying effect, and means saintly or venerable. Thus we see a pun on "saintes" [Holy; venerable]. Returning to "sournoises", besides its figurative application, we see it as possibly a reference to war which is carried on in an underground sort of way, because sournois, besides meaning crafty or hypocritical, can also describe something that is not easily seen.

---

[11] cf. Le Robert: (entry for Grâce)

Sorte de charme, d'agrément qui réside dans les personnes, les choses... e.g. La grâce du corps, des proportions

xii) Se retournant
Incontinent
Elle moucha le nez
D'un enfant d'choeur
Qui par bonheur
Etait enchifrené

("Tonton Nestor", 138. V. 1-6):

this example is similar in format to one discussed earlier from the same song in stanza three (cf. p. 14). Brassens has created a slapstick scene, where Nestor pinches Jeannette the bride, who turns about and hits the choir-boy, then says "merde" instead of the expected "oui" to the priest. This is a pun because moucher has two senses, and both are evoked in the song. Provoked by Nestor's action, Jeannette is unlikely to turn around and blow the choir-boy's nose for him, but this is what we are told. And just as previously the best man was hit but luckily had "un' tête à claqu's", here the choir-boy was luckily stuffed-up ("enchifrené"). But the other sense of moucher, as defined by Littré, is as follows:

> Populairement. Moucher quelqu'un, remettre quelqu'un à sa place, lui infliger une correction, le battre.[12]

Thus Jeannette somehow blows the choir-boy's nose and hits him at the same time.

xiii) Dieu fass' que ma complainte aille tambour battant
Lui conter qu'un certain coup de foudre assassin

("L'Orage", 127-128. VIII. 1, 4):

the singer has an affair with the wife of a man who sells lightning rods. Because of the latter's profession, the two lovers only meet when the weather is stormy, as it was on their first night together. The

---

[12]Dictionnaire de la langue française, Paris: Gallimard-Hachette, 1966, V, 488.

expression "coup de foudre" is therefore doubly appropriate in this line, because it refers both to the thunder which brought them together, and to the idea of love at first sight, referring to their love-affair.

xiv) J'lui ai dit: "De la Madone
Tu es le portrait"
Le bon Dieu me le pardonne
C'était un peu vrai
Qu'il me le pardonne ou non
D'ailleurs je m'en fous
J'ai déjà mon âme en peine
Je suis un voyou

("Je suis un voyou", 66. I. 9-16):

in this song Brassens describes the affair he had with Margot - whom he loves still and will never forget, although she marries someone else, "un triste bigot". Brassens performs some tricky manoeuvres with contexts in this song: after a confession of sorts of his actions or words with respect to Margot, the singer excuses himself with the phrase "Le bon Dieu me le pardonne". Then he reconsiders, saying that he does not really care whether or not he is forgiven because "J'ai déjà mon âme en peine", as he puts it. This phrase, with the religious connotations, means a soul in Purgatory - this, as we know, is where it is believed the soul finds itself if not forgiven by God. But each of "âme" and "peine" are given two senses, because the expression "âme en peine" also refers to a living being ("âme") who is plagued with anxiety of some kind ["en peine"].

xv) J'ai jeté ma pipe
Ma viell' pipe en bois
Qu'avait fumé sans s'fâcher
Sans jamais m' brûler la lippe

("Auprès de mon arbre", 75. II. 3-6):

the most obvious sense of fumer here is to smoke, which is quite

acceptable when referring to a pipe. But Brassens also brings into play another meaning of fumer, i.e. to get angry, by explaining that his pipe did not get angry when it smoked: it smoked without fuming. To support the reconciliation of this personification with reality, Brassens then suggests how a pipe might show its anger, i.e. by burning the smoker's lip.

xvi) Au temps où les faux-culs sont la majorité
Gloire à celui qui dit toute la vérité

("Vénus Callipyge", 162. CODA. 3-4):

in this song, Brassens sings in praise of this lady's large behind. Faux-cul is a term describing a bustle, or some form of padding that was once in fashion for making one's behind look larger; in this case, faux means imitation. Normally, the two words which form this term are not understood separately or literally, but are taken together as a lexical unit. But Brassens in effect returns us to the original formation of the term, by opposing "faux" with dire la vérité in the next line; in this case, faux means deceptive. Thus we find that we are meant to take faux and culs separately and literally, despite the contradiction that this makes with direct experience.

xvii) Quand les Gaulois
De bon aloi
Du franc-parler suivaient la loi

("La Ronde des jurons", 110. I. 4-6):

this verse describes the almost physically violent Gallic cursing of the past, which gives rise to the use of the lexical unit "franc-parler" [outspokenness]. But also there seems to be a pun made on the first part of this compound, franc, because of the reference to "les Gaulois": this term and franc are both historically significant for a Frenchman.

Franc, because of this significance and because of the trigger-word "Gaulois", stands out in the listener's mind, as having an ethnic reference and as a result the compound "franc-parler" is perceived as being more than just a lexical unit. While it retains the meaning outspokenness, because we still recognize the two terms as a unit, franc also therefore comes to mean Frankish, so that the phrase refers to the Frankish language. What is different about this example is that Brassens is not restoring the original meaning of franc [open, frank, direct] , in connection with parler, when he makes this play, but rather what amounts to a pun on franc: it means Frankish, as we have said.

xviii) Alors sa veuve en gémissant, au gué, au gué
Coucha avec son remplaçant, au gué, au gué

("Corne d'Aurochs", 40. XIV):

this is a special case of pun, which requires that we return to part of the definition of the pun given by Oxford English Dictionary as "the use of a word in such a way as to suggest two or more meanings or different associations..." Here, the meaning of gémir remains the same [groan or moan] , and this is exactly what the dead man's wife does. But the difference here lies in the associations, because on the one hand, before we hear the second line of the above verse, it is apparently associated with a widow's grief; on the other hand, once we have heard that the lady is moaning while going to bed with another man, it is surely associated with her enjoyment of the pleasures found with him.

CHAPTER II

ADAPTATION OF FIXED EXPRESSIONS

According to Alphonse Bonnafé, "[Brassens] racole dans toutes les époques les clichés, les expressions consacrées, et les estropie, les disloque. Cela donne 'à contre-sous [sic], à bras fermés, empêcheurs d'enterrer en rond, une fesse qui dit merde à l'autre,' etc."[1] In this chapter, we will discuss different methods whereby Brassens adapts expressions, which are normally fixed in form and meaning, to suit his own needs in his songs. We differentiate between three general methods that Brassens uses: one is the substitution of one word for another in the fixed expression, as in "à bras fermés" (94. I. 12) instead of à bras ouverts; another method is to somehow disturb the syntax of the original expression, as for example "les coupeurs de cheveux en quatre" (163. V. 3) instead of couper les cheveux en quatre; the last is to introduce an unusual element into a fixed formula, as for example when he uses "[avoir] rendez-vous" with "au prochain orage" (127. V. 6) instead of with demain or au prochain mois. All of these tend to produce a humorous effect; we will discuss the different types of humour as we proceed with the example of each of the three groups.

Group one, replacement of one part of the fixed expression with another word, can be further divided into two smaller groups, based on the nature of the part that is replaced. With this subdivision, here is

---

[1] Alphonse Bonnafé, ed., Georges Brassens, Paris: Séghers, 1967, p. 14.

a list of the categories as we have named them:

1. Replacement of a Term
   (a) Term changed is circumstantial to meaning
   (b) Term changed is integral to meaning
2. Syntactical Disturbance
3. Lexical Disturbance

1. Replacement of a Term
   (a) Term changed is circumstantial to meaning

Most of the examples in this group are based on cliché expressions. A cliché can usually refer to a large number of situations, expressing one feature that is common to all of these situations. Mainly by historical accident, each cliché has come to be expressed in terms of a specific object or context. For example, in a situation where someone makes a mistake and feels very badly about it, the phrase there is no sense crying over spilt milk might come to mind. The general idea, do not waste time regretting past errors, is expressed in terms of a specific context, crying over spilt milk.

If we divide each example into two parts, i.e. the new word as opposed to the rest of the phrase which is left intact, certain characteristics become noticeable. Because only a small part of the original expression is changed, this expression is easily recognized. In these examples, the unchanged part generally carries by itself the essential meaning of the cliché. The changed part is really only circumstantial to the cliché's meaning: the original word consisted simply of the particular object or action through which the meaning was conveyed, like the "spilt milk" above. The meaning could have been expressed in different terms. For example, all was quiet is expressed in English and in French

by clichés of similar format but in respect of two different objects: You could have heard a pin drop, on aurait pu entendre voler une mouche. "You could have heard" and "on aurait pu entendre" each suffice to announce the cliché's meaning, indicating special conditions permitting one to hear something not normally audible. Each also suffices to announce the cliché itself, as it occurs in each language. "A pin drop" and "voler une mouche" are circumstantial: any object which makes a tiny noise could have taken the place of the pin or the fly, at least to a certain extent. In Brassens' songs, the cliché is reworded in terms of a new context, and this new context is provided by the song itself. If he were describing a tense moment of play in a chess match, he might say, "you could have heard a pawn drop". The original cliché is recognized, but we can appreciate the aptness of the new word to its context. This aptness, as well as the surprise generated by the new formation, make the line a source of humour for the listener. An example, which we discuss in detail further on, is from Une Jolie fleur: Brassens takes the cliché mener quelqu'un par le bout du nez [to have control over someone], and substitutes "coeur" for "nez", in keeping with the subject of this song about a love affair that turned sour. The line is: "[Une jolie fleur]... qui vous mène par le bout du coeur" (64. refrain. 4).

1 (b). Term changed is integral to the meaning

The examples in this group are also based on fixed expressions, but they are not necessarily clichés. Whereas a cliché can most often be used in many different kinds of situations because it expresses a very general and even universal idea, the examples here are usually limited to a particular type of situation. Thus the context represented by the song

is one in which the expression in question is normally found. Once again we can consider the examples as consisting of two parts, the part left intact from the original phrase as opposed to the word or words that Brassens changes. Because only a small part of the original is changed, this expression is still easily recognized. In these examples, the part that is changed is more than circumstantial to the meaning: it is an integral part of the whole sense, a part without which the meaning of the expression could not have been conveyed when the expression was originally formed. Recognition of the base expression has the effect of recalling its implications and connotations when the listener or reader hears or sees the new one. Thus, the new element is forced to take on a meaning connected with its new surroundings. Often the effect produced is comical. We could compare the whole expression to a table lamp, and the part that is changed to its light bulb: the lamp is, unlike a cliché, but like the expressions in this group, limited to a particular type of situation or activity; its bulb is absolutely necessary to the normal functioning of the lamp. Exchanging the light bulb for, say, a tennis ball, produces certain effects: first, since only a small part of the lamp is replaced, we still recognize what it is and what it does. Our recognition of the lamp and its function forces us to consider how a tennis ball might perform as a part of the lamp, in place of the bulb; this consideration results in a certain comic effect produced by the incongruity of a tennis ball used in a lamp. Finally, imagine such a lamp being found in a tennis club, where the silliness of the tennis ball as a replacement for the light bulb is enhanced by the aptness of the tennis ball being found thus in a tennis club. Brassens uses language to achieve

this effect, whether it be comic or not, in his replacement of one term of a fixed expression. For example, in the song Embrasse-les tous, Brassens takes a well-known quotation and replaces one term that plays an important part in the sense of the original: "Embrasse-les tous, Dieu reconnaîtra le sien" (120. refrain. 3-4) is an adaptation of Tuez-les tous, Dieu reconnaîtra les siens. As indicated in the later discussion, the original meaning exists alongside the new one introduced by the word-change.

2. Syntactical Disturbance

This group consists of examples which result from a change in the syntax of a fixed expression. The new meanings are generally literal ones, as against the metaphorical sense of the original phrases. Thus we find these lines in "La Tondue":

> Mais je n'ai pas bougé du fond de ma torpeur
> Du fond de ma torpeur
> Les coupeurs de cheveux en quatre m'ont fait peur
>
> (162. V. 1-3).

Couper les cheveux en quatre takes on a literal sense and keeps its figurative one; because the song is about a girl whose head is shaved, the almost dead cliché is revitalized, because we are forced to consider the literal application. The syntactical disturbance consists of the transformation of a verb into its agent, with the additional required shift from the article, "les", to "de".

3. Lexical Disturbance

The examples in this group consist of standard formulae or set phrases to which incongruous and unusual elements are introduced. These formulae are unlike fixed expressions which do not vary in form; the formulae can usually vary up to a point. Thus, to plan a meeting for

the same time tomorrow, the same time Wednesday, the same time next week, or even as far ahead as the same time next month, are all accepted and usual uses of this fixed formula. However, a recent comedy by Neil Simon is entitled Same Time Next Year, which is an incongruous use of the formula; it is not normally used with such a long period of time, because it is uncommon to arrange for a meeting so far in advance (or, if such a time period seems too feasible to be striking, one might consider same time next century as more incongruous). The incongruity generally produces a comic effect. In a song about a love affair, which begins and is continued only in stormy weather, between the singer and the lady next door, the singer says that this lady arranges a time for their next meeting. The humour lies in the use of an expression, normally considered an expression of time, with reference to the weather: "Rendez-vous au prochain orage." ("L'Orage", 127. V. 6).

Within each category, we will list the examples and attempt to explain the specific characteristics and nuances of each one. Sometimes a short explanation of the context will help in our explanations. We will also point out the more general effects of word play to enrich the sense of the song and to appeal to the imagination, as these effects occur.

1. Replacement of a Term

(a) Term changed is circumstantial to meaning

i) Un' jolie fleur dans une peau d'vache
Un' jolie vach' déguisée en fleur
Qui fait la belle et qui vous attache
Puis qui vous mène par le bout du coeur

("Une Jolie fleur", 64. refrain):

from the expression mener par le bout du nez [to have control over]. We recognize this original expression because there is only a small change made, a substitution of "coeur" for "nez", and the rest of the phrase in the song reproduces the original cliché.

In the context of falling in love, Brassens has taken a cliché meaning "to have control over", which could easily have been used in its original form to express the idea, and adapted it to fit the song. The emotion represented by "coeur" is associated with falling in love; the girl gets a hold on the singer through his emotional attachment to her and controls him by that emotion, The effect of this process is to give the old, colourless cliché new life.

ii) N'aie crainte que le ciel ne t'en tienne rigueur
Il n'y a vraiment pas là de quoi fouetter un coeur
Qui bat la campagne et galope.

("Pénélope", 128. V. 1-3):

we recognize the base expression il n'y a pas de quoi fouetter un chat [it is nothing of great importance, it is of small significance], from the similar forms of the old and the new.

The singer is attempting to convince Pénélope, "l'épouse modèle", that having extra-marital affairs is not an action of great consequence for which she will have to pay. Thus, affairs of the heart suggest the change from "chat" to "coeur".

This is also an interesting case because not only did the context suggest this change, but "coeur" has evoked other expressions with which it is normally associated. It becomes the link between the first cliché and "coeur qui bat" [heart beating], and also "bat la campagne" [range far and wide]. Thus there is a fusion and a confusion of these clichés,

producing a humorous effect. The same effect is produced with galoper, which is like an intensified battre in the phrase "coeur qui galope" [heart which beats quickly, as of one who falls in love or makes love].

iii) Le ciel l'avait pourvue des mille appas
Qui vous font prendre feu dès qu'on y touche
L'en avait tant que je ne savais pas
Ne savais plus où donner de la bouche.

("Une Jolie fleur", 64. II.):

this is from ne plus savoir où donner de la tête [to be confused, not to know which way to turn].

The original cliché's meaning fits perfectly well in the song, because the singer is describing a confusion that he feels in the face of the girl's countless charms. However, the change from tête to "bouche" also results in a revitalizing of the sense of "donner", because in the original expression this word is inseparable from the whole phrase, in the same way as a syllable is inseparable from the word in which it occurs. Apart from the transfer of meaning of not knowing where to turn, in a figurative sense, "donner" also takes on a more concrete aspect because of the context. It has a character similar to donner un coup de brosse à son chapeau [to give one's hat a brush]. Thus humour is produced both by the newly-coined expression and by the description itself.

iv) Que je ne sache plus où donner de la corne
Semble bien être le cadet de ses soucis.

("Le Cocu", 106. III. 3-4):

once again from ne plus savoir où donner de la tête [to be confused, not to know which way to turn].

This time it is the cuckolded singer who is in a quandary, due to his wife's indifference and her lovers' callousness. The same transfer of meaning from the original expression to the new is achieved here,

and "donner de" is again given a more physical meaning: one gives of oneself in the act of love. Thus the last two examples are based on the same cliché, and both retain the original meaning although they each have a revitalized meaning as well.

v) Qu'au lieu de mettre en joue quelque vague ennemi
Mieux vaut attendre un peu qu'on le change en ami
Mieux vaut tourner sept fois sa crosse dans la main.

("Les Deux oncles", 165. XII. 1-3):

from the cliché tourner sept fois la langue dans la bouche [to think carefully or to think twice, as before doing something rash]. The original is recognized because the form of the adapted phrase parallels that of the original.

In a song criticizing war, the singer advises that careful consideration of one's actions is worthwhile. This context suggests the change from langue and bouche to "crosse" and "main". The resultant comparison made by the listener between the original and the new leads to an appreciation of the similarities between the images; rifles can be said to speak in their own dangerous way. Rather than humour in this case, the turn of phrase adds colour to a song that has a serious tone.

vi) "Chez l'épicier pas d'argent pas d'épices
Chez la belle Suzon pas d'argent pas de cuisses..."

("Grand-père", 94. II. 1-2):

these phrases are based on the cliché, point d'argent point de Suisse [one must pay for the goods one desires]. This base expression is recognized by the form of the two new expressions, which are parallel to that of the original. Also there is a correspondence in sounds of "Suisse/épices/cuisses".

By restating the cliché in different terms, Brassens compares the merchant or clergyman who says these words to l'épicier [a grocer] and to la belle Suzon [a prostitute]. The cliché itself is revitalized because of the new words: where Suisse and argent have become almost empty of meaning, épices and cuisses stimulate the imagination.

Also, Brassens has used épicier in an unusual way. Here it is as if the grocer were really a dealer in spices, by analogy to other cases where the seller's designation is derived from the name of the product he sells (c.f. fruitier, fruit). Therefore there is a pun on épicier, which can mean grocer or spice-dealer.

vii) Quand on est sa-
ge et qu'on a du sa-
voir-boire

("Le Vin", 99. III. 1-3):

this was probably suggested by savoir-vivre [good breeding], savoir-faire [ability or know-how], or both. The similarity of form - savoir + verb linked by a hyphen - and with savoir being used as a noun - permits recognition of the original phrase. It was no doubt savoir-faire that served as a base for the new lexical unit: even though either original phrase could fit the context of the song, faire is a more general verb than vivre and thus could better stand the change to a more specific activity; for vivre on the other hand a change to boire is simply a substitution of one specific action for another.

In a song about drinking wine, then, savoir-boire is more appropriate than savoir-faire, for while it retains the meaning of the original, the specific activity it describes is directly related to the song.

1. (b) Term changed is integral to meaning.

i) Embrasse-les tous
Dieu reconnaîtra le sien

("Embrasse-les tous", 119. I. 11-12):

from the well-known historical allusion, tuez les tous, Dieu reconnaîtra les siens, the words of the papal legate with respect to the massacre of the Albigeois, according to le Grand Robert. The new expression is close enough in form to the original that it is easily recognized.

This song describes a girl's love as a deadly, destructive instrument, used to track down the right man for her to love for the rest of her life. The implication transferred from the original expression is that the girl's embraces are fatal, even for the chosen one, "le sien". The next two examples, from the same song, are also based on love and its destructive powers.

ii) Passe-les tous par tes armes
Passe-les tous par tes charmes

("Embrasse-les tous", 119. I. 13-14):

both original and adapted expressions are included in the song. The original form is passer par les armes [to shoot, to execute].

Once again the girl's love is compared to death, through the use of "charmes" in this expression. Had the original expression not existed, or had the form of the original as shown above not been included, the new phrase would have been vague in meaning, even favourable from the lovers' points of view. A man does not usually consider it unpleasant to be in a woman's arms. This relationship between the new expression and the old also characterizes the preceding and the following examples.

iii) [Passe-les tous par tes armes]
Jusqu'à ce que l'amour s'ensuive

("Embrasse-les tous", 119. I. 20):

from jusqu'à ce que la mort s'ensuive [until dead, as in the death sentence]. The tone of this song has been established well before this line, by such phrases as the two examples we have just discussed; the heroine's love is a dangerous one, and we are not favourably disposed to her embraces. Therefore, since we are aware of the catastrophic results of being loved by this girl, and since the new phrase as underlined above refers back to the format used in the pronouncement of the death sentence, the line reflects the tone of the song and the destructiveness of the girl's love.

iv) S'il faut aller au cimetière
J'prendrai le chemin le plus long
J'ferai la tombe buissonnière

("Le Testament", 79. II. 1-3):

we recognize the original, faire l'école buissonnière [to be truant from school], because of the part left unchanged. Buissonnière almost always occurs in conjunction with école.[2]

This expression makes sense only because the original phrase exists and is known. The idea of avoiding for as long as possible a place to which one is required to go, is transferred from the original to the new expression, even though the idea contradicts common sense. Playing truant demands volition, which a dead man no longer has: he

---

[2]Prévert uses a similar play:

En entendant parler
d'une société sans classes
l'enfant rêve
d'un monde buissonnier

("L'Enseignement libre", Spectacle, Paris: Gallimard, p. 207)

cannot choose a longer route to his grave, and once there he must remain. This description of the singer's feelings is a humorous one, due to its incongruities.

v) J'aurais sans doute du bonheur
Et peut-être la croix d'honneur
A chanter avec décorum
L'amour qui mène à Rom'

("Le Pornographe", 101. IV. 1-4):

a reworking of the saying, tous les chemins mènent à Rome [all roads lead to Rome]. This expression represents the respectability or the propriety of the Catholic attitude, Rome being considered the focus of Catholic Christianity. This is the sense that is shifted to the new expression concerning love, and Brassens writes that if he sang about respectable and acceptable types of love he would perhaps receive "la croix d'honneur". However, he is not attracted by love that is respectable and acceptable, so he avoids singing about "l'amour qui mène à Rom'".

vi) Jurant par-là
Jurant par-ci
Jurant à langue raccourcie.

("La Ronde des jurons", 110. I. 7-9)

A bras raccourcis [violently, ferociously] is recognized as the original because à + NOUN + raccourci occurs mostly in conjunction with bras as the noun.

The original expression describes physical violence so that when it is applied to cursing, the implication of violence adds vigour to it, almost as if the Gallic curses were physical attacks.

vii) [O que renaisse l'époque où]
Les gens avaient à coeur d'mourir plus haut qu'leur cul.

("Funérailles d'antan", 116. III. 8):

from the fixed expression péter plus haut que son cul [to pretend to be of a higher social class or rank than one is].

The implication of wanting to be on a higher rung of the social ladder is carried to the realm of dying and funerals. Like faire la tombe buissonnière, without its base expression this adapted one would not make much sense. This is partly because the original expression is figurative, and "péter" actually represents something else besides to pass wind. Being aware of this figurative meaning makes us transfer the original message to the new expression. At the same time, the words take on their literal sense for a moment, painting a nonsensical, impossible picture.

viii) Bon papa
ne t'en fais pas
nous en viendrons
à bout de tous ces empêcheurs d'enterrer en rond

("Grand-père", 93. V):

from the similarity between the form of this adapted expression and its base, empêcheurs de danser en rond, [those who prevent others from enjoying themselves], we easily recognize this original expression.

Exchanging enterrer for danser is an unlikely occurrence, except through word play, because enterrer en rond is not a description that is based in the normal way of looking at reality. Danser is considered enjoyable, while enterrer is not, and en rond is an incongruous description of enterrer, wherein lies the humour of the play.

ix) C'est depuis ce temps-là que le bon apôtre
Ah! c'est pas joli
Ah! c'est pas poli
A une fess' qui dit merde à l'autre

("Grand-père", 93. IV):

this is from avoir un oeil qui dit merde à l'autre [to be cross-eyed].

There is a transfer of the idea that a pair of crossed eyes is like two people who are no longer harmoniously disposed to one another, and may thus be said to dire merde to each other. This idea is applied to a man who has just been kicked in the behind, so that his buttocks are somehow no longer politely and prettily arranged in a properly symmetric way.

Another factor contributing to the humour already created by making the image of crossed eyes apply to the behind, is the particular aptness of the two parts of the adapted expression "fesse" and "dire merde". The latter not only describes the disagreement between the buttocks by comparison with the base expression, but also suggests a more literal application of "merde" because of the physical associations between "merde" and "fesse".

x) Comme on était légers d'argent
Le marchand nous reçut à bras fermés

("Grand-père", 93. I. 11-12):

à bras ouverts [with open arms] is used to indicate a positive or a warm welcome. This is recognized as the base expression because recevoir à bras is always used in conjunction with ouverts.

Once again we understand what the singer means to say because we recognize the sense of the original expression. This meaning is thereby shifted to the new phrase. But the possibility of reversing the expression's meaning by simply substituting the antonym of one of the terms exists only at the level of language. We think it normal to oppose meanings by analogy:

the analogy used here could be shown through the use of a door, for example, in that when it is open it is considered the opposite of when it is closed. We accept that open and closed are opposite when describing a door, so by analogy we accept that with closed arms is opposite in meaning to with open arms. However, à bras fermés is not in general use, and thus relies on this analogy to give it a kind of sense. The simplicity of this line, as well as the image it conjures up, serve to amuse the listener.

xi) ...notre amour du coin des lèvres
Amour nul et non avenu
Amour d'un sou qui n'allait, certes,
Guèr' plus loin que le bout d'son lit

("Le Temps passé", 140. II. 5-6):

which is from ne pas voir plus loin que le bout de son nez [to be unable to see further than the tip of your nose]. The common terms plus loin que le bout de son serve to persuade us that Brassens was indeed thinking of this phrase when he wrote the verse.

The singer observes in this song that the living tend to think of the dead in favourable terms, even though the person or thing that has died was of poor quality or character when alive.

In this verse, a love between the singer and another is described as having been a poor one, to which neither contributed much. Thus it is a love which extended scarcely further than the end of the bed, a love with little depth to it, almost purely physical. The lack of depth is the common element of meaning between the original expression and the revised one.

xii) O vous qui prenez aujourd'hui la clé des cieux

("Les Deux oncles", 167. XIV. 1):

taken from prendre la clé des champs [to take one's freedom]. In this instance, Brassens sings of the fruitlessness of battles, and at this point in the song is addressing whoever is about to die, telling them to give a message to "l'oncle Martin" and "l'oncle Gaston" in heaven. The message of taking one's leave is transferred from the old expression to the new because, as usual, we still recognize the original from the similarity of form. The new term carries with it its own sense as well, so that the expression has become more specific, referring to a place - if the heavens can be considered as such.

2. Syntactical Disturbance

i) Parlez-moi de la pluie et non pas du beau temps

("L'Orage", 126. I. 1):

adapted from the cliché parler de la pluie et du beau temps [to chat about insignificant matters]. By inserting "non" in the second half of the expression, Brassens revitalizes the terms, giving them a literal application. The singer is interested only in stormy weather, not in good, because his mistress only comes to his door when her husband is not selling or installing lightning rods during storms. The new meaning is humorous when compared to the well-worn and colourless original.

ii) S'il y a des coups d'pied au cul qui s'perdent
C'lui-là toucha son but.

("Grand-père", 93. III. 3-4):

this expression, il y a des coups de pied au cul qui se perdent [as when someone deserves a kick in the behind] is given a literal sense. By adding "Celui-là toucha son but", Brassens changes the reference of se perdre: in the original, it actually referred to the act of kicking,

rather than to the kick itself; here, it does refer to the kick, and means to miss. Thus, instead of there are kicks that should have been imparted to certain people, Brassens says there may be kicks that people attempt and miss, but mine certainly hit its goal. Once again the humour lies in the revitalizing of a well-used expression by giving it a sense that it may never have had, even when it was first used, but which evokes a specific image in our minds.

iii) On était du même bois
Un peu rustique un peu brute
Dont on fait n'importe quoi
Sauf naturell'ment les flûtes

("Auprès de mon arbre", 75. I. 5-8):

from the expression être du bois dont on fait les flûtes [to be easily swayed, of pliable temper].

Brassens has linked together two expressions, the above one and "on était du même bois" [to be two of a kind]. The word "bois" used in this expression is appropriate, because the singer is comparing himself to a tree, and thus "bois" is literal as well as figurative [we were made of the same type of wood; we were two of a kind]. As for the second expression, by rearranging its components Brassens has given it a literal hue as well as its figurative one.

iv) J'voudrais avoir la foi, la foi d'mon charbonnier
Qui est heureux comme un pape et con comme un panier.

("Le Mécréant", 117. II):

from la foi d'un charbonnier [simple or naive faith]. The effect of replacing un by the possessive adjective "mon" is to refer to one specific charcoal-dealer instead of the fictional one of the original expression, thus making the expression literal. The charcoal-dealer is shown to be

suspect as far as his faith and religious character are concerned, so that the humour lies in the paradox created in comparing the "charbonnier" of the cliché to a "charbonnier" in reality.[3]

v) Sur ces entrefait's-là trouvant dans les orties
Un'soutane à ma taille je m'en suis travesti.

("Le Mécréant", ll8. VII):

jeter le froc aux orties [to abandon one's life as a monk] seems to have suggested this verse to Brassens. He sings of his desire to follow Pascal's advice, "Faites semblant de croire et bientôt vous croirez", by donning an ecclesiastic's robe. The expression is changed, as we see, in that the singer finds the robe in the nettles, rather than discarding it. Furthermore, Brassens has made a slight change in the vocabulary, from froc to "soutane".

The reader or listener does not take the singer's action seriously, because the robe used to belong to someone else who lost his faith and threw the robe away (if the original expression is considered in its literal sense).

vi) [Quand on est sage]
On se garde à vue
En cas de soif u-
ne poire

---

[3] A similar example is found in Spectacle by Prévert:

L'ABBE

\- - - - - - - -
Enfin...Heureusement qu'il a la foi du charbonnier.
Il n'y a que cela qui sauve, la foi de charbonnier!
Il sort. Le charbonnier entre....
\- - - - - -
Il s'approche de Marie, la déshabille, et l'entraîne vers le lit.

("Théologales", Paris: Gallimard, 1951, p. 114.)

("Le Vin", 99. III. 406):

a simple rearrangement and rewording of the saying, garder une poire pour la soif [to put something by for a rainy day]. Brassens asserts that it is a wise thing to put aside something for a time of need, but once again, as so often happens, he takes the fixed saying literally: the "soif" becomes that of one who enjoys his or her wine, who is blessed with "savoir-boire", and the "poire", as we soon find out, is another way of saying a bottle. Therefore those who are wise, according to this song about drinking wine, keep one or two bottles for a later time of need.

vii) Il y avait des temps et des temps
Qu'je n'm'étais pas servi d'mes dents
Qu'je n'mettais pas d'vin dans mon eau

("Celui qui a mal tourné", 92. I. 1-3):

Brassens has interchanged "vin" and "eau" from the original mettre de l'eau dans son vin [to dilute one's wine, to curb one's demands]. The expression has a new literal sense, that the singer lacked wine to put in his water, which implies that he is very poor. The listener or reader appreciates the clever manipulation which is implemented in such a simple way.

viii) Contr'un pot de miel on acquit
Les quatre planches d'un mort...

("Grand-père", 93. VI. 5-6):

probably from être cloué entre quatre planches [to be dead and in the grave]. Though not all of the terms from the original expression are present, the reference holds because of the unusual juxtaposition of un mort and his quatre planches. Otherwise, had the original expression not existed, the reference might not have been as easily understood.

ix) Je ne fais pourtant de tort à personne
En suivant les ch'mins qui n'mèn'nt pas à Rome

("La Mauvaise réputation", 31. IV. 5-6):

the original expression tous les chemins mènent à Rome [there is more than one way to reach one's goal] has been adapted by the use of ne...pas and the rewording to include a relative clause. Brassens' phrase expresses a personal morality as opposed to the morality of the Catholic attitude as represented by the base expression. Thus, he uses the phrase to represent a set of values or methods with which the singer prefers not to be associated; he wishes to avoid the "chemins" followed by most of us.

3. Lexical Disturbance

i) La belle rentra dans ses foyers
En m'donnant rendez-vous les jours d'intempéries
Rendez-vous au prochain orage

("L'Orage", 126. V. 5-6):

Donnez rendez-vous is a formula used usually in a context related to time. Its use here is suggested by the way this particular love-affair is carried on , in inclement weather only. The humour results from the use of this expression, normally associated with the clock and the calendar, to arrange a meeting according to the weather.

ii) O que renaisse le temps des morts bouffis d'orgueil
L'époque des m'as-tu vu dans mon joli cercueil

("Les Funérailles d'antan", 116. III. 5-6):

this formula is generally used by those pleased with their apparel, a normal form being for example "m'as-tu vu dans mon joli chapeau" or perhaps "ma jolie robe". Here, it is the corpse expressing pride in its dead man's (or woman's) clothes, its coffin. Thus there are two sources of humour: the incongruity between the original use and the new, and the

incongruity of someone who has died having such an attitude, or any attitude, and posing such a question about his or her appearance.

iii) On a marqué dessus ma porte
"Fermé pour caus' d'enterrement"

("Le Testament", 79. VI. 3-4):

a formula not uncommon, for example when used by a shop-owner who closes his store in order to attend the funeral of a friend or a relative. However, it is the singer's own funeral for which the notice is placed above his door. This is somewhat like the case where the spider asks the fly to dinner, but rather to be eaten than to eat.

iv) [En attendant]
Celui derrièr' qui tu condamn'ras ta porte
En marquant dessus fermé jusqu'à la fin des jours
Pour caus' d'amour

("Embrasse-les tous", 119. II. 6-8):

a formula used to indicate the store's closing for a short period of time, usually for repairs, vacation, or, as in the preceding example, for funerals. The humour of this example lies in the inordinately lengthy time period suggested during which the door would be closed, i.e. "jusqu'à la fin des jours", instead of "la fin de la semaine, du mois, de l'été". Also humorous is the reason given for closing the door, "pour caus' d'amour", instead of for a funeral or for repairs.

The final two examples differ slightly from the first four: Brassens takes two expressions which are often exploited, and exploits them in his own way.

v) Mais où sont les funérailles d'antan

("Les Funérailles d'antan", 116. refrain. 1):

the well-known refrain from Villon's "Ballade des dames du temps jadis",

Mais où sont les neiges d'antan, has been varied in this way by others, both French and English,[4] so that this is not an original case. Otherwise, we would have included this example in category 1(b) because of the substitution of a term integral to the overall meaning of the well-known quotation. The humour lies here in the tone of the song as compared to the tone that the Villon quote carries with it: the song is a humorous treatment of funerals, the funerals are not taken seriously at all, as is indicated by the refrain:

Mais où sont les funérailles d'antan
Les petits corbillards corbillards corbillards corbillards de nos grands-pères
Qui suivaient la route en cahotant
Les petits macchabées macchabées macchabées macchabées ronds et prospères
- - - - - -
Les belles pom, pom, pom, pom, pom, pompes funèbres

(p. 116. refrain. 1-4, 10).

Since variations on Villon's refrain are common, we treat this as a type of set formula, used to express nostalgia about some topic or object, so that there is an incongruity in the half-mocking tone of the song when the unexpected "funérailles" is used with the formula.

vi) Nul ne peut aujourd'hui trépasser sans voir Naples
A l'assaut des chefs-d'oeuvres ils veulent tous courir
Mes ambitions à moi sont bien plus raisonnables
Voir votre académie Madame et puis mourir

---

[4]Joseph Heller adapts this expression as well:

...and then there was Yossarian with the question that had no answer:
"Where are the Snowdens of yesteryear?"
- - - - - -
"I'm afraid I don't understand."
"Où sont les Neigedens d'antan?" Yossarian said to make it easier for him.

Catch-22, New York: Dell Publishing Co. Inc., 1968, pp. 35-36.

("Vénus Callipyge", 160. VIII):

once again from an expression upon which variations have been based, voir Naples et mourir, a statement of noble intent. Treating this as a formula which is normally used with terms expressing objects or places which represent the highest point of achievement attainable, Brassens creates humour by using the formula to refer to l'académie, the lady's voluminous behind, to which this whole song is devoted.

4. There is one expression which does not fit into any of the categories above, and which we will describe separately:

> Dieu fass' que ma complainte aille tambour battant
> Lui parler de la pluie, lui parler du gros temps

("L'Orage", 126. VIII. 1-2):

we have already encountered a variation on the same cliché at the beginning of this song: Parlez-moi de la pluie et non pas du beau temps. This time, however, there is syntactical disturbance, and replacement of a term: parler de la pluie et du beau temps. Beau, then, is replaced by gros, the reason being that the singer looks forward, not to pleasant weather, but to thunderstorms when his neighbour's wife is free to come over to his home. Therefore the meaning of the expression is changed, and this is the reason that it does not fit the first two categories.

Brassens enjoys disrupting the accepted, complacent ways of expressing oneself, exemplified by the cliché. We note a general tendency to react against statements of a general nature: if something cannot be done, he will do it, as in "s'il y a des coups d'pied au cul qui s'perdent/

Celui-là toucha son but"; if most people do things one way, he will avoid it, as in "Je ne fais pourtant de tort à personne/ En suivant les chemins qui n'mèn'nt à Rome"; he asserts his individuality in "La Mauvaise herbe" and other songs, as we see in the lines:

> Les hommes sont faits, nous dit-on,
> Pour vivre en band' comm' les moutons.
> Moi, j'vis seul, et c'est pas demain
> Que je suivrai leur droit chemin.
>
> (63. III)

These are the attitudes that show through in all of his work, and not just in his adaptation of fixed expressions.

CONCLUSION

In this final section we propose to present some observations which tie in with our above discussion of various types of word play in Brassens.

To begin with, Brassens shows an interest in language as such through his word play; this is almost self-evident, since words are crucial parts of language, and Brassens makes plays upon and with them. Secondly, the ability to achieve the successful results that Brassens does in playing with words suggests that he has a good command of his medium, the French language; his friend, writer René Fallet, states that Brassens "poursuit une éternelle étude du français", and that "Cet indulgent de nature est sans pitié quant au style et à la syntaxe."[1] A third notion, (related to the second), indicated by the use of word play, is that Brassens is alert to some of the flexibilities of language which allow different types of word play; language consists to a large extent of ways of expressing oneself which are considered normal (i.e. conforming to norms), wherein lies the possibility of deviating from the norm in order to create an effect of some kind. Brassens exploits this possibility, and does so without falling into gibberish, without departing from le génie de la langue. He uses two general types of word play, as discussed in the body of the thesis; corresponding to these are two general cases of departure from the norms of language, which deserve discussion.

---

[1]Fallet, "Georges Brassens", Les Nouvelles littéraires, 2076 (15 June, 1967).

One elementary characteristic of the use of the French language as a means of expressing an idea or naming something is the desire to guarantee that what is said or read has only one meaning for the receiver of the message. Ambiguity is considered unfavourably in normal circumstances. The Oxford English Dictionary says that subjectively, ambiguous when referring to things, means "5...wavering or uncertain in direction or tendency; of doubtful or uncertain issue... 6. Hence, Insecure in its indications; not to be relied upon."[2] But the use of punning discussed in Chapter One, where Brassens intentionally brings more than one meaning into play at once, intentionally creates ambiguity, has favourable rather than unfavourable results. When contexts are linked through the pun word, the effect is an intensification and a concentration of meaning, and the meanings echo and re-echo in the reader's mind, appealing to his imagination to reconcile the disparate senses.

The other norm which Brassens employs to create word plays is the accepted use of clichés and fixed expressions - both figurative and literal - as means of communication. It is a part of the normal development of languages for such phrases to evolve. When one of these forms is used incorrectly, as for example by a foreigner who does not know the language well and thus slips into a misuse of the so-called "idiomatic", there usually results an impediment of communication, another type of ambiguity. But Brassens does use these phrases in ways that do not conform to their accepted usages. The cliché consists of a group of words whose individual meanings are deadened from being used together very often over a certain period of time; the fixed figurative expression is similar in that very

---

[2] Op. cit., I, 270.

often the impact of the original literal sense has faded, and the figurative meaning of the phrase is accepted without thought as to the phrase's origins. Brassens reinvigorates the cliché and the fixed expression by offering to the reader or listener either its forgotten sense or some new sense based on the literal application of the phrase. Language thus becomes more powerful and more colourful at the hands of the singer, because of this literalness which is not normally found in the phrase in question.

There is another point to be made about the deviation from norms in terms of language. It is often the case that poetry is used by its creator to probe the norms of language, to find out just how far language can be changed or manipulated and still somehow make sense. According to Greet, Jacques Prévert is one such poet:

> Although his puns may comment on the human condition satirically, sentimentally, or otherwise, Prévert is not so much concerned with making meanings meaningful as with questioning meaning itself. In his best poems the puns seem to make no comment at all beyond a linguistic one.[3]

But it is not just language that Prévert considers, it is also society, and the point to be made here is that there is a connection between the poet's attitude towards language and his attitude towards society:

> The satire, directed on one level against bourgeois institutions, is directed also against clichés, euphemisms, and other misleading or meaningless phrases.[4]

Brassens is not as serious as is Prévert with respect to questioning how

---

[3]Jacques Prévert's Word Games, Berkeley and Los Angeles: Univ. of Calif. Press, 1968, p. 4.

[4]Ibid., p. 79.

words make sense, but his use of language techniques, which take him and the reader away from the norms, suggests, as we stated at the beginning of this conclusion, an awareness of, and interest in, language as such; this interest and this awareness are certainly more heightened in him than in most people. This reflects a special attitude towards society, and the following quotation from Bonnafé, the editor of our main source book, suggests Brassens' frame of mind: "Il s'est jeté à corps perdu dans sa révolte, son refus de pactiser avec la société, et nous avons vu que seul son ouvrage l'a sauvé du naufrage."[5] In his own words, "Je suis toujours anarchiste, et le serai toujours."[6] There is a connection, once again, between the two types of probing, of language and of society. Bonnafé agrees with this, although in a rather general statement: "Brassens a dû parcourir toutes les ressources de la langue et de la versification pour les faire servir dans sa lutte. Un examen de son style révélerait très bien son désir de tout mettre sens dessus dessous".[7]

It is interesting to note, as a closing point, that the pun shares certain characteristics with the metaphor, in particular with reference to the two-sided nature of each. We call upon James Brown once again, as he concludes his article on punning:

> In general, further analysis of the pun leads into more and more complicated aspects of language-use, aspects pointing emphatically, for instance, toward the analogue metaphor ("A is B", when A is not B) which seems to function like the pun, though freed by the power of syntax from the constraining

---

[5]Alphonse Bonnafé, ed., Georges Brassens, Paris: Séghers, 1967, p.8.

[6]René Fallet, "Brassens", Paris-Match, No. 1223 (14 Oct. 1972), p. 35.

[7]Op. cit., pp. 12-13.

> requirement of lexical ambiguity (symbol similarity) for the meaning it links.[8]

Metaphor is one of the mainstays of poetry: as Sayce writes, "the metaphor, the sudden and unprepared transformation of something into something else, is more suited to the violent and immediate impact of poetry than to the more leisurely methods of prose."[9] But not all poetry is given to metaphor: returning once again to Jacques Prévert, who is considered by many to be a poet, his works are dominated much less by metaphor than by word games. We reiterate here that the purpose of this thesis is not to discuss how close to being a poet Brassens comes; but in the light of the comparison made above between the pun and the metaphor, we might perhaps suggest that word games make up, to some extent at least, for a certain lack of imagery in Brassens. Nor is the pun a silly type of game for the amusement of the idle, but rather a creative activity. Léopold Peeters comments that "le jeu de mots fait découvrir la possibilité du jeu avec les mots. Et ce jeu avec les mots peut devenir acte créateur."[10] One final word from Brown about the pun expands upon his statement which we quoted above:

> the pun...possesses a semi-metaphoric status which marks it as a significant symbolic accomplishment. For, within the scope of contextual and lexical accident, the pun permits escape from the literal directness of simple names... In the pun we find and may study those

---

[8]"Eight Types of Puns", PMLA, LXXI (1956), 26.

[9]Robert A. Sayce, Style in French Prose, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970, p. 59.

[10]La Roulette aux mots, Paris: La Pensée Universelle, 1975, p. 11.

> basic elements of structure, uncomplicated by the presence of other factors, which characterizes literary word-use; for the pun is the first step toward the achievement of symbolic metaphor.[11]

The pun, then, is a device which, particularly in poetry where the way words are used is basic to the art, has a very positive value, despite derision on the part of the critics and especially the purists. In view of this, it could be suggested that through the pun, the literary value of Brassens is quite high.

---

[11]Brown, Op. cit., p. 18.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Principle Works

a) Text Employed

Bonnafé, Alphonse ed. Georges Brassens. "Poètes d'aujourd'hui", 99. Paris: Séghers, 1967.

b) General Criticism

Charpentreau, Jacques. Georges Brassens et la poésie quotidienne de la chanson. Paris: Les Editions du cerf, 1960.

Clayre, Alasdair. "Words for Music", The Times Literary Supplement, MMMCDXL (Feb. 1, 1968), 103-104.

Fallet, René. Brassens. Paris: Editions Denoël, 1967.

Greet, Anne Hyde. Jacques Prévert's Word Games. Berkeley: Univ. of Calif. Publications in Modern Philology, LXXXIX, 1968.

c) Linguistic Criticism

Brown, James. "Eight Types of Puns", Publications of the Modern Language Association, LXXI (1956), 14-26.

Empson, William. Seven Types of Ambiguity. New York: A Meridian Book, 1955.

Peeters, Léopold. La Roulette aux Mots. Paris: "La Pensée Universelle", 1975.

Sayce, Robert A. Style in French Prose. 4th edition. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970.

Ullmann, Stephen. Semantics. New York: Harper and Row, 1962.

Secondary Works

a) General Criticism

Bosquet, Alain. Injustice. Paris: La Table Ronde de Combat, 1969.

Benhamou, Paul. "Interview avec Georges Brassens", The French Review, XLVI, #6 (1973), 1129-1137.

b) Linguistic Criticism

Adrienne. The Gimmick. Paris: Flammarion, 1971.

--------. The Gimmick 2. Paris: Flammarion, 1972.

Baum, Paull F. "Chaucer's Puns", Publications of the Modern Language Association, LXXI (1956).

Bersani, Jacques et al. La Littérature en France depuis 1945. London: George G. Harrap & Co. Ltd., 1970.

Deloffre, Frédéric. Stylistique et poétique françaises. Paris: Société d'édition d'enseignement supérieur, 1970.

Le Hir, Yves. Analyses Stylistiques. 3e édition. Paris: Librairie Armand Colin, 1965.

Naudin, Marie. Evolution parallèle de la poésie et de la musique en France: rôle unificateur de la chanson. Paris: A. G. Nizet, 1968.

Ruwet, Nicolas. Langage, musique, poésie. Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1972.

Wellek, René and Warren, Austin. Theory of Literature. New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1956.