Blurred Lines: Exploring Poetic and Musical Subjectivity in Verlaine and Debussy's "Romances sans paroles"

Emily Eyestone

College of William and Mary

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Blurred Lines: Exploring Poetic and Musical Subjectivity in Verlaine and Debussy’s *Romances sans paroles*

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree of Bachelor of Arts in the Department of Modern Languages at the College of William and Mary.

By

Emily Eyestone

Accepted for _________________________________
(Honors, High Honors, Highest Honors)

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Charles Palermo

Williamsburg, Virginia
April 11, 2014
# Table of Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Acknowledgments</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 1</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 2</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 3</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 4</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bibliography</td>
<td>95</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Acknowledgements

I have wondered about the connections between music and other art forms since I was 15 years old, playing Debussy's “Reflets dans l'eau”. This thesis has given me the chance to explore questions about art that have been on my mind for such a long time and I am so grateful for that chance.

The first sparks of inspiration for the following project came to me almost two years ago, when I was studying abroad in Lyon, France. At that point I was taking a class on the work of Romantic poet, Alfred de Musset. One night, I attended a concert of Debussy's piano music. In listening to the performance, I was struck by the idea that a certain aesthetic correspondence might be shared between poetry and music, an idea that ultimately is pursued and explored in the following pages. For this reason, I would like to initially thank the performer, Eric Himy, whose perceptive performance that night served as the crystalizing impetus for my consideration of music and poetry together. I stayed in touch with Mr. Himy after his concert and since then, he has consistently offered enthusiastic curiosity about my ideas, and even helped to support my research in Paris this past summer.

Secondly, I would like to thank the Charles Center at William and Mary for their help in providing my research fellowship in Paris last summer. Their contributions, combined with those of family members, friends, and alumni, helped to make my dream of studying in Paris come true. There is no better place in the world for reading and thinking than Paris, and the exceedingly generous support of all who donated truly gave life to this project.

I am very lucky to have a committee of such attentive and insightful readers. Their
expertise will be indispensable to the improvement of this project. Prof. Hulse went above and beyond as a reader, generously agreeing to my review drafts and provide much-needed guidance in terms of music theory as early as February. His advice, direction, and encouragement has been instrumental.

A very special thank you as well to my advisor, Prof. St. Clair. In the past two years, there has been no one who has believed in me and the value of my ideas more. I am exceptionally grateful for the intellectual insights always so freely shared, his meticulously careful (and frequent) readings of my work, the brilliant direction and patient explanations. Most especially, thank you for the unquestioning confidence that I could pull this off, particularly in those moments when I wasn't so sure. There would be no project whatsoever without you.

I was never very good at keeping things brief when trying to explain my thesis; nevertheless, my family and friends still dared to ask the question, and then hung in there for what was likely a much lengthier explanation than expected. Their sincere curiosity and patience meant the world. Special thanks to my mom, whose unflagging support, interest, and love has made this endeavor, as well as all other things I do in life, possible. Finally, I would like to dedicate this project to all the teachers I've had along the way, whose passion for learning and love of ideas has so consistently shaped me.
Introduction

The course of nineteenth century art and literature, particularly in the wake of romanticism, shows authors and readers grappling with the premise of subjectivity, and the claims of art to accessing and representing individual experience.¹ This study will compare subjectivity as it is portrayed musically and poetically, in four poems from Verlaine's 1874 collection, *Romances sans paroles*, with their musical settings composed by Claude Debussy between 1885 and 1888. It will evaluate how poetic and musical expression converge to disrupt traditional concepts of subjectivity as a unified expression of identity. A comparison of poetry and music reveals the identity of the subject to rest in its inability to adhere to stable spatial, temporal, or narrative terms. In the nineteenth century, expression of “lyrical” subjectivity in poetry described an intimate offering forth of deep, personal emotion and feeling. The “lyrical subject” refers to the “subject who sings,” initiating a close connection between personal emotion and music. However, while lyrical poetry and music are both efforts by the artist to express feeling, the poem or composition may be received somewhat differently by its audience. Exploration of subjectivity is intimately linked not only to the artist's process of creation, but to how the work is interpreted by those listeners or readers who are affected by it. As Seth Whidden notes, a tension arises from the gap between the poet's expression of subjectivity and the reader's impression of the subject presented on the page.² Instability also emerges during the nineteenth century as poets and artists begin to confront the inadequacy of language to satisfingly express individuality and emotional experience. In the

² Ibid., 14.
course of this introduction, we will address a few general considerations that will be at play throughout the work, while also explaining the method of comparison that will be used. To frame the analysis, I will first provide a brief overview of the historical connections between Verlaine and Debussy, as well as some background about the romance as both song and poetic form. Secondly, the point of departure for this investigation in its comparison of Verlaine and Debussy's work in Romances sans paroles is the representation of subjectivity. Conceptions of poetic and musical identity will therefore be sketched out initially. Afterward, we will examine musical and poetic meaning, and how formal differences shape representations of meaning in both. Finally, an explanation of the method for comparing Verlaine's poems to Debussy's settings will be made. In this part, I will explain why taking a discursive approach is important as it respects music and poetry's formal differences, while allowing areas of similarity to emerge in a sort of dialogue without subsuming one expressive medium to the other.

Verlaine and Debussy's Connections

The links between Debussy and Verlaine are not just aesthetic; the biographical crossovers between the two artists show an interesting convergence of social, artistic and to some extent, political, sensibilities. Their first point of connection is traced to Verlaine's brother-in-law, Charles de Sivry, who was an active revolutionary during the of Commune of Paris in 1871.³ De Sivry fought alongside Debussy's father, Manuel, on the barricades in the First Arrondissement near the Louvre, a hotspot of revolutionary activity during the Commune. When Debussy's father was captured and imprisoned by the French army after, de Sivry took a personal interest in helping his friend's family. It was in this way that de Sivry became aware of young Claude-Achille Debussy's talent and potential as a musician.⁴ De Sivry's mother and Verlaine's mother-in-law, Madame

Antoinette-Flore Mauté de Fleurville, was a pianist of great skill and a well-respected teacher.\(^5\) De Sivry arranged for 10 year-old Achille to start taking lessons from Madame Mauté in 1872.

From this point on, there is a somewhat surprising void of information as to the extent of Debussy and Verlaine's personal and professional interactions. It seems not unlikely that they would have had some degree of crossover, considering Verlaine and his young wife Mathilde had just moved into Madame Mauté's apartment in Montmartre (after Verlaine lost his position with the city of Paris following his enthusiastic support of the Commune).\(^6\) The young Debussy was often in their home for piano lessons as he prepared for his entrance examinations to the prestigious Paris Conservatoire (he was admitted in 1873). However, no records of interaction exists from any point in their lives, despite the fact that Debussy would later go on to publish 19 of Verlaine's poems, almost one-third of his total output as a composer. While Debussy secured publication rights for most of the poems he put to music, there is no evidence that he did this in the case of Verlaine.\(^7\) In fact, Debussy only published one set of Verlaine's poetry during the poet's lifetime, three pieces taken from the collection, *Arriettes oubliées*, in 1891, but no commentary or reaction from Verlaine has ever been found.\(^8\)

**Background of the romance**

The poems and song settings studied in the following chapters are taken from Verlaine's *Romances sans paroles*. The collection's title immediately situates its musical-poetic orientation. A *romance* is a type of song whose origins can be traced as far back as the Middle Ages. During this time, it was performed ceremonially in courts.\(^9\) The height of its popularity followed the French

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5. There are suggestions that Madame Mauté may have even been a student of Chopin in her younger years. These claims, however, are largely just that; they can be found in her daughter, Mathilde de Mauté's diary but are unsubstantiated by any actual evidence. Edward Lockspeiser. *Debussy, His Life and Mind*, 21.


Revolution, when its transition from art form to popular song took place. The romance has a long and diverse history, but its dual application in music and poetry is what is of interest here. A romance can describe a poem that treats especially sentimental or emotive material. On the other hand, it may also refer to the specific musical form a poem like this takes when it is set to music and sung. Rousseau provides a helpful explanation of how the romance deftly unites the two realms of music and poetry.

[…] air sur lequel on chante un petit Poème du même nom, divisé par couplets, duquel le sujet est pour l'ordinaire quelque histoire amoureuse et souvent tragique. Comme la Romance doit être écrite d'un style simple, touchant et d'un goût un peu antique l'air doit répondre au caractère des paroles; point d'ornements, rien de maniére, une mélodie douce, naturelle champêtre, qui produise son effet par elle-même, indépendamment de la manière de la Chanter.

“[…] an air from which sings a little poem of the same name, which is divided into couplets whose subject is usually some, often tragic, love story. Like the musical Romance, it must be written in a simple style, with an emotive and slightly old-fashioned disposition that responds to the character of the words. No ornaments, nothing contrived, a sweet melody, naturally pastoral, which creates its effect itself, independently of the way in which it is sung”

The simple style of the romance attempts to seamlessly weave together poetry and song so that the “tune responds to the character of the words”; a convergence of poetic and musical material that likely would have appealed to the both Debussy and Verlaine.

Another possible source for the title of Verlaine's 1874 recueil may be Felix Mendelssohn's Romances sans paroles, a collection of piano music comprised of eight different books, published between 1829 and 1845. The short, lyrical pieces of Mendelssohn's collection are certainly consistent with the simple, emotive style of the romance but are purely instrumental, containing no sung material.

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12 Unless otherwise indicated, all translations in this work are my own.
13 Pascal Lécroart, art. cit., 232.
Musical and Poetic Subjectivity

The comparison of musical and poetic subjectivity is of particular importance in evaluating the project of *Romances sans paroles*. Both Verlaine and Debussy take a new approach to subjectivity, one that understands identity not as a reliable or unified fulness, but as a concatenation of unique characteristics, over which a phenomenological structure of temporal and spatial continuity is superimposed, articulating a sense of continuousness. The argument in the following chapters will be that the notion of identity as coherent and stable is a misprision, and that it is challenged in the processes taken up by Debussy and Verlaine as they seek to trouble the boundaries that delimit traditional constructs of the subject. Debussy's *Ariettes* and Verlaine's poems in *Romances sans paroles* propose instead that the identity of the subject actually rests in its failure to adhere to idealistic constructs of completeness. The unique procedures by which meaning is conveyed in music versus poetry have a great deal to do with their expressive differences, poetry drawing upon linguistic material and music dealing in nonverbal sonorities. Formal discontinuity does not prevent music and poetry from communicating similar ideas, however. In fact, juxtaposing music with poetry enriches the interpretive process by adding additional layers of meaning by calling attention musically to key areas in the poetic text.

