

## F. Poulenc's Compositional Diary: A Source for Analysis of Creative Process and Hermeneutic Interpretation

Francis Poulenc appears to have destroyed most of his compositional sketches. Only a very small number have so far been located. The setting of Apollinaire's 'Montparnasse' is typical in that only a signed manuscript copy with minor corrections is known to exist (it is now held in the Pierpont Morgan Library, New York).<sup>1</sup> If we are to glean insights into creative practice given such circumstances then we must turn to the composer's written accounts of compositional process. In the case of this song Poulenc wrote a detailed chronology of his protracted engagement with the poem, which not only offers a valuable account of compositional process, but also, through its revelation of the composer's poetic predilections, allows us to move from analysis, through consideration of inspirational factors, into hermeneutic interpretation. Furthermore, the recent publication of the full, 'uncensored' text of the *Journal* allows this interpretative project rich new dimensions.<sup>2</sup>

'Montparnasse' is an autobiographical poem (1911–12) in which Apollinaire depicts his arrival in Paris. It describes the itinerant artist as an absurdly hirsute yet angelic figure, loitering in the hotel doorway:

O porte de l'hôtel avec deux plantes vertes	[O door of the hotel with two green plants
Vertes qui jamais	green which will never
Ne porteront de fleurs	bear any flowers
Où sont mes fruits Où me planté-je	where are my fruits where do I plant myself
O porte de l'hôtel un ange est devant toi	O door of the hotel an angel stands in front of you
Distribulant des prospectus	distributing prospectuses
On n'a jamais si bien défendu la vertu	virtue has never been so well defended
Donnez-moi pour toujours une chambre à la semaine	give me for ever a room by the week
Ange barbu vous êtes en réalité	bearded angel you are really
Un poète lyrique d'Allemagne	a lyric poet from Germany
Qui voulez connaître Paris	who wants to know Paris
Vous connaissez de son pavé	you know on its pavement
Ces raies sur lesquelles il ne faut pas que l'on marche	these lines on which one must not step
Et vous rêvez	and you dream
D'aller passer votre Dimanche à Garches	of going to pass your Sunday at Garches
Il fait un peu lourd et vos cheveux sont longs	It is rather sultry and your hair is long
O bon petit poète un peu bête et trop blond	O good little poet a bit stupid and too blond
Vos yeux ressemblent tant à ces deux grands ballons	your eyes so much resemble these two big balloons
Qui s'en vont dans l'air pur	that float away in the pure air
A l'aventure	at random]

Poulenc's description of the protracted genesis of his setting in his *Journal de mes Mélodies* is highly revealing:

It took me four years to write 'Montparnasse'. I have no regrets for the care I took over it for it is probably one of my best songs ... . I found the music for the line "Un poète lyrique d'Allemagne" at Noizay, in 1941.

All the end part (after "Vous connaissez de son pavé") at Noizay in 1943.

The first two lines, in 1944, in Paris. Several lines still remained including the terribly difficult: "Donnez-moi, pour toujours, une chambre à la semaine".

This came to me during the flight to Noizay, in 1943.

After this I let these fragments macerate and perfected the whole in three days, in Paris in February 1945. This way of working in fits and starts may be surprising. Nevertheless it is quite customary with me where songs are concerned ...

As I never transpose music which I have just conceived for a certain line, or even for several words, into another key to make it easier for myself, it follows that the linking up is often difficult and I need to stand back in order to find the exact place where I am at times obliged to modulate.<sup>3</sup>

This describes a compositional process which is based on what seem to be randomly inspired settings of individual or groups of poetic lines composed in no particular order. The final paragraph identifies Poulenc's main 'post-inspirational' compositional problem, the blending of the fragments so produced (a task which firmly distances him from the technique and aesthetic of surrealist collage). The point of entry for Poulenc's creative musical response to the poem is, however, very significant, as it is the central poetic invocation of the figure of the artist – the autobiographical subject of Apollinaire's text. To start the compositional process at this point suggests an act of identification on Poulenc's part with the poet. Poulenc sets this as an arching V-I-IV phrase in E minor. The local tonic chord is, typically for Poulenc's style, a ninth chord, with the piano and voice climactically emphasizing the F# ninth. This expressive highlight is introduced by a piano arpeggiation, marked 'très à l'aise', which peaks at the instruction that the pianist reach for the top note with the left hand over the right. The manner of articulation and the performing gesture mark this sensual moment as physically pleasurable, one to be savoured, embraced or displayed. Poulenc's description of how this music was 'found' [*trouvé*] is suggestive of a recovered *objet sonore*. In the completed song, however, this found E minor tonality is unstable and ephemeral, for at the beginning of the passage which follows, composed in 1943, the harmony quickly shifts to the dominant of Eb (b. 38), the tonic of the completed song. But in the first part of the song, the final fragment to be composed, some three years later, there is also a subtle process of preparation for the E tonality. A melancholic, chromatically descending three-note figure in the second poetic clause (bb. 4–5; 'avec deux plantes vertes') – a motif which will later be much developed – ends on Cb. In bars 7–8 this pitch forms part of a triad of Cb-Fb-Ab, dissonantly positioned over the Eb pedal as the poem tells of the lack of blooms. In functional, tonal terms this is flat supertonic harmony, which moves to the dominant of Eb over the continuing tonic pedal. However, the Fb triad's combination with the Eb enharmonically anticipates the E major seventh (E-G#-B-D#) which at bar 22 begins a cycle of fifths whose goal is C (b. 26). This is the setting of the 'difficult' line which he had composed a year earlier, in 1943. Thus the modulation between fragments, one of Poulenc's primary compositional concerns, is achieved through the subtle preparation of the inspirational source phrase in E minor.

Let us return to the compositional starting point. Seventh and ninth chords are, of course, pervasive in Poulenc's music. They have a dual provenance, one in the refined harmonic world of Ravel and Debussy and another in the chordal idiom of popular urban musics. This suggests an ambivalent relationship between high and low worlds. In Poulenc these beloved harmonies are imbued with an especially melancholic character through their placement, as in this song, at moments of disjuncture, or through apparent allusion to a past expressive function. The E tonal centre found within a song in Eb minor is an attempt to rise above the key of the city, and also to connect in amorous relationship. But the expressive quality of the phrase is poignantly alienated.<sup>4</sup> The E minor chord with added seventh and ninth is poised between redemption and abjection. The chord is fetishized, invested with superabundance of significance, just as its meaning and stature is questioned as a (re)discovered fragment, embodying the melancholic figure of the lost poet in an alien modern metropolis. Unsurprisingly, in the second half of the song there a number of nostalgic recollections of this E minor harmony. After the disappearance of the E minor vision, the harmony suggests a slip back to the dominant of E minor (b. 48), but the chromatic descents and circles of fifths resume and pull the music away from this allusion. The close of the final vocal line (b. 64ff) is an exquisite harmonic progression, a symmetrical prolongation of the tonic Eb minor (Eb minor through G [V of C] and Cb [enharmonic V/e] than back to Eb minor), with the voice outlining a descending Eb-B-G-Eb augmented triad. This sequence, which parallels the 'aventure' of the text and also encapsulates the main tonal events of the song, begins to repeat, only to stall on the dominant seventh on B (b. 68) a last recollection of the E minor inspirational image. The piano coda offers a hushed, low-registered chorale around C major seventh. But the final arpeggiation, where the left hand plays 'dessus', 'céder', recalls, at least for the performers, the concert audience or the listener reading the score, the expressive figure of the 'poète d'Allemagne'.

This image of the melancholic creative artist, around which the song turns, is paradigmatic for Poulenc's works, and I believe that Poulenc's identification of this as the source of compositional process in 'Montparnasse' is therefore revelatory for the analysis and interpretation of other important song settings of similar character. I will illustrate this by now turning to a later Apollinaire

setting, one where at the corresponding poetic and musical turning point, Poulenc lovingly and nostalgically raises his dead Muse.

In Poulenc's erotic, urban pastoral the pleasures of idyllic or illicit relationships are played out in the city's public and private spaces. Terror and anxiety strike when the voice of the beloved Other is drowned out by the din, uncannily produced or abruptly cut off by mechanical communication systems, or silenced by death. As the 'modern' communicative agencies such as the typewriter and telephone (the mechanization of the process of writing and of the voice of the Other) took the production of texts and voices out of the discourse of Romanticism<sup>5</sup> artists sought new creative techniques employing or stimulated by the machines of modernism. Apollinaire's experiments in spatial effects of typesetting in the collection of poems *Calligrammes* (1913–18) are a famous example. (Pierre Bernac was dismissive: he thought the 'ideograms' represented a 'puerility that adds nothing to the value of the poems but merely makes them more difficult to read'.<sup>6</sup>) The typographical layout of 'Voyages' as a 'Calligramme' suggests a 'severely schematic depiction of a landscape', a sense of space and recession, dislocation and distance through judicious use of type size. Thus 'the whole graphic form ... "arrests" and lays out for contemplation, in a controlled pattern, appearances that are described as evanescent.'<sup>7</sup> The poem concerns the flight of love, in a Dantean exile or even an imaginery descent into hell. The train moving into the distance is a favoured image of transience. Apollinaire's juxtaposition of pastoral and technological imagery moves to expressions of personal loss. Aimless birds sit on the telegraph wires; the train travels to an unknown destination through summer woods. Modern communication networks are viewed as rather absurd, without fathomable meaning. The poem moves into an image of the gentle night, the black C depicts the moon, and the last line, 'C'est ton visage que je ne vois plus', confirms this as a song of mourning.

The typesetting generates both abstract structures, some of which may be seen to reflect the pulsations and splinters of the city, and personal symbols or lyrical or amorous import. Apollinaire's poetry derives from Symbolist exploration of the psyche and the transitory familiar from Baudelaire's description of modern life. Its inspirations are drawn from a conflict between optimism and anguish in the experience of the Parisian metropolis, the possibilities of new technology, of simultaneity and fragmentation, of the dissolution of hierarchies of high and low, but with a controlling, aspiring creative spirit at its heart. Significantly, the cover of the Heugel edition of the song cycle features the poet's name in the centre of a mirror: it is drawn from the poem 'Coeur Couronne et Miroir', an ideal portrait of the creative figure (it might be seen as a visual correlative to the compositional process of Poulenc's setting of 'Montparnasse' previously described). But this is a spirit 'haunted by uncertainty and doubt', holding an 'enduring attachment to the poetry of personal emotion and elegiac sadness', creative tensions, with self division and division from the erotic muse as major preoccupations. In his age of anxiety, the artist seeks refuge, a nostalgic comfort, a redemptive image.<sup>8</sup>

Poulenc's settings from 1948 transform a selection of the *Calligrammes* into a notably 'Romantic' song cycle with a unifying tonal structure (based on F#) and a balance of affective states moving towards a summarising close concerning the loss of love. Several of the poems which Poulenc set are 'hymns to women' (two are addressed to Apollinaire's muse, Marie Laurencin). A setting of 'Voyage' ends the cycle, and new personal levels of meaning accrue through the relationship of particular aspects of the musical structure to the song's dedication to Poulenc's beloved muse, Raymond Linossier. In his *Journal* Poulenc describes the song thus: 'By the interjection of unexpected and sensitive modulation, "Voyages" goes from emotion to silence in passing through melancholy and love.'<sup>9</sup> The central affective association of lost *amour* is the song's turning point and, I believe, a crucial inspirational source. Poulenc's compositional creativity was profoundly related to his attraction to artistically gifted women. Among such figures in Poulenc's life, Linossier, the poet Louise de Vilmorin and the diva Denise Duval were especially important.<sup>10</sup> The Muse functions not only a figuring of an adored inspirational Other, but also as the artist's self-confessional mouthpiece. But in Poulenc's creative mind such appeals to the beloved source of inspiration do not always seem to be heard. As Richard D. E. Burton notes in his short but insightful study, in 1928–30, 1954–5 and 1958–9, Poulenc suffered 'incapacitating breakdowns', with each crisis arising through a 'combination of artistic self-doubts and anguish over his personal relationships'.<sup>11</sup> The first crisis was precipitated by Linossier's rejection of Poulenc's proposal of marriage

and then exacerbated by her tragic death at the age of 32 in January 1930. She was buried with the manuscript of *Les biches* (1924) in her hands. Later in life, Poulenc was to excise many of the references to her in his *Journal de mes mélodies* when preparing the diary for publication, including the line acknowledging that 'It is not by chance that it ["Voyages"] is dedicated to the memory of Raymonde Linossier'.<sup>12</sup> It seems he wanted important aspects of her role in his life and art to be concealed. Clearly, this was to keep some of his most personal feelings from public airing. This is a characteristic masking tactic. In 1958, with memories of Linossier still painfully felt nearly thirty years after her death, he spoke of her with an 'emotion, concealed beneath a gentle irony and a charming cheerfulness.' Linossier was the confidante of Poulenc's formative years, and her early death symbolized his loss of youth, and he saw in her mix of secretiveness, melancholy and laughter a feminine image of himself. He was to miss her advice until the end of his days, in compositional matters as well as in affairs of the heart.<sup>13</sup> But she continued to function as a recovered figure of creative renewal for the composer. Many works were written in dedication or as a memorial to Linossier. As Poulenc once confessed, his music sings with 'the voice of Francis according to Raymonde', or 'it is Poulenc, but very Raymonde'.<sup>14</sup>

In his musical response to poetic play with the image of mechanical writing in Apollinaire's *Calligrammes* Poulenc appears to seek absolution from the fear, expressed in his letter of proposal of marriage, that without Linossier he would 'become just a machine that produces notes', the fear of creative death and also seeks to create a nostalgic image of a lost youthful life, which he so closely identified with Linossier. The elegiac tone of Poulenc's setting of 'Voyages' is established by an opening minor third motive and lamenting bass descent from the tonic F# to its dominant (F#-E-D#-D-C#) establish from the start. Throughout the song there is a subtle doubling and echoing of voices. The song begins with doublings (even treblings) of the singing voice in the piano, but this unity soon becomes lost, so that when the singer is momentarily mute the piano picks up the opening minor third and echoes it in counterpoint (bar 9ff.). It is an image of separation as well as dependency. When the pastoral scene is imagined there is a brief piano interlude in the contrasting key of Eb, marked 'très poétique et mystérieux' and played a little faster (bb. 17–19). Its texture contains two important, emotionally contradictory elements. Between the 'tenor' and 'soprano' lines there is a canon effect – a device to bring the sound of two voices tantalisingly closer together. But beneath this lies the minor third motive. Now no longer a melodic incipit, it has become a minatory and mournful bass figure, heard twice (G-Bb and Bb-Db).

The structural dominant on C# is retrieved with the poetic image of the lover's gentle night (b. 25), but it is beautifully displaced at the expression of the lost face of the beloved (bb. 29–30): a *forte* G ninth sinks to a *subito piano* Db ninth, the enharmonic of the structural dominant. Poulenc wrote that the music at 'C'est ton visage' 'must be tender and unexpected, as though the clouds had suddenly cleared to reveal a ray of moonlight', in a momentary illumination of the recalled image of Linossier, 'the irrevocable departure of a face which I have never replaced and of a beautiful, alert intelligence that I shall miss forever'.<sup>15</sup> The setting of this line performs a central function in the song comparable with the line "Un poète lyrique d'Allemagne" in 'Montparnasse'. Although we don't have a description of the compositional chronology of 'Voyage' the musical and poetic character of this line strongly suggests that we can locate here the primary focus of inspiration, from which the song radiated outwards. For Poulenc, the recalled image of Linossier's face was a significantly potent and highly charged source of inspiration.<sup>16</sup> The 1939 setting of Paul Eluard's 'Ce doux petit visage' ['Nothing but this dear little face'] is, like 'Voyage', dedicated to Linossier's memory. The sudden harmonic shift or intrusion of the dominant ninth of C in 'Voyages' recalls that this chord has a similar function as the marker of the crucial turning point in the Eluard setting (b. 18). Furthermore, the dissonances over a dominant pedal in the short piano coda of 'Ce doux petit visage' are closely comparable in their poignant effect to those which support the final poetic line of 'Voyage' – 'que je ne vois plus'. Intertextual allusion inspired by a shared poetic image and structure thus lies at the poetic heart of Poulenc's musical setting. The piano coda of 'Voyage' is replete with minor third motives in octaves, which generate a quite austere or hollow effect because of the textural 'distance' between the lines. The characteristic repeated chords in the middle register of the piano, Poulenc's favourite musically connective tissue, are notably absent. The central poetic image of the song is of the beloved face which is no longer seen. Its primary musical effect is of voices joined and separated in the context of modern,

technological alienation in a fractured, elegiac pastoral. The silence which Poulenc described as the song's destination is, of course, the consequence of the Muse's voice being muted by death.

To conclude, I propose that these observations of creative process, poetic inspiration and intertextual allusion suggest that in the late 1930s and 1940s Poulenc developed a compositional model or template for setting lyrical poems with a melancholic-erotic tone. The opening song of *Calligrammes*, 'L'Espionne' closely follows the model of 'Ce doux petit visage' – a plangent opening paragraph in a relatively stable minor key but with dissonances which are the seed of a sequential middle section (always replete with ninths) leading via a crucial poetic turning point to a nostalgic, bittersweet close. Other songs to follow this model include the Apollinaire settings 'La Grenouillère' (1938), 'Bleuet' (1939) and 'Hôtel' (1940).<sup>17</sup> 'Voyage' (1948) represents a variant of this model, one highly valued by its composer; 'Montparnasse' (1941–5) is one of this model's most complex examples, one whose pivotal moment around which the structure and expression turn is precisely that which Poulenc identified as the beginning of the song's compositional process. Thus, from such a specific description of creative work subtle and wide-ranging insights into musical structures, inspirations and meanings can emerge.

### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> See Carl B. Schmidt, *The Music of Francis Poulenc (1899–1963): A Catalogue* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995).
- <sup>2</sup> Francis Poulenc, *Journal de mes Mélodies*, edition intégrale et notes établies par Renaud Marchart (Paris: Cicero, 1993).
- <sup>3</sup> Francis Poulenc, *Diary of My Songs*, bilingual edition with a translation by Winifred Radford (London: Victor Gollancz, 1985), 75–77 (translation modified); *Journal de mes Mélodies*, 42–3. In the Max Eschig edition the song is dated 'Noizay Septembre 41; Paris Janvier 45'. In a letter to Pierre Bernac (24 June 1944) Poulenc wrote: 'The two Apollinaire songs, 'Montparnasse' and 'Hyde Park', almost finished, apart from a word here and there.' Francis Poulenc, *'Echo and Source': Selected Correspondence 1915–1963*, trans. and ed. Sidney Buckland (London: Gollancz, 1991), 135.
- <sup>4</sup> If Poulenc is identifying himself with this depiction of the poem's subject it is, I suggest, as a modern, urban reincarnation of Gilles, the distanced, melancholy figure in Watteau's eighteenth-century *Fêtes Champêtres*. Paul Guth compared Poulenc with this figure of Gilles; Pierre Bernac, *Francis Poulenc: The Man and His Songs*, trans. Winifred Radford (New York: Norton, 1977), 29. Gilles, a white-suited and isolated figure, who maybe an image of Watteau himself, is pictured as a 'melancholy, fearful' figure who stands outside the social pleasures of the party seen behind him; Erwin Panofsky, 'Et in Arcadia Ego', in Raymond Klibansky and H.J. Paton (eds), *Philosophy and History: The Ernst Cassirer Festschrift* (New York: Harper & Row, 1963), 251.
- <sup>5</sup> Friedrich A. Kittler, *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*, trans. with an introduction by Geoffrey Winthrop-Young and Michael Wutz (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), 183–263.
- <sup>6</sup> Pierre Bernac, *Francis Poulenc: The Man and his Songs*, 83.
- <sup>7</sup> Anne Hyde Greet and S.I. Lockerbie, 'Commentary', in Guillaume Apollinaire, *Calligrammes: Poems of Peace and War (1913–1916); A Bilingual Edition*, with translations by Anne Hyde Greet (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2004), 394–5.
- <sup>8</sup> See S.I. Lockerbie, 'Introduction: The Modernism of *Calligrammes*', in Apollinaire, *Calligrammes*, 1–20. The lines in the heart-shaped *Calligramme* in translation read: 'In this mirror I am enclosed living and real just as you imagine the angels and not at all like reflections.'
- <sup>9</sup> *Diary of My Songs*, 95; *Journal de mes Mélodies*, 55.
- <sup>10</sup> Keith Clifton, 'Mots cachés: Autobiography in Cocteau and Poulenc's *La Voix humaine*', *Canadian University Music Review* 22 (2001), 68–85. Clifton explores the appeal of the 'feminine' for Poulenc, placing the composer's close relationships with women in the tradition of the homosexual-straight woman 'bond', in which the intimately beloved female acts as 'surrogate sister, mother, or confidant'.
- <sup>11</sup> Richard D.E. Burton, *Francis Poulenc* (Bath: Absolute Press, 2002), 14.
- <sup>12</sup> Poulenc, *Journal de mes mélodies*, 54.
- <sup>13</sup> For an in-depth portrait see Sophie Robert, 'Raymond Linossier: "Lovely soul who was my flame"', in Sidney Buckland and Myriam Chimènes (eds), *Francis Poulenc: Music, Art and Literature* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1999), 87–139. The quotation (trans. on p. 87) is from a lecture by Yvonne Lançon, who went to visit Linossier's grave with Poulenc in 1958.
- <sup>14</sup> Robert, 'Raymonde Linossier', 99.
- <sup>15</sup> *Ibid.* Again the second line is a portion of text which was cut by Poulenc before publication. On the vocal performance of this line Bernac wrote: 'it is of prime importance that the moon is suddenly veiled again on the syllable "sa" of the word "visage", *pp*, with infinite tenderness and nostalgia prolonged until the end by the beautiful coda for the piano'. *Francis Poulenc*, 89.
- <sup>16</sup> Robert, 'Raymonde Linossier', 95, 97.
- <sup>17</sup> 'Hier' (1931) from *Trois poèmes de Louise Lalanne* might be considered a prototype. The poem is actually by Marie Laurencin, Apollinaire's lover and muse.

## Santrauka

### **F. Poulenco kompozicinis dienoraštis – kūrybinio proceso ir hermeneutinės interpretacijos analizės šaltinis**

Rašytiniai kompozitorių pasakojimai apie kūrybinį procesą dažnai (teisingai) vertinami skeptiškai ir įtariai. Pvz., Poulenco „Mano dainų dienoraštis“, išleistas šeštąjį dešimtmetį, iki tol buvo paties kompozitoriaus daug kartų taisomas. Neseniai pasirodė naujas leidimas, kuriame publikuojami ir Poulenco išbraukti fragmentai. Vienas iš įdomiausių epizodų pasakoja apie dainą „Monparnasas“ (ž. G. Apollinaire'o), kurią kompozitorius priešokiais kūrė 1941–1944 m. Poulenco pasakojimas apie kūrinio dalių gimimą ir jų jungimą į visumą tik iš dalies patvirtina kompozitoriaus tariamą artėjimą prie siurrealistinio montavimo būdo. Interpretacijai šio fragmento reikšmė dar svarbesnė: čia kompozitorius įvardijo frazę, kuri jam tapo įkvėpimo šaltiniu, poetinę idėją, kuri inspiravo kūrybinį procesą. Ja apibūdinamas eilėraščio herojus, poetas, su kuriuo susitapatina pats Poulencas. Taigi ši frazė duoda puikią galimybę išsiginčyti ir į patį kūrybinį procesą, ir į hermeneutinę interpretaciją.