Language is a form of material communication that mediates between interior affect and experience and its external communication. Because it is expressed in a language of signifiers that represent, or point toward such sensation, the poetic text is disjointed from a pure linkage to the innermost feelings of the poet. This initiates a splitting (*dédoulement*) between the poet and the “poetic subject” that appears on the page, which is only ever an approximation of the poet’s interior experience, mediated by language. However, such a split allows for an exploration of meaning and subjective expression that is textual, relegated to the space of the poem, and not necessarily tied to the poet's individuality or personal emotion. Textual representation initiates a shared space between
creator and reader, in which “subject” and “object” both find themselves in some sense implicated by the text, and in which the feelings initially proposed and written by the author become transferred to and experienced uniquely by the reader through the process of reading. Victor Hugo proposes the text as a mirror, creating an intimate equivalency between the writer and reader wherein the process of reading the text automatically involves the reader in it. “Prenez donc ce miroir, et regardez-vous-y. On se plaint quelquefois des écrivains qui disent moi. Parlez-nous de nous, leur crie-t-on. Hélas ! Quand je vous parle de moi, je parle de vous ! Comment ne le sentez-vous pas ? Ah ! Insensé qui crois que je ne suis pas toi! (Take [the text] then, as a mirror, and look at yourselves in it. People complain sometimes about writers who talk only of “me”. Talk about us, they cry. Alas! When I refer to myself, I also refer to you. How can you not see this? Ah! Foolish, those who believe that 'I' am not 'you'!).”

The textual space of the poem is not only the expressive material of the author, but a shared space in which experiences felt by one are transferred to the page, and then taken up by the reader.

Music works in a similar way; its meaning also exists in a shared space of constant dialogue between composer and listener. The composer may be its creator, but since music is performed and heard, its emotional relevance and effects are scattered and internalized by those who hear it, expanding its “subjects” far beyond the creative génie of the artist. Therefore, arriving at an “origin” or stable source of musical subjectivity is impossible; instead, musical subjectivity is infinitely divisible and expansive. As Lawrence Kramer puts it, “...[musical] subjectivity has no single origin or locale, it does not belong to any of the persons, living or dead, real or imaginary, engaged in the occasion of music, yet it belongs to all them at once...it is the simulacrum for an

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15 The problematic of multiplicity in the singular expression of a poetic subject was significant in nineteenth century poetry, and is explored notably by Victor Hugo. His own status in nineteenth century literature and poetry is of critical importance in shaping poetic techniques and strategies undertaken by later poets. Verlaine himself sent one of his first poems, “La Mort,” to Hugo when he was only 14 years old. Yann Frémy, Verlaine: La parole ou l'oubli (Paris: Academia, 2013), 152-153.
original subjectivity that appears only in the multiplication of simulacra.”

However, musical subjectivity is in some ways more difficult to define, as it does not rely on denotative linguistic structures to convey feelings. Even in vocal music, words are secondary to the musical expression that underlies and exceeds them. It is not possible to use the words of a song to exhaustively account for its emotional effect (as in poetry, music is the expression of feeling, but just whose feeling is less clear). With an understanding and acknowledgment of formal difference, we can move forward in an informed comparison that respects each medium's unique strategies and capacity for expression.

Musical and Poetic Meaning

While we will be investigating questions of subjectivity as they are presented in Verlaine's poems and Debussy's settings of these texts, it will be useful to begin with some idea of the interaction between poetry and music more broadly. One point of departure for the comparison of music and poetry is acknowledging that while they differ in expressive material, both seek to convey meaning. Questions surrounding expression and the subject were appreciated by Debussy, and handled musically in his transcriptions of the five poems of *Ariettes oubliées* 1885-1887. Music enjoys a certain freedom from the semantic strictures that words obey. However, as Lawrence Kramer notes, this has not always been the case. Prior to the eighteenth century, music's significance was inseparable from its role as supportive of a text. The nineteenth century gave rise to revolutionary shifts in ideas about the role of music, particularly as music distinguished itself from a basis in words or incanted texts (such as opera, song, hymns, etc.). For the first time in Western tradition, composers began to search for an extra-verbal presence of musical meaning.

This is not to imply, however, that non-verbal significance in music and semantic meaning

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in language are entirely opposed to each other. Lawrence Kramer points to the dimension of figural language and illustrative narrative as ways in which we might see a convergence, or even a seepage between these two categories. “Addressing the nonverbal, communicating indirectly what cannot be directly conveyed in words is one of the most traditional roles of language, and one of the richest in terms of technique.” Indeed, the use of figural language is a distinctly poetic device for intimating meaning that is basic to poetic communication. Methods of figurative language, like irony and allegory transcend direct meaning between word and signified and suggest presences of other, latent meanings. Figurative devices work to evoke meaningfulness rather than attempt to make narrative explain.

The evolution of an independent musical hermeneutic must be understood in light of the social and political changes taking place in Europe during the nineteenth century. The search for a more liberated, enigmatic musical and poetic meaning beyond the semantic frontiers of language developed as a resistance to increasingly severe regulation of artistic expression, both from overt political censure as well as from a social climate unfavorable to forms of non-traditional expression and dissent. Changing conceptions of meaning in poetry and music may be understood in the context of one another: “From a theoretical point of view, this realignment [of poetry and music] is the rise of their convergence itself.” The redefinition of poetic and musical significance not only paralleled one another, but allowed for a side-by-side consideration of the two forms. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, a certain expressive affinity developed between poetry and music, both grounded in the same “preconscious sources,” to use Kramer's term. As Debussy

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19 Ibid., 14.
21 Lawrence Kramer, op. cit., 17
22 This “development” at the beginning of the nineteenth is certainly not the first time that a connection between poetry and music had been thought of. Affinity between the two expressive forms has been observed since antiquity, and has been steadily evolving and transforming since the Middle Ages, including important compositional shifts that have redefined the relationship between music and word, in developments from linear counterpoint to simultaneous harmony, for example.
observed, “[music] is not even the expression of a feeling, it's the feeling itself”. 23

Acknowledging that poetic techniques often privilege sensation and the prosodic dimensions of language over and above even the semantic implication of words, it cannot be ignored that poetry and music still differ formally in critical ways. However, their discontinuity is not to be seen as an irreconcilable or irreparable division. Prior to the nineteenth century, musical and poetic form for the most part aimed at presenting a coherent, self-contained statement, one based on a sense of completion and rationality (demonstrated by forms like the sonata and aria in music, or the sonnet in poetry). However, the convergence of music and poetry, particularly of interest to musicians and poets during the Symbolist movement, with which Debussy and Verlaine were both engaged to varying degrees (more tangentially in Verlaine's case) necessarily initiates a confrontation of the differences between the two forms.

The challenge in taking music and poetry together is striking a balance between acknowledging their differences, while seeking connections where similar content may be communicated via different syntaxes. In looking for points of correspondence, it can be tempting to reconcile or flatten out the formal and expressive differences that prevent us from making a neat comparison. For this reason, it is important to take a discursive approach in treating the two side by side. A discursive method recognizes that both poetic language and music are culturally produced categories, and as such will reflect the constructed beliefs and values of the society that creates them. The importance of such an approach is twofold in our study of subjectivity in music and poetry: firstly, it reveals the ways in which concepts of subjectivity are informed by the cultural beliefs and values, and as a result, their contingency. Secondly, seeing poetry and music in a discourse encourages a communication between the forms that respects their individual integrity, as well as the discontinuities inevitably exposed in their comparison. In the contradictory and irregular territory where music and poetry at once seem to come together and pull apart, a

proliferation of new meanings might emerge that are indeed based in their failure to line up exactly.

Music and Poetry in Discourse

Novel ways of understanding poetic and musical subjectivity can arise from such discursive comparison as well. Difference does not threaten the concept of identity itself; rather it challenges the assumption that identity as a category must be consist of a complete, unified and unequivocal expression of individuality. A discursive approach respects the concept of the subject, but proposes that subjective identity does not lie in a complete, unified wholeness, but is defined instead by its multiplicity and resistance to coherence. The subject is seen as emergent through discontinuities and instability. The premise of subjective identity is preserved, but the need for its definition as a unity is called into question: “A work based on a discursive model can admit discontinuities and perplexities of all sorts without risking its formal coherence” (Kramer, 17). The ways in which the poem and composition do not and can never hope to align as a result of their signifying asymmetries actually initiates a productive territory between the two, and one that acknowledges that ambiguity, contradiction, and indecipherability will always be implicit in their comparison. Positioning poetry and music in terms of a discourse will help to understand many of the ideas explored in the following chapters, with respect to a comparison of Verlaine and Debussy's work.

Poetic and Musical “Translation”

The mobility and obscurity of musical and poetic meaning acts instead as an area of correspondence, in which a process of “translation” occurs between two different forms. Here, translated meaning is not a resolution produced through analytic explanation, but rather a discursive contrast that respects the terms of poetic and musical expression while allowing certain areas of similarity to emerge and increase our understanding of both. In Peter Dayan's study of what he terms “interart” expression, particularly in the Symbolist movement at the end of the nineteenth
century, he lays out five laws of what he terms the “interart aesthetic”.\textsuperscript{24} One of the laws states that we must be careful not to conflate \textit{interaction} between two art forms with \textit{equivalence}.

The second law of the interart aesthetic is that between art in any two different media (for example, poetry and music), any equivalence must always be \textit{incalculable}. There can be no direct translation, and no unproblematic collaboration. Poetic form, for example, cannot gain any value by imitating musical form; conversely, a piece of music ceases to be music if it aims to model its meaning on that of words.\textsuperscript{25}

The distinction between interaction and equivalence is of particular importance for our study, which explores musical transcriptions of corresponding poems. Given that Verlaine's poems precede and to some extent, inform Debussy's settings, it might be tempting to see the poetic texts as foundational or primary. However, such an approach would privilege the poem as preeminent without respecting the independence of the musical setting. As I will attempt to establish throughout the next chapters, artistic creation as conceived by both Verlaine and Debussy cannot be reduced to simple mimetic replication of a prior text or image. Rather, artistic output is the offering-forth of an interior and highly personal process of meaning-making. Debussy's settings are in this sense in no way beholden to, or even musical expressions of Verlaine's poems. Rather, they are unique, creative productions that may point to similarities between ideas initiated by the text, but are autonomous works whose significances are at once materially distinct and expressively different than their textual antecedents. It is certainly true that Debussy was drawn to these poems because he shared an aesthetic vision similar to that of Verlaine. Thus, his musical settings are quite sensitively attuned to the kind of poetic procedures and ideas Verlaine introduces and we can be relatively confident in seeing connections between the two. Common elements of indecipherability, ambiguity and lyrical, sonorous suggestion as opposed to the established symbolic equivalency of the \textit{mot juste} appear frequently in both artists' work.

The discursive, translational process undertaken in the comparison of Verlaine's poetic texts

\textsuperscript{24} Peter Dayan, \textit{Art as Music, Music as Poetry, Poetry as Art, from Whistler to Stravinsky and Beyond} (Surrey, UK: Ashgate, 2011), 3.

\textsuperscript{25} Peter Dayan, \textit{op. cit.}, 4-5
to Debussy's musical settings open up new possibilities for understanding subjectivity. Such comparative approaches are not limited to a constant, stable, idealized version of what should constitute the identity of a subject. Formal discontinuities between the poem and musical setting allow for the overflow of meanings that exceed boundaries between the two. As Dominique Rabaté explains, “[I]l sujet lyrique n'est donc pas à entendre comme un donné qui s'exprime selon un certain langage, la langue change en chant mais comme un procès, une quête d'identité” (The lyric subject should therefore not be understood as a given that can be explained according to a certain language, a language change into song, but as a process, a search for identity). Through the mobility and often discontinuous convergences between music and poetry, subjectivity is re-conceived as a process in itself, not an exhaustive or stable category filled by the individual, but rather as a dynamic production of meaning accomplished through its own mutability and inconsistency.

In each of the following chapters, the focus of comparison will be between a poem taken from Romances sans paroles and its accompanying musical setting. In each chapter, a central problematic that is addressed in both the poetic text and transcription will act as the point de départ and organizing thematic from which an exploration of subjectivity will be launched. In Chapter 1, the poetic subject finds expression through alternative modes in Verlaine's “C'est l'extase,” where the sonorous dimension of words suggests an affinity between prosodic sensation and musical experience. In Chapter 2, clear boundaries between interior and exterior are broken down in the poem “Il pleure dans mon coeur”. Mobility and flux emerge as a common source of instability in both artists' work in Chapter 3, where rhythmic indecipherability in “Spleen” reveals the fiction of a continuous temporal subject, instead emphasizing the mutability of a subject constantly operated on by the passage of time. In the final chapter, the poem, “L'ombre des arbres” we will look at how the subject grapples with alterity through an encounter with its reflection. The clear, delineated

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boundaries between subject as stable source versus reflected image become clouded, forcing the subject to contend with itself as an indeterminate part of a discourse with its the reflected image, rather than the unequivocal source.
Chapter 1: Sensing Subjectivity in “C’est l’extase”

Verlaine’s interest in exploring the aesthetics of sensation can be traced to his participation with the Parnasse movement in French poetry, several years before the publication of *Romances sans paroles.* In a letter to Mallarmé in 1866, Verlaine writes of his “efforts vers l’Expression, vers la Sensation rendue” (efforts toward expression, toward rendering Sensation). Debussy describes music not as evocative of a meaning but as pure expression itself. In Verlaine's *Romances sans paroles,* allusions to music occur in a variety of ways: via the form of a *romance,* which is initially a song-form; through explicit references made to instruments and music inscribed in various poems in the collection (particularly, *Ariette V*); and in the material, prosodic qualities of words and their arrangement (i.e. rhyme, rhythm). Musical references continually remind the reader of the centrality of sound. Aural sensation is critical to evaluating the poems of Verlaine's *Romances sans paroles,* considered to be among his most musical poetry. In this collection, the sensory experience in poetic language and music call attention to the relationship between the two aesthetic forms. Verlaine's “C'est l'extase langoureuse...” is saturated with rich rime, sonorities, internal assonances and delicate rhythms, demonstrating a poetic use of language that explores its sensory and expressive possibilities outside the abstract, denotative implications of words. The sonorous dimension of Verlaine's text emphasizes a more musical orientation and attempts to draw attention to a potential of meaning that is not merely rooted in referential function. The ability to sense and feel belies the active presence of a subject, one whose feeling becomes not only the

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29 *c.f., supra,* Introduction, p. 8.

30 Musical instruments figure prominently in a number of the *Ariettes,* most significantly perhaps, *Ariette II,* with its references to a “piano”, “musiciennes” and “lyre”.

18
creator's, but also the internalized experience of the reader or listener when they encounter the text. Shared sensation between creator and receiver arises from the text or composition and is not exhausted in one subject, but is replicated and extended to as many different audiences as receive the text. In this chapter, we will look at how sensation acts as a shared musical and poetic language, one that is not fulfilled in an individual subject, but extended and replicated. This shared language of sensation and expanded subjectivity will act as a point of convergence between the two forms in “C'est l'extase”.

While Debussy's interest in Verlaine's work extends far beyond this most explicitly musical collection, the converging sensibilities of each artist are on display here, and their shared interest in exploring sensation, duality, and artistic subjectivity at the limits of conventional expression is particularly prominent in *Romances sans paroles*. The poem we will look at in this chapter is called “C'est l'extase,” from the section of the collection entitled, *Ariettes oubliées*.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>C'est l'extase</th>
<th>This is Ecstasy</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 C'est l'extase langoureuse,</td>
<td>1 It is languorous ecstasy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C'est la fatigue amoureuse,</td>
<td>It is love's weariness,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C'est tous les frissons des bois</td>
<td>It's all the shuddering of the woods</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parmi l'étreinte des brises,</td>
<td>Amid the breezes' embrace</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 C'est, vers les ramures grises,</td>
<td>5 It is, toward the gray boughs,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Le choeur des petites voix.</td>
<td>The chorus of little voices.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>O le frêle et frais murmure!</td>
<td>Oh, the frail cool murmur,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cela gazouille et susurre,</td>
<td>There are twitterings and whispers,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cela ressemble au cri doux</td>
<td>It's like the gentle cry</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10 Que l'herbe agitée expire …</td>
<td>10 Which ruffled grass breathes out</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tu dirais, sous l'eau qui vire,</td>
<td>You might say, under the water eddying,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Le roulis sourd des cailloux.</td>
<td>The muted rolling of pebbles.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cette âme qui se lamente</td>
<td>This soul which laments</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>En cette plainte dormante</td>
<td>In this subdued plaint,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15 C'est la nôtre, n'est-ce pas?</td>
<td>15 It is ours, isn't it?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>La mienne, dis, et la tienne,</td>
<td>Mine, you know, and yours,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dont s'exhale l'humble antienne</td>
<td>Which exhales a humble refrain</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Par ce tiède soir, tout bas?31 So softly, on this warm evening.

Verlaine published this first *ariette* as a single submission in the journal *La Rennaissance littéraire et artistique* in May of 1872. It first appeared under the title, “Romance sans parole,” which of course eventually became the title of the entire collection.32 The exchange of title sets up an interesting correspondence between the “ecstasy” introduced in the first line of the poem and the ultimate title of the collection. The “extase langoureuse” of the poetic subject suggests a visceral sensory experience that belongs to the realm of sensation that is paradoxically mediated by language. In other words, desire and ecstasy cannot be written about to be felt, they must be directly experienced. *Extase* could be read as a translation of the “romance sans parole,” a “romance without words,” one that must be sensed and felt to be known, and cannot easily be accounted for through narrative explanation. “Romance” then refers as much to a song-form as to the ecstasy of a sexual union whose meaning signals the limits of linguistic appropriation.

*Romances sans paroles* thus introduces an initial paradox: these are quite clearly not songs *without* words; as poems, they necessarily deal in language. And even after Debussy is finished with them, the words of the poem are still very much present, though sung. Words appear, but in unconventional organizations whose phrasing privileges the rhythmic and prosodic qualities of the words far more than their meaningful combination in the phrase. The reader is well aware of being within the language of the poem, but denotative language becomes secondary to other potentialities of word combinations. As Mallarmé points out in his famous 1887 lecture, *Crise de vers*,

Les langues imparfaites en cela que plusieurs, manque la suprême: penser étant écrire sans accessoires, ni chuchotement mais tacite encore l’immortelle parole, la diversité, sur terre, des idiomes empêche personne de proférer les mots qui, sinon se trouveraient, par une frappe unique, elle-même matériellement la vérité...mais, sur l’heure, tourné à de l’esthétique, mon sens regrette que le discours défaille à exprimer les objets par des touches y répondant en coloris ou en allure, lesquelles existent dans l’instrument de la voix, parmi les langages et quelquefois chez un.33

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Languages, which are imperfect insofar as they are many, lack the supreme language, because thinking is like writing without instruments; not a whispering but a still keeping silent, the immortal world, the diversity of idioms on earth, prevents anyone from proffering which would otherwise be at their disposal, each uniquely minted and in themselves revealing the material truth...as soon as my mind turns toward aesthetics, I regret that speech fails to express objects by marks which correspond to them in color and movement, marks that exist in the instrument of the voice, among languages and sometimes in a single language.\(^{34}\)

In the above passage from *Crise de vers*, Mallarmé points to a divide between the materiality of words and the arbitrarily assigned symbolic nature of their semiotic meaning. The sound of a signifier is not necessarily evocative of its signified. This is a reality of language that Verlaine was acutely aware of as well, and which is particularly important to consider with respect to the dynamic process of meaning-making in music versus poetry. Peter Dayan explores some aesthetic differences between music and poetry in his first chapter of *Music Writing Literature*, “Translating the Raindrop”. In this chapter, Dayan investigates the process of musical “translation” of rain in a Chopin prelude. He differentiates between the process of translation between words (for instance, between words of different languages) and how this can be understood differently from the process of “translation” that takes place between words and music.

The rain has to go through a process of translation that deprives it of its objective character. But if its sound is not preserved, what is? For if, as I translate 'pluie' by 'rain', I lose the sound of the word, nonetheless there is something that remains the same, or nearly the same for certain practical purposes: the signified, the mental image conjured up by the word. But there seems to be no such signified, no such stable equivalence which survives the sublimating translation from rain to prelude.\(^{35}\)

In Dayan's analysis, we can see how, while the specific signifier of a word may change from language to language, the evocation of a signified beyond the word stays relatively constant.\(^{36}\) In

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\(^{34}\) Eugène Fasquelle, éd. (Paris: Bibliothèque-Charpentier, 1897) 235-251


\(^{36}\) Peter Dayan, *Music Writing Literature, from Sand via Debussy to Derrida* (Hampshire, England: Ashgate, 2006), 7. To make an important qualification: stability of the signified is always mediated by various cultural expectations and conventions, and the entire system of language must be understood within these parameters. However, if we take, as Dayan suggests, the transition from music to poetry as a sort of translative process, we can reasonably assume certain common understanding of signifieds that are formulated according to the same social and historical context
music, on the other hand, this association is not so concrete. Evocation is not imitation, nor is it direct symbolic correspondence; musical translation is more metonymic than metaphoric, more based in underscoring organic similarities rather than forging arbitrary connections, or metaphors.

The title of the collection as well as the structure of the romance, acts as something of an indictment of language, at once using it and turning it back upon itself in order to break down its conventional, semantic praxis through a privileging of language's aural functions that comprise their own system of meaning. This “double articulation” of the signifying dimension of words and the sensation of their poetic function can be found in the title of the collection, Romances sans paroles. 37 The fact that these are going to be “songs without words” sets up an initial paradox, as the romance is by definition a form dedicated to the intersection of words and music. In “sans” we might also detect an approximate echo of the preceding syllable, “Rom-ANCES”. 38 Such an encounter demonstrates “chiasmus of sonority,” a crossing between words and sounds, between language and music.

The sublimation of words in favor of their sensory, material potential can be read in the chiasmus between “rom-ances” and “sans” ([ä:s] and [s:ä]), sounds that reverse and effectively undo each other, depleting the significative potential of the sign. In addition, the section Ariettes oubliées (“forgotten Ariettes”), from which we will take the poem “C'est l'extase,” seems to extend this complication. As Christian Hervé again points out, the Ariettes indeed would be forgotten if they didn’t have words. If the musicality of words is what is of most importance here, the words themselves must still be present as the poem's material building blocks, but they are deployed in ways that emphasize the importance of sound and its value as a source of extra-referential meaning within the text. Such a privileging of sound aligns well with the way that meaning is presented in music. As Peter Dayan explains, music is full of meaning but “irredeemably corrosive of


The Subject in the Phrase

In “C’est l’extase,” the search for a continuous and stable subject is complicated from the beginning. Rather than an explicit line or extended idea that would indicate something about the subject, Verlaine offers us a series of juxtaposed thoughts. In what seems an effort to underscore their disjointedness, to prevent us from seeking some sort of larger, flowing connection, their structure is repeated. (“C'est l'extase...C'est la fatigue...”). The description of the sensation proceeds the introduction of the subject, ostensibly the one experiencing these sensations. The presentative c’est initiates a statement but offers no subject explicitly; as a result, we are left searching for the subject to whom this “ecstasy” might belong. The sensations are not rooted to a concrete subject until the fourth line of the third strophe (“C’est la nôtre, n'est-ce pas?”), and even at this point, the subject is not stated, but posed through a question. “C’est l'extase,” and Debussy's transcription thus pushes us to conceive of the subject behind this interrogative uncertainty. The sensations themselves are introduced textually, seemingly detached from a subject. Demonstrative pronouns and adjectives like “c'est” (it is), “cela” (it), “cette” (this) introduce feelings, prompting the reader to assume the extra-textual presence of a subject beyond the limits of the text. As Emile Benveniste explains, deictics are markers of the subject in language, even if their reference is more discreet than a personal pronoun: “Other classes of pronouns that share the [subjective] status depend in their turn upon [personal] pronouns. These other classes are the indicators of deixis the demonstrates, adverbs, and adjectives, which organize the spatial and temporal relationships around the “subject” taken as a referent...” Jean-Pierre Richard suggests that setting up these sensations without explicit textual attachment to a specified subject is evocative of a “tristesse anonyme” (an

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This sensation transcends the lyrical subject to embody a more general and pervasive suffering, one that is not confined to the individual. Even at this point, the mysterious subject comes to us in the possessive of the first-person plural, notre (“ours”). If we assume that the subject (or subjects, as appears to be the case here) was always implicitly present in the poem as the source of these sensations, we might understand how Verlaine proposes an “extra-linguistic” subject, one whose presence is always inaugurated by the énonciation but whose presence is only implied (and even then, it is through the uncertain appeal, “c'est la nôtre, n'est-ce pas?”). We must recognize the subject is there at some level in order to account for these textually disembodied sensations; but when Verlaine refrains from announcing the subject outright, he recognizes its ability to exist in a much freer, dialogical way.

Sensation as Fragment

Arnaud Bernadet notes that the ariette is a form that sees the gradual disappearance of melody: “La morphologie du mot “arietta” emprunté au XIIIe à l’italien et dérivé lui-même de “aria” va dans le sens d'un decrescendo au point de rendre imperceptible la sensation de la mélodie” (The morphology of the word, arietta, borrowed from the eighteenth century Italian and derived from “aria” is suggestive of a diminuendo to that descends to the the point of making the melody imperceptible). The broader, formal structure of the ariette is itself suggestive of a kind of narrative or melodic depletion. Rather than offering a flow of continuous thoughts or ideas, Verlaine's “C'est l'extase” instead presents a series of fragments that are constantly interrupted and isolated by the demonstrative pronouns and adjectives that preface each independent idea. This trend is echoed in Debussy's setting of the poem. One of Debussy's characteristic, and most unconventional compositional practices was to organize his pieces into two-block harmonic units. Roy Howat continues his study of Debussy's development in the Ariettes by tracing a change in

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42 Arnaud Bernadet, op. cit., 114.
how the composer shapes “dramatic events,” the moments of obvious climax or highest points of accumulated tension. Furthermore, Debussy is as well-recognized for his focus on harmony as for his non-conformity with classical harmonic structures. “When we say that Debussy's characteristic harmony is often independent of its tonal function (at least as we define tonal function according to the principles of common practice), we mean that he chooses a harmony first and foremost for its value as sound and sonority.”

Debussy was more interested in the independent sounds of harmonies, rather than as supportive operation of traditional harmonic models, based on the movement between the tonic and dominant. Debussy emphasized harmonic autonomy in “C'est l'extase” through its organization into “two-bar blocks”, which Boyd Pomeroy defines as one of the elemental structural components of Debussy's music. Two-bar blocks describe the continuation of a thematic motive over two measures. Rather than activity supportive of longer melodic or phrasal expressions, Debussy often divides his pieces into two-measure units of harmonic similarity. “The units' identity is established by symmetrically-balanced contrast and juxtaposition in factors such as motive, texture, and harmonic rhythm; larger form is generated by the hierarchical chaining of units and compounds.”

These harmonic units serve a dual purpose: they distinguish themselves as independent harmonic entities (in much the same way the unique verses in Verlaine's poem are presented), and they complement the non-goal-oriented progression of the melodic line. Their effect focuses the listener's attention to the momentary sensation of sound, rather than subsuming it under the melody. In the introduction of “C'est l'extase,” we can see an example of the two-bar block harmonic structure.

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The triads in the right hand start out high, increasing slightly in speed (eighth notes are succeeded by sixteenths in the second measure) as they fall to the tied resolution of the tonic c# minor chord (measures 3-4). This delicate release of cascading chords feels almost like a soft, lingering expiration of breath following a moment of intense climax, which we assume has preceded the slow exhale. This introduction emphasizes what is equally clear in the text of Verlaine's poem: the reader gets a glimpse of a moment that is thematically related to the “climax” of the narrative, but is related to it only by association, by reference. We have the fragmentary conclusion of the story, rather than the total narrative itself. The declining chords seem to confirm this: they give us the release of breath, without the intake. What remains is a sensation so delicately prolonged, that the music seems to beg the listener to focus on this moment of expression, distinct and valuable as it is from identification with any larger “whole”. The prolonging effect legitimizes the moment of exhale irrespective of its connection to the larger breath, or even the larger event we are witnessing the tail end of. In doing so, Debussy recognizes the validity of the fragment, and of the unique moment of sensation. As we saw earlier with the presence of the deictics in Verlaine's poem (c'est, cela, cette), the subject responsible for the sensory experiences must be inferred by their presence. Again, events that precede the exhale are implied, but are nevertheless implicated if not explicitly stated in the text or music. The dénouement of the breath also implicitly references its beginning, the intake, and thus of the whole event itself, without having to linearly represent the whole narrative.

The descending line of dominant ninth chords of in the piano introduce the “melody,” or the
sung line of verse. The dominant ninth was used sparingly in western classical music until Debussy (though Wagner is known to have experimented with it).\textsuperscript{45} Even then, it was used largely as a complement to the dominant seventh, so as to even more significantly increase the tension around a return to the tonic, by attenuating its arrival. Debussy's use of the dominant ninth is as an element of timbre that does not require a resolution. The dominant ninth in this context is its own independent dissonance, not related to or predictive of an ultimate resolution. While the dominant ninth progression eventually does reach the tonic key in the second line, the resolution is delayed for a long enough duration that the listener's attention becomes focused on the autonomous dominant ninth harmonies, rather than anticipating the tonic. Boyd Pomeroy provides some explanation for why these non-functionally tonal chords were a distinguishing feature in Debussy's music: “Debussy's surface chord successions typically serve ends of colouristic effect rather than tonal-syntactical coherence. This is especially so with respect to the frequent presence of functionally ‘superfluous’ (non-resolving) chordal sevenths and ninths.”\textsuperscript{46} The dominant ninth chord is treated as an autonomous and equivalent participant in the overall tonal sonority, allowing it to exist as a harmonically distinct instance from the overall “phrase”. Like the emphasis in Verlaine's text on distinct moments of sensation that are not necessarily tied to their expression as part of a larger narrative event, the dominant ninth leads the ear in no particular direction, allowing for an immersion and focus in the qualitative sensuousness of the moment.

The falling triads of dominant ninths are dissonances that lead to no particular resolution. They fall spatially of course, but descend in no particularly harmonic direction. The dominant ninth chord can be thought of as an even greater marker of deferral from the tonic. It is removed from tonal resolution to the tonic by two degrees, one step further than the dominant seventh, which resolves directly to the tonic. Therefore, the dominant ninth operates with even greater distance from the tonic than does the dominant seventh. This has the effect of increasing its tonal autonomy.

\textsuperscript{45} Boyd Pomeroy, \textit{art cit.}, 188-190.
\textsuperscript{46} Boyd Pomeroy, \textit{art. cit.}, 160.
as distinct from the tonic key. The cascade of dominant ninth chords in the opening measures of “C'est l'extase” affirm the non-narrative focus on momentary sensation; our attention is directed to the sonorous experience of the harmonies themselves, rather than to any larger thematic motive or structure they might serve.

Although independent sonorities are highlighted, the element of movement and transition can of course not be ignored; they do work together to produce temporal and durational effects that are evocative. Generally, however, these sonorous groups are suggestive of fragmentary images which form, dissipate and are succeeded by different groups. A single, sustained harmonic progression supportive of a melodic narrative is not what we see in Debussy's “C'est l'extase”.

Structural Organization

Equally important to linguistic representation of the subject is the structure through which language is organized. According to traditional sentence structure, we derive meaning and understand a phrase based on an overriding syntactical organization, which arranges various parts of speech in logical, or at least recognizable ways. The subject is inscribed in the language, but depicted in the phrase by means of a structure. In his analysis of Verlaine's method in Romances sans paroles, Gérard Dessons makes a distinction between the phrase (which he maintains is present in the poem) and the phrasing. “En fait, la romance sans paroles n'est pas davantage la romance sans langage que les poèmes ne sont sans phrases. C'est la question, en revanche, du phrasé, qui n'est nullement une suite de phonèmes concourant à la production d'une impression sensible.” (In fact, the romance without words is not so much the romance without language as they are poems without phrases. The question is actually one of phrasing, which is nothing but a series of concurrent phonemes that produce a meaningful impression). As Dessons conceives of it, Verlaine's

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47 For a complete discussion of the formation of the subject in language, see Emile Benveniste's “Subjectivity in Language,” in Problems in General Linguistics, cf. supra, p. 18.
poems in this collection are obviously not lacking for language; instead what is missing is the
c conventional structure of a phrase that would explicitly announce a subject to account for its
sensations. Rather, we are given only the fragmentary sensations which undercuts the narrative
structure of the phrase. In a similar way, Debussy is well-recognized for challenging conventions of
narrative structure of the musical phrase. During what is considered Debussy's “first” period (1885-
1892), he began to move farther away from traditional sequential units, which can be traced through
their harmonic consistency and thematic cohesiveness. Roy Howat summarizes this development in
*Debussy in Proportion*.

[Debussy's] earliest pieces had generally static forms, defined by contrasts of thematic
groups and tonal centers, but with relatively uniform textures and harmonies inside them. In
later works, these are replaced by less conventional sequences whose outlines are still well-
marked, but marked by different types of harmony, different degrees of chromaticism and
different types of texture, all of which also tend to change at different rates. In the process,
sustained or extended melody is progressively curtailed in favour of more compact and
plastic motivic units.⁴⁹

Debussy's *Ariettes* mark an important phase in the composer's stylistic maturity. In many ways,
they are examples of the kind of evolution and formal experimentation with melody and harmony
Howat describes. And to be sure, Verlaine's *Ariettes* seem an apt form in which to pursue a more
marked departure from traditional melodic form. *Ariettes* generally follow basic ternary form (in
which a three-part A-B-A construction, where the B section generally takes the dominant, tonic or
relative minor of the original key)⁵⁰, a structure that is flexible enough to allow the composer to
explore the relationship between melody and harmony. The interaction of melody and harmony in
Debussy's *Ariettes* is similar to Verlaine's experimentation with the narrative “melody” of words
that direct a phrase and tell a story, and the extra-referential function of words that is more
consistent with harmony.

In his essay, “Debussy's Significant Connections,” Craig Ayrery applies deconstructive

models for evaluating language to music theory. He notes that deconstruction generally encourages analysis via a comparison of discourse, rather than deferring to pre-conceived structures of analysis (which it is the project of deconstruction to decenter). He writes that seeing music as narrative has been the dominant method of music theory, but proposes that a more nuanced understanding of music as discourse instead of narrative can help disengage music from the inherent limitations of a structural approach: “Why this should be the case is no mystery: 'discourse' demands a focus on the musical signified, the most elusive and problematic dimension; 'narrative' is attractive because it reinstates the domain of the signifieds, reconstructing the unity of the sign by giving each musical signifier a referent, and permits the analyst – usually with relief – to interpret.”

The narrative approach is one of interpretive familiarity and convenience. But for evaluating a composer as iconoclastic and, indeed as resistant to conventional methods of critique as Debussy, an approach that embraces what is fragmentary, disjointed, ambiguous and non-narrative seems more appropriate. The musical subject should not be understood as developing with a sense of cohesion and unity throughout the thematic unfolding of a phrase; instead, in Debussy's music, the subject emerges through the fractious, discontinuous moments of distinct harmonic sensations. These harmonic fragments correspond to the disjointed verses of Verlaine's poem. Locating the subject in these disjunctive moments validates its presence as not necessarily dependent or only articulated via the totalizing structure of the phrase.

**Re-imagining the Subject in the Text**

The fact that the elusive subject is inaugurated in the plural, notre (“our”), also bears consideration, as we explore how Verlaine might be breaking down conventional expectations for the singular subject. The notre of verse 15 is both linguistically and metrically divided into its constitutive parts in the following verse: “La mienne, dis, et la tienne”. There are seven syllables in

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this line, and throughout the poem (according to rules of French versification, the “e” at the end of mienne is to be pronounced, as it comes before a consonant). The fourth syllable, marking the middle of the verse, falls at dis, which is itself not insignificant. Divided graphically by commas, the two groups of three syllables flank the dis in the middle. The metrical balance between the two groups, as well as the rime riche of mienne and tienne (exemplifying Verlaine's penchant for internal rhyme) with whom the sensations introduced above are apparently shared, and indeed, symmetrically divided between. The word dis, from the verb dire (“to say”) shows that the division of nôtre, into the separate mienne (“mine”) and tienne (“yours”) is spoken; their separation of the “I” from “you” is an act of language whether spoken or textual. As Benveniste explains the role of language in distinguishing persons through the titles I and you, “It is in a dialectic reality that will incorporate the two terms [I and you] and define them by mutual relationship that the linguistic basis of subjectivity is discovered.” Such an appeal, through “dis” also appears to be an appeal to the “other” that we depend upon, both in language and social interaction, to define our own identity as subjects.

Of course, the symbolic implications of this division extend far beyond the poem’s semiotic realm; but here Verlaine suggests another way of looking at things. Accepting Benveniste’s position that subjectivity is a condition of language, we can see in Verlaine's “C’est l’extase” not so much the disappearance of the subject, but rather an opportunity to regard it differently. The subject is still based in the text, as the sensation described refers to its presence, extra-textual as it is for the first part of the poem. But Verlaine reverses the conventional referential system. Now the normally

53 It should be noted here that “C’est l’extase” represents an example of what is called “vers impairs” in French versification. The “vers impairs” refers to any verse whose meter is an odd number of syllables. Because most French verse is written in lines with an even number of syllables (the most common being the 12-syllable alexandrin, the décasyllabe, and the octosyllabe, with 10 and 8 syllables, respectively), the vers impairs has been traditionally understood to have a destabilizing effect on the verse, creating rhythmic uncertainty. However, more recent scholarship (see Benoît de Cornulier’s *Théorie du vers,* 1982) has suggested that the only “destabilizing” effect the vers impairs probably had was to the glorious tradition of French versification, constituting much less of a threat to the metrical and rhythmic balance of the verse itself.
55 Émile Benveniste, *op. cit.*, 225.
ambiguous and inaccessible sensation refers to the presence of a subject, rather than being announced explicitly by the presence of personal pronouns. The subject’s sensations precede its enunciation, suggesting that it is perhaps the feelings themselves that constitute subjective experience and identity. The *nôtre*, arriving finally as the source to account for these sensations encourages us to re-think subjectivity as the domain of the *individual*, but instead as a shared union, or togetherness.

If a subject is introduced through language, it is also possible for language to help redefine it. We can read something politically astute in the *nôtre*, as it relates to language and sensation: individual subjectivity is shown to be constructed formally, through language, revealed to be something culturally and historically determined. Verlaine shows this construction through the contrast in his approach to the traditional “lyrical subject,” in which the speaker in the poem occupies a space of individual authority. In “C'est l'extase,” however, the feelings expressed are ultimately found to be shared not by one, but by two participating subjects. In this way, Verlaine's poem not only suggests the dual potential of language: both as a space of constraint but also, with poetic language especially, as a place where these very historical constraints (i.e. of defining subjectivity as individual) might be resisted and re-evaluated. In *Le Plaisir du texte*, Barthes explains this idea of the text as a potentially disruptive tool in his definition of a “texte de jouissance” : “Texte de jouissance: celui qui déconforte (peut-être jusqu'à un certain ennui), fait vaciller les assises historiques, culturelles, psychologiques, du lecteur, la consistance de ses goûts, de ses valeurs et de ses souvenirs, met en crise son rapport au langage (a text of play: one which discomforts (perhaps to the point of troubling) in order to destabilize the historical, cultural and psychological convictions of the reader, the consistency of their tastes, values and memories, creating a crisis with respect to their relationship to language).”

A focus on the sensory experience of poetic language, as opposed to the strict equivalence made between words, induces a

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of freer “playfulness” that is useful in considering comparisons of musical and poetic meaning as well as in exploring other options for subjectivity.

The “Sense” of Musical and Poetic Meaning in “C'est l'extase”

If we understand the subject as inaugurated by the writing process, it follows that subjectivity and meaning are not only inscribed in the syntax of the phrase, from which a cohesive semantic meaning is conveyed, but also in the extra-referential function, such as the sounds, rhythm and harmonies created by their arrangement. It is for this reason that Verlaine invokes music – to call attention to the importance and potential sources of meaning in this extra-narrative territory. In his discussion of the Ariettes oubliées, Arnaud Bernadet identifies the difference between phonemes and morphemes.57 A phoneme is the smallest unit of sound that does not carry meaning in and of itself, but creates slight differences that distinguish separate words.58 A morpheme, is the smallest meaningful unit of sound. Morphemes are part of the symbolic relationship of language; they are signifiers that refer to a signified object. The sounds of Verlaine's “C'est l'extase,” are almost more immediate and palpable than the semantic dimension of the words. Their abstract meaning seems even to fade behind the richness of the word's combinatory, poetic functions (rhyme, alliteration, assonance, etc). The way the words feel as they are read, sung or recited is a reference itself to the importance of sensation in the poem. Certainly an emphasis on the words' musical sensation finds even greater expression as they are put to music and sung in Debussy's transcription. In “C'est l'extase,” the temporal progress of the introductory descending chords is clear. But as with the “languor” of ecstasy, Debussy creates the impression of timeless suspension. Debussy accomplishes this suspension by his use of non-functional dominant ninths as parts of a whole tone scale (which lack the semitones that create for the listener an expectation of harmonic resolution).

It is certainly situated within time, but the music, particularly of the piano accompaniment, does all

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57 Arnaud Bernadet, op. cit., 114-115.
58 For example, in English: the words “bat” and “pat” are distinguished by a single phonetic difference, between the “b” and the “p”, simple units of sound that nevertheless change the meaning of the words entirely.
it can to emphasize and extend thematically, even if it is unable to temporally, the sensation of ecstasy.

Verlaine's interest in rhyme is well-recognized, not just for its role as operative link between verses (such end rhymes that repeat throughout the poem, creating links between verses), but within the phrase itself: “fréquentes allitérations, quelque chose comme de l'assonance souvent dans le corps du vers, rimes plutôt rares que riches” (Frequent alliterations, something like assonances often found within the body of the verse, rimes that are more rare than rich). 59 Verlaine's attention to sonority, rather than just the functional role of rhyme in tying together two verses, is complemented by a similar feature in Debussy's music. In the poem, emphasis on the phonological quality of words affirms its musical orientation. Musical meaning is problematic because it does not fit the signifier/signified logic of language. 60 David Clarke advises caution in unquestioningly applying formalist accounts of poetry and linguistics to music, as these “provide models which are of necessity metalinguistic, since they are formulated in a language other than that of the music under scrutiny”. 61 This means that it is not entirely accurate or fair to apply the phonological privileging of signifiers in Verlaine's poem to the musical setting. When we make accounts of “what we hear in music” most people are apt to give an explanation in language, and certainly this is what music theory and analysis deals in. However, such a “narrative” approach, as Craig Ayrey labels it, only “reconstructs the unity of the sign by giving each musical signifier a referent”. 62 Music does not obey the structure of language; it does not contain the same relationship between signifier and signified. In fact, the idea of reference in music is constructed only when attempts are made to account for it in words (for example, when we attempt to have music “evoke” certain images, like rain, clouds, etc.). Thus, evaluating music in linguistic terms will always fail to compensate for the

fact that structurally, language and music are not the same, and one cannot be used to “explain” the other. As Barthes describes, in his account of music as an isologic language:

The signified has no materialization other than its typical signifier; one cannot therefore handle it except by imposing on it a metalanguage. One can for instance ask some subjects about the meaning they attribute to a piece of music by submitting to them a list of verbalized signifieds...whereas in fact all these verbal signs for a single musical signified ought to be designated by one single cipher which would imply no verbal dissection and no metaphorical small change.  

The linguistic account of music is a forged metaphorical equivalency; it is the arbitrary substitution of one thing to stand in for another, unrelated phenomenon. Said otherwise, it is a mistake to appropriate a linguistic model of meaning to evaluating of music, which is expressively, formally and significantly different than language. Using language to try to demystify music may not be the most useful or appropriate way to respect the formal differences between music and poetry. To my mind, this metaphoric substitution also sets up a power dynamic in which the object being “explained” is sublimated into the terms of the symbol that now accounts for it. Instead, a more discursive method of comparison admits differences between two modes and allows for a contiguous, metonymic association to emerge. The emphasis on sensation in the poem and musical setting of “C'est l'extase” reveals an organic, sensory contiguousness between phonological expression of the poetic subject and the musical subject inscribed in Debussy's setting.

The emphasis on sensation in Verlaine's “C'est l'extase” is echoed in Debussy's setting of the song. The privileging of sensory experience in both music and poetry encourages a re-conception of the subject, which is still inaugurated by the text or musical composition. The phonological qualities of language evoked in Verlaine's poem encourage a more “musical” consideration of the text, one that looks beyond the semiological equivalencies of language. In highlighting a search for the subject beyond the abstract, symbolic implications of the text, the opportunity for a freer and more contiguous correspondence between musical and poetic structures and meaning is opened up.

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In the following chapter, we will continue to investigate how subjectivity is portrayed in music and poetry in *Romances sans paroles* through looking at the subject's relationship to its interior feeling and their exterior representation in the poem, “Il pleure dans mon coeur”.
Chapter 2:

Interiority and Exteriority in “Il pleure dans mon coeur”

Verlaine’s third Ariette from the section Ariettes oubliées in Romances sans paroles is called “Il pleure dans mon coeur”. The poem initiates a powerful tension between interior experience and its external representation. It proposes a distinction between weeping as an internal, personal response and the exterior event of rainfall, in order to underscore the fraught, and often obscure connections between interior experience and the external world. Lines between exterior and interior are fluid and unstable in this poem, as the outside world is relocated within the perceived experience of the subject's own imagination. Debussy's settings of “Il pleure dans mon coeur” is sensitively attuned to the dialectic between inner and outer. The relationship between natural versus musical sound is explored here, and shows the role of music to be that of unique creative expression, as opposed to an attempt to mimetically evoke natural, exterior phenomena. “Il pleure dans mon coeur” also traverses the dialectical space between interior feeling and its external representation, in the terms made available by language. My argument in the following chapter is that clear boundaries between internal space and exterior world are blurred in this poem, as exterior space is located within the perceptual experience of the subject, rather than as a distant, separate entity. The outer world is subsumed into the subject's self as it responds to and engages with it. External space always exerts great relational influence upon the subject as it strives to operate within its parameters. In this chapter, the unstable divisions between inner and outer will be examined through formal analyses of rhyme and harmonic practices, as well as through poetic and musical systems employed by Verlaine and Debussy as methods for troubling conventional
boundaries between interior and exterior.

**Verlaine's Divided Subject**

In his writings, Verlaine often refers to a distance opened between the individual and its feelings, and the transmission of this subject to the page through language. As Henri Bergson explains, “nous échouons à traduire entièrement ce que notre âme ressent: la pensée demeure incommensurable avec le langage” (we fail to translate entirely what our soul feels: the thought is left incommensurable with language). Verlaine articulates a similar distinction between what he identifies as *l'homme et le poète*. According to his understanding, the “subject” rises *sui generis* from the act of writing and must be distinguished from the individual author responsible for the works. The subject (which is variable and unique to each text) may make reference to the biographical writer, but should by no means be conflated with the *homme* behind the writing. Such a conception of authorship reveals two things: first, that Verlaine sought to pursue a poetic project not bound to his own biographical position. Secondly, and perhaps more importantly for our treatment of interiority and exteriority, that the differentiation Verlaine draws between *homme* and *poète* reveals a self-reflexive division between the poetic subject of the poem, and the empirical “self” of the poet-creator. This division between the individual and its textual rendering in the exterior space of the poem will be an important point of departure as we investigate the poem, “Il pleure dans mon coeur”.

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“Il pleure dans mon cœur”

1 Il pleure dans mon cœur
   Comme il pleut sur la ville
   Quelle est cette langueur
   Qui pénètre mon cœur?

5 O bruit doux de la pluie
   Par terre et sur les toits !
   Pour un cœur qui s'ennuie,
   O le chant de la pluie !

10 Dans ce cœur qui s'écoeure
   Quoi ! Nulle trahison
   Ce deuil est sans raison
   C'est bien la pire peine
   De ne savoir pourquoi

15 Sans amour et sans haine,
   Mon cœur a tant de peine !

It weeps in my heart

1 It weeps in my heart
   Like it rains on the city
   What is this languor?
   That penetrates my heart?

5 Oh soft sound of the rain
   On the ground and the roofs
   For a troubled heart
   Oh, the song of the rain!

10 In this disconsolate heart
   What! No treason
   This grief is without reason

15 It weeps without reason
   It is the worst pain.
   To not know why
   Without love and without hate
   My heart is in so much pain.

The title of Verlaine’s third *Ariette* is taken from its first verse, which foregrounds the contested relationship between the interiorized subject and external world. From the start, Verlaine sets up a contrast between inner and outer by means of the analogy made to rain. The juxtaposition of weeping and rain initiates a division that will be developed throughout the poem as tension between self and exterior builds. The constant interweaving of outer and inner also evokes a sense of uncertainty surrounding the tenuous, unstable boundaries separating the two. Lines between inside and outside are blurred and pushed in a way that is suggestive of the poetic subject’s attempts to understand its place in terms of this dialectic.

In the first two verses, the subject activates a correspondence between the interior and exterior: the personal, interiorized act of weeping is equated to rain falling on a town: “Il pleure dans mon coeur comme il pleut sur la ville” (it weeps in my heart like it rains on the town). In French, it is unusual to express the experience of crying in the same way as the impersonal, “il pleut” (it is raining). Crying is a highly personal response to emotional stimuli, so it would be more

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natural to use the verb in relation to its subject: “Il pleure,” or “he is crying” rather than the impartial, “it weeps in my heart”. The choice of expression initiates a self-reflexive distance between the subject and the experience of crying. “il pleure...” does not convey the same powerful sense of subjective accountability for the act of weeping as “je pleure”. The gap between subject and its emotional activity is also present in the syntactic arrangement of the line. It is echoed formally in the close correspondence between the verbs “il pleut” and “il pleure,” which further prompts a comparison of the two terms. The il used in the expression “il pleut” is the only subject available for the verb pleuvoir. Here, il is considered to be “le grand neutre de la nature” (the great neuter of nature), initiating the question of what is actually raining. The tenuous “it” exists as a subject only in language; there is no way we can answer for a real subject behind the rain when we say “it is raining”. Of course we know scientifically the meteorological source of rain, but in terms of its usage in this context, il is a vacuous subject, one that exists only at the level of language with no material signified beyond it. This is what Emile Benveniste referred to as “sémantique sans sémiotique” (semantic without semiotic); a linguistic term whose meaning is both exhausted in and limited to itself, with no substantive referent beyond it. As Gérard Hilty explains:

Verlaine lui aussi ne se rend pas tout de suite compte de la valeur négative du premier mot de sa “romance sans parole” (...) Le dernier quatraine est comme l'acceptation de ce “deuil... sans raison,” la pleine conscience que le premier mot du poème est absolument vide et que derrière lui se cache le néant.

(Verlaine himself did not realize the negative value of the first word of his "romance sans parole" (...) the last quatrain is like an acceptance of this “grief without reason”, the full realization that the first word of the poem is completely void, and that behind it hides only nothingness)

By setting up the verse “il pleure dans mon coeur” (it weeps in my heart) in the same way as the

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68 In French, verb endings vary more than in English and correspond much more specifically to the subject that proceeds them. Therefore, most verbs have a number of different possible endings. For a verb like "pleuvoir" however, only one verb ending exists, and it corresponds to the third person singular subject, il (“it”), a purely grammatical subject (it is not possible to say “you are raining”, “we are raining”, etc.).


abstract, “il pleut” (it is raining), we are left with a similar sense of uncertainty as to the actual source of the poetic subject's ennui. Does it exist as a real signified beyond the mere scope of the word? Or is the source of the speaker's melancholy actually concentrated in the frustrating inadequacy of language itself?

The Effect of Rhyme

While its cause can perhaps never be firmly identified, the effects of the subject's melancholy are quite tangibly represented through tears and rain. Tension between interior and exterior is reaffirmed in third and fourth verses: “Quelle est cette langueur//qui pénètre mon coeur?”. The languor that assails the subject is framed as an invasive force that penetrates the interior from outside. But the lines that would divide inner from outer are complicated; Verlaine emphasizes the ambiguous boundaries through thick, interwoven internal and end rhymes.

We noted in Chapter 1 how Verlaine uses frequent internal rhyme and assonance within lines of verse to emphasize the inner musicality and autonomy of each line. In “Il pleure dans mon coeur,” he draws upon these techniques again to sonorously isolate specific moments and ideas; however, the interaction of internal rhymes versus end rhymes in Verlaine's third ariette also underscores a struggle to define inside from outside. In this quatrain, the rhyme, “-eur/oeur” unites verses 1, 3, and 4, functioning as an end rhyme. However, the same sound occurs within the lines of verse as well, so that in verse 1 for example, “Il pleure dans mon coeur,” the word coeur serves both as an end rhyme and an instance of internal rhyme with pleure. Interestingly, lines between internal and external rhyme are blurred (to varying degrees) in each of the first lines of the quatrains. The barriers between interior and exterior are challenged in the organization of the

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72 In the second quatrain (vers 5), “O bruit doux de la pluie,” pluie serves as an end rhyme while also creating a correspondence with “bruit”. In vers 9, the first line of the third quatrain, (“Il pleure sans raison”), “raison” sets up the end rhyme with vers 11 and 12, but also forges an internal resonance with “sans” and predicts “dans” in the line that follows. The fourth quatrain differs slightly; “C'est bien la pire peine”. Internal rhyme is replaced with assonance and alliteration shared between pire/peine and almost a chiasmatic correspondence between bien and peine.
poem, through the intermingling and dual functions performed by internal and external rhyme. Meddling with inner and outer boundaries at the level of form complements the same project explored thematically in the poem.

At the end of the first strophe, the poetic subject asks what the source of the languor that “penetrates” its heart; however, as the poem progresses, it seems that the languor emerges more from the subject’s heart itself, a process we can see unfolding through procedures of rhyme, used to highlight points of connection between words. The rhyme between coeur and langueur is one of particular importance; their contextual and prosodic link in the first strophe is more explicit, but coeur appears again in verse 10 where it functions both to refer back to langueur as well as to serve as an internal rhyme within its own line (“pour un coeur qui s’écoeure”). In French, the verb écoeurer means to physically disgust or nauseate. In this case, the verb is also reflexive, indicating that it is the heart of the poetic subject that seems to be creating the subject’s feelings of physical repulsion. As internal rhyme, the effect of coeur here is to locate the poetic subject’s ennui as arising from within itself, from its own heart.

The link between coeur and langueur as external rhymes is suggestive of a sickness and nausea that besets the subject. The root of langueur is the Latin, languere which denotes a feebleness or weakness that is linked to illness. As external rhymes, both langueur and s’écoeurer suggest a physical sickness or nausea that ultimately derives not from any outside source, but from the interior, from the heart of the poetic subject itself. The blending of boundaries between internal and external rhyme thus plays a key role in “Il pleure dans mon coeur,” reinforcing the tension between interior and exterior confronted by the poetic subject as it searches for a source of its melancholy.

In the second strophe, rhyme blends boundaries between exterior and interior: “O bruit doux de la pluie//par terre et sur les toits//Pour un coeur qui s’ennuie//O le chant de la pluie”. The “bruit doux” is associated with the external sound of rainfall hitting the ground and rooftops. By contrast,
the neutral sound of rain takes on meaning as it strikes the heart, transformed through internalization by the perceiving subject (the “coeur qui s'ennuie”) into a meaningful song. The division between inner and outer, and self and other is also conveyed through the homophone of *toits* (roofs) in the second strophe (verse 6) and the word *toi* (you). The outside is aligned with a “you”, or Other, whose presence beyond the subject complicates subjectivity and increases tension between interior and exterior.

Christian Hervé points out that *pour* (for) points toward the act of interpretation undertaken in the heart of the poetic subject. The sound of rain becomes song as it is translated for the self that hears it and makes it meaningful. It is significant that in Debussy's transcription, the composer changes the word *chant* in verse 8 to *bruit* (measure 35). Then, in verses 7-8, “s'ennuié”, “bruit” and “pluie” all are sung on E in the vocal line. This tonal repetition reinforces the rhyme, perhaps further directing our attention to the opposition between *bruit* and *chant*. The fact that the *bruit* is incanted by the singer encourages us to consider how objective, exterior sound might become a meaningful song when internally processed by the subject.
Nature neutered

The contrast of the natural, outside world to poetic subject's interiority presents a helpful analogy in exploring the boundaries between the two. As mentioned above, the juxtaposition of *pleuvoir* and *pleurer* draws upon the nature/self distinction and introduces it as a problematic of the poem. In Debussy's rendition, alternating intervals of sixteenth notes approximate the sound of rain. The melodic line of the piano part is taken up in the bass, as the soft light rain literally falls from above, in the higher notes of the right hand. Debussy was quite interested in the capacity of music to evoke the natural world. In his music, nature is typically represented in the accompaniment, which certainly seems to be the case in “Il pleure dans mon coeur”. For Debussy, as I am arguing is the case for Verlaine, the evocation of nature is not simply an effort to reproduce or replicate natural phenomena; instead, nature is called upon in a metaphorical sense as an experience of what is exterior to the subject, namely, the neutrality of Nature, the “il”. But Verlaine and Debussy's approach confounds the limits between nature and the subject, proposing that what is exterior may in fact be a construction created by the subject itself.

Peter Dayan explores the process of musical translation from the naturally-occurring sound of a raindrop into its musical representation in his analysis of the compositional process behind one of Chopin's preludes. In her memoir, *L'Histoire de ma vie*, Georges Sand, Chopin's longtime lover and artistic compatriot, describes the creative process he undertakes in writing a prelude while listening to rain falling outside. Sand's account helps to elucidate an emerging, distinctly nineteenth century musical hermeneutics, which sees music not as imitation of words or images, but rather as the process of rendering or translating inner experience and feelings into expression. As Sand retells it:

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74 It is unclear exactly which prelude Chopin is describing in this exchange, recounted by Georges Sand in her autobiography, in a section documenting their time in Majorca. Dayan notes several of traditional options for the famous “Raindrop Prelude”, including numbers 2, 6, and 15. However, he points out that none of these are convincing possibilities because they were all likely written prior to their sojourn in Majorca.
Il protestait de toutes ses forces, et il avait raison, contre la puérilité de ces imitations pour l'oreille. Son génie était plein de mystérieuses harmonies de la nature, traduite par des équivalents sublimes dans sa pensée musicale et non par une répétition servile des sons extérieurs. Sa composition de ce soir-là était bien pleine des gouttes de pluie qui résonnaient sur les tuiles sonores de la Chartreuse, mais elles s'étaient traduites dans son imagination et dans son chant par des larmes du ciel tombant sur son coeur.”

(He protested with all his strength and he was right, against the puerility of such imitations for the ear. His genius was full of mysterious harmonies of nature, translated in his musical thought by sublime equivalents, not by servile repetition of external sounds. His composition of that night was indeed full of the drops of rain which fell on the resounding tiles of the monastery, but they had been translated in his imagination and in his music by tears from heaven falling on his heart).

Chopin does not wish to futilely grasp at replicating the sound of real raindrops falling on the roof. Such a crude understanding of music as imitation of exterior reality is limiting and minimizes the originality of musical creation, subordinating it to a foundational text, image or exterior inspiration. As Dayan explains, “The only source [Chopin] needs for his translation is already within him; the harmonies are there, and he needs nothing else; he need hardly refer, it seems, to nature.”

A similar process is undertaken in Verlaine’s text, which explicitly stages the interaction between rain on the outside, versus its internalization within the poetic subject, and in Debussy’s musical rendering of “Il pleure dans mon coeur”. In fact, Debussy expresses a very similar sentiment to Chopin’s, in a commentary on his opera, Pelléas et Mélisande, in 1909.

Earlier experiments in the realm of music led me to detest classical development, whose beauty resides solely in technique, which can only interest those academics among us. I wanted music to have a freedom that she perhaps has more than any other art, as it is not restricted to a more or less exact reproduction of nature, but instead deals with the mysterious correspondences between Nature and the Imagination.

These “mysterious correspondences” indicate that like Verlaine, Debussy avoided a simplistic, mimetic representation of nature in his work, which he saw as a futile approximation of natural

75 George Sand, Histoire de ma Vie, in Oeuvres autobiographiques, Georges Lubin, éd. volume 2 (Gallimard, bibliotheque de la Pléiade, 1971), 420.
phenomena that would always either be “pointlessly imitative or capable of evoking many and varied interpretations.” But Debussy goes farther, suggesting that the relationship between “Nature and the Imagination” may be one that challenges the opposition between the two; that finds the subjective, internalized experience of nature as what is important for creating aesthetic expression. This subjective processing of nature occurs within the imagination and is not a distinct, idealized outer space that the musician and composer constantly and feebly grasp at imitating.

Certainly if what Debussy sought to convey, and what the listener ultimately hears in a piece of music is “nature” (the soft rainfall in “Il pleure dans mon coeur,” for example), this impression is contained and constructed within the mind of the listener. Verlaine merges inner and outer limits in “Il pleure dans mon coeur,” where the exterior phenomenon of rain takes on significance only as it is translated by the heart of the poetic subject. In much the same way, Debussy suggests that music should be the “transposition sentimentale de ce qui est invisible dans la nature” (emotive transposition of what is invisible in nature). The musical evocation of nature then, reveals the contested limits between exterior and interior. In positioning music as an expressive rendering of internal experience, the temptation to conflate it with external referential practice is also avoided. Music is an offering forth of what is inside, rather than an effort to replicate in sound what is perceived on the outside. The falling rain we hear in the accompaniment in “Il pleure dans mon coeur” can be identified with nature but its effect is located within the subject rather than an oblique and inaccessible outside.

A similar grappling with the boundaries of inner and outer is present in Debussy’s transcription. In a certain way, we might think of the work itself as an exterior manifestation of what the subject feels within. However, Debussy demonstrates that the transmission of inner space to outer, even in the form of music, is more complicated than that. As Verlaine underscores the dialectic between inner and outer by blurring the boundaries of internal and end rhyme, Debussy

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79 Ibid., 96.
records this tension through formal strategies, significantly, in his use of the “Neapolitan chord”. This chord is often used in association with minor keys, because it attenuates and thus intensifies the expectation for a return to the tonic. In the case of Debussy's piece, which is written in g-sharp minor, the Neapolitan chord is A Major, which occurs in measure 13, emphasizing *langueur*, and then just a few bars later on *coeur* in measure 17.\(^{80}\) The Neapolitan chord is built on the flattened, second degree of the scale, and while it normally occurs in first inversion, it is perhaps significant in terms of building contrast that the appearance of the chord in Debussy's setting should occur in root position of A major.

The third and fifth of the Neapolitan triad in root position are C# and E, both part of the diatonic scale of the tonic key (g-sharp minor). In the score, this is evident in that the only accidentals (natural signs) that occur on the A Major chords in measures 13 and 17 are on A. The A raised

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\(^{80}\) The supertonic (second scale degree) of g-sharp minor is A#. However, in the minor mode, the scale degree 2 is flattened, or lowered by one half step so that it no longer presents as diatonic scale degree 2, supportive of the melody but is instead chromaticized. The chromaticism defers resolution to the tonic even more, extenuating uncertainty.
above the tonic g# creates a leading tone above the tonic triad, and then shifts to create a leading tone below the tonic triad. The double articulations of leading tones produces a diminished third interval, heightening the expectations of an eventual resolution to the tonic. According to Arthur Wenk, “the so-called Neapolitan sixth heightens those elements that give the minor mode its particular flavor”.\(^\text{81}\) The Neapolitan chord effectively highlights the minor tonic key to which the music will ultimately return, and makes the reprisal all the more powerful in accentuating the tension before the resolution. The two A major Neapolitan chords occur on “lan-gueur” and “coeur” initiating harmonic “rhyme” that emphasizes the rhyme between the two words in the poem.

**Verlaine's mode mineur**

Debussy uses the Neapolitan chord to tonally reinforce and point toward a return to the dominant g# minor key. However, their placement in relation to the minor tonic also suggests a careful reading of Verlaine's characteristic mode mineur. The term is taken from the verse “tut en chantant sur le mode mineur,” from his poem, “Clair de lune” in the collection, *Fêtes galantes*.\(^\text{82}\) Describing Verlaine's poetry as written in “le mode mineur” includes two implications of the word: it is minor in a musical sense, marked by a pervasive sense of sadness and melancholy, and a kind of splenetic “deuil sans raison”.\(^\text{83}\) In its second sense, mineur refers to the smallness and the limited scope Verlaine conceived for his poetry. The poet's interest in keeping his poetry “minor” has less to do with his hopes for its success, but indicates instead his refusal of sweeping poetic gestures toward totalizing, ideal notions of beauty, form, and artistic originality, typical of Romanticism and Parnasse. In contrast, Verlaine's poetry proposes the interior “self” as something limited, fragmented and inaccessible. “Le petit et le maniére constituent chez Verlaine deux catégories critiques : en marge des maîtres consacrés, le poète se réclame d'un défaut artistique et

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\(^{82}\) Paul Verlaine, *Oeuvres poétiques complètes*, 97.

\(^{83}\) Paul Verlaine, *Oeuvre poétiques complètes*, 127.
l'institue en lieu de la valeur” (The petit and the maniére constitute two critical categories of Verlaine's style: on the margins of established tradition, the poet calls attention to its artistic failure and puts in place instead value). 84

Verlaine's mode mineur is echoed in Deleuze and Guattari's discussion of “Minor Literature” in their book, Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature. In their study, minor literature denotes a deterritorialization of the dominant language by an expression of marginalized voices (whether of minorities, immigrants, the uneducated, or the poor). Deleuze and Guattari contend that minor literature is both always political and always collective. It is thus always political because the stories of its members do not have the privilege of ignoring the extent to which their circumstances are politically and economically determined. “[In minor literature], the individual concern becomes all the more necessary, indispensable, magnified because a whole other story is vibrating within it.” 85 The “whole other story” to which the identity of minor literature's participants are bound, comprise the political circumstances that immediately and quite viscerally decide the nature of their existence. Minor literature is necessarily collective for Deleuze and Guattari because it precludes the emergence of individuals or “masters” in a tradition. However, the nascent, collective force of minor literature also undermines the conventional status of an individual artistic subject. “There isn't a subject; there are only collective assemblages of enunciation, and literature expresses these acts insofar as they are not imposed from without and insofar as they exist only as diabolical powers to come or revolutionary forces to be constructed.” 86

Minor literature sublimates the individual writer into expressing the collective ideological constraints of the marginalized group. With this in mind, we might return to the idea proposed by Jean-Pierre Richard of a “tristesse anonyme” (explored in Chapter 1) and which is present

84 Arnaud Bernadet, op. cit., 33.
86 Ibid., 18.
throughout Verlaine's *Romances sans paroles*. Richard interprets Verlaine's frequent use of demonstrative pronouns and adjectives in this collection of poems ("c'est", "cette", "ce", etc.) exposes a rift between the subject and its accountability for these feelings. "Ce deuil est sans raison" is not representative of the grief of a single poetic subject; rather, it transcends the speaker to describe a more general melancholy that cannot be located or exhausted in the individual (but with which the poetic subject is ostensibly familiar). We can apply this reading of demonstrative pronouns in Verlaine's "Il pleure dans mon coeur" to the suggestion of a broader, collective experience addressed in the literature of "minor" communities in Deleuze and Guattari's essay on minor literature.

Understanding the *mode mineur* provides important insight into the way Verlaine understands subjectivity, and subsequently, how Debussy incorporated elements of the poet's minor mode into his song setting. Debussy set to music the poem "Clair de lune" from Verlaine's *Fêtes galantes*, (from which the reference to the *mineur* is taken) at roughly the same time as he worked on the *Ariettes*. Verlaine understood the *mineur* as a critique of traditional concepts of an original, individual and unified subject. However, the poet's *mode mineur* is also linked to an overwhelming melancholy that he sees arising from the interior of the subject itself, not as something caused by outside forces of events. In Verlaine's writings, the self is described as something *haissable* (detestable) and even poisonous. He writes,

La source de cette mélancholie qui fait […] trembler le vers, le suspend, le brise soudain sans que jamais on en arrive à la confidence, au sanglot, à l'effusion lyrique, elle n'est pas, on le voit, dans les évènements ou dans les choses: elle est dans le poète même, cherchant son expression dès les vers de son jeunesse […]

(The source of this melancholy which makes […] the verse shake, suspends it, breaks it suddenly without ever letting it arrive at a sense of confidence, at a sob, at a lyrical effusion, it is not, as we think, contained in events or things: it is in the poet himself, searching for

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87 See my discussion of this surrounding the first *Ariette*, “C'est l'extase,” in Chapter 1.
89 Paul Verlaine, *Oeuvres poétiques complètes*, 52.
expression since the first verses of his youth [...]"

In light of this passage, the use of “languor” as the feeling that penetrates the poetic subject's heart is important. As we discussed earlier in the discussion of Verlaine's use of rhyme in “Il pleure dans mon coeur,” the word “languor” is derived from the Latin verb, *languere*, which refers to a feeling of weakness or faintness resulting from a physical sickness. The languorous melancholy is caused by the poisonous *moi* itself.\(^\text{90}\) The poetic subject searches for an exterior cause to explain its pain when in reality, the self is contaminated from within, in the way that external stimuli affect the subject. The *trahison* referred to in vers 11 (“Quoi? Nulle trahison”) introduces the possibility of a kind of duplicity or self-betrayal at the “heart” of the poetic subject's grief. The role of pronouns becomes significant once again as the text is treated by Debussy in a musical setting. Christian Hervé notes the alteration in the poem between the use of personal and impersonal pronouns.\(^\text{91}\)

“*Mon coeur*” devolves throughout the poem into *le coeur* and finally *ce coeur*. He posits that this depersonalization might be attributable to the subject's gradual distancing from “self,” which becomes increasingly aware of its *dédoublement* (“splitting”) as the “moi devient autre sous son propre regard” (the “me” becomes other within its own regard).\(^\text{92}\) In Debussy's transcription, the music lingers over these lines, and the harmonic “rhyming” between *langueur* and *coeur* is musically affirmed in the corresponding A major Neapolitan chords. In the context of such languorous anxiety, the Neapolitan sixth complements and indeed emphasizes the minor mode presented in the text.

While Verlaine's *mode mineur* may point to the *moi* as the ultimate source of melancholy, it

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\(^\text{90}\) Historical uses of the term “languor” may reflect important intertextual connections made by Verlaine's poem, and also re-affirm its status not only as a cause of illness, but as a force of subjective division. In his *Confessions*, St. Augustine speaks of a languor that self-reflexively turns the subject into its own object of inquiry, initiating a division: “in cius oculis mihi quaestio factus sum et ipse est languor meus” (In your eyes [God], I become a question [mystery] to myself and this is my languor) in *Augustine Confessions*, James J. O'Donnell, ed. Vol. 3 books 8-13 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 220.


is never explicitly shown that this is the case in the text of the poem. The fact that these questions play out within the text of a poem introduces another kind of division: this one, between the artistic subject and the work. The poetic subject searches throughout the poem for the source of his sadness (“Quelle est cette langueur...?”, “Il pleure sans raison”, “De ne savoir pas pourquoi...”). In the end, we are left with no clearer idea of the source of the subject's sadness. In a sense, the melancholy is itself being generated by the text; the only way we become aware of it at all is through its initiation via the poem itself. Perhaps then, the implicit lack and desire inaugurated in the very act of writing is the mobile source of the subject's sadness surrounding this deficiency.

**Locating Melancholy**

“Il pleure dans mon coeur” presents an atmosphere of incertitude in which the poetic subject searches in vain for causes to account for its pain. The text triggers a rupture between the interior moi of the poetic subject and the textual rendering of its feelings in the poem. The source of the penetrating sadness perhaps cannot be pinpointed exactly, but nevertheless exists implicitly, if nothing else as a “semantique sans sémiotique” that is generated by the poem. And in fact, it is just in the way that this melancholy evades any identifiable source that allows for its continual replication and extension in the text, so that despite its obscurity and apparent lack of origin, it is still exerts a near constant pressure throughout the poem, once again suggesting that it is perhaps the poem itself that is the true origin of this “deuil sans raison”. The deuil is always there but frustratingly, its origin is not. The two verses that bookend the poem (“Il pleure dans mon coeur” and “Mon coeur a tant de peine”) testify to the melancholic presence throughout, but bely nothing of its source. The rupture between self and text exposes a space that cannot be neatly closed between the two, and in fact, one that will lead to an infinite splitting of the subject.

L'impossibilité pour le moi de coïncider avec lui-même, d'arriver à une cohérence, à une unicité qui fonderaient son identité. (...) Le mouvement du texte est celui d'un écartèlement continu qui fait du moi le spectateur étonné de lui-même, à la fois sujet et objet de son
questionnement. La quête de l’unité confine ainsi invinciblement au dédoublement...

(The impossibility for the “moi” to coincide with itself, to achieve a coherence, a unity that would establish its identity (...) the movement of the text is one of continuous splitting which makes the “moi” the unexpected spectator of itself, at once both subject and object of its own questioning. The search for unity is thus irrefutably confined to constant division).

On the one hand, the source of the poetic subject's ennui can never be apprehended or arrived at; it will be constantly replicated and continuously arising as a result of the text's inherent mobility. Melancholy is therefore present throughout the poem, yet because it exists in a fluid state of constant *glissement* (“slippage”) of textual meaning, its source can never be satisfactorily identified or stabilized; rather, melancholy itself exists in a state of mobile slippage throughout the poem.

Like a poem, a piece of music is an inherently mobile work whose identity is based on temporal progression. Debussy's sensitivity to the frustrated search for a localized source of melancholy in “Il pleure dans mon coeur” is represented in a variety of ways. The song is marked by intense chromaticism in both the vocal line and piano accompaniment, which attenuates tension through concentrating on a close and continual slippage between semitones, deferring the anticipated return to the dominant. As Arthur Wenk explains, “[Debussy] makes use of the melodic descent from tonic to dominant...further increasing the chromatic tension by filling in the semitones of that descent.”

The chromaticism is most obviously represented in the left hand of the piano accompaniment. While the key center is established is g # minor, the chromatic scale not only delays its return to the dominant, but also displaces the tonal center itself. Chromatic scales are the progression of one semitone to the next; they have no harmonic origin or end. In fact, there is no harmonic syntax that would lead the ear to expect any kind of resolution at all. Each semitone predicts the next, but is never fulfilled on the next note, which itself becomes immediately

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93 Daniel Bergez, “Incertitude et vacuité dans les Ariettes oubliées,” *art. cit.*, 419.

94 *Glissement* is a term indicating a kind of signifying slippage, characteristic of the poems in *Romances sans paroles*, and explored notably by Verlaine commentator Christian Hervé. We will explore the concept of glissement much more in Chapter 4, but the relevant discussion is in Hervé's article, “Le glissement” in *Relectures de Romances sans paroles*, [http://romances-sans-paroles.pagesperso-orange.fr/4vague.htm](http://romances-sans-paroles.pagesperso-orange.fr/4vague.htm) [site internet personnel].

95 Arthur Wenk, *op. cit.*, 61.
anticipatory of the one that follows. The kind of chromatic line we see in measures 4-6 leads downward, further emphasizing a sort of musical glissement. The falling chromatic line also demonstrates a tonally fractious loss of tension, with lower tones exhibiting slower frequencies than the higher ones that precede them. In the chromatic progression used by Debussy in “Il pleure dans mon coeur,” we can see a musical depiction the same kind of “slippage” and infinite semiotic dislocation present in Verlaine's poem.

There is also a great deal of harmonic differentiation in “Il pleure dans mon coeur”. While the piece is written in g-sharp minor, a variety of harmonic modulations occur, particularly in the second and third stanzas, in which we travel almost fully around the circle of fifths. Arthur Wenk notes that, “composers have often used the circle of fifths to get from one key center to another or to establish a key center firmly.”⁹⁶ Instead, Debussy deftly aligns the harmonic “slippage” from one key to another with the part of the text that corresponds to the narrator's frustrated search for the source of melancholy that is itself produced and re-produced by the impossibility of ever locating such an origin. The indeterminacy of the subject's melancholy can be extrapolated also from the whole tone scale progression that is at least suggested in the left hand melodic line of the piano accompaniment in measures 3-6 (although the descending notes in measures 5-6 are “filled in” by a chromatic note in between the whole tone intervals). The whole tone scale is characterized by its lack of established tonal center. In this scale, there are no leading tones because all the notes are separated by an equal distance. The symmetrical degrees of separation between notes prevent the creation of leading tones, meaning that no tension-to-resolution relationship can be established, as in the diatonic scale. Thus, the interval progression of the whole tone scale creates a blurred, indistinct effect that refuses to establish allow one tone to stand out over others, producing an atmosphere of sonorous indecipherability.

⁹⁶ Ibid., 60.
Verlaine's poem, “Il pleure dans mon coeur” explores and challenges the binary that would separate interior from exterior, inner feelings from outer textual representation, and self from nature. The ennui produced by the inability of the poetic subject to account for any reason is affirmed by the mode mineur which is taken up by Debussy. Harmonic ambiguity in Debussy's song, as well as the presentation of nature as a perceptual construct of the imagination, both to reinforce the instability of the relationship of the self to the outer world, which is revealed to perhaps be nothing more than a figment of the self. The ambiguity of boundaries between self and exterior is formally inscribed in technical procedures, such as rhyme and harmony, through an attention to the mode mineur; as well as through textual deconstructions of understood boundaries between self and Nature. It constantly searches for a source of melancholy that ultimately seems to arise from that inner exteriority that is a text. The search for a stable source of the poetic subject's melancholy is confounded by the constantly shifting, mobile boundaries between interior and exterior, and the impossibility of localizing its “origin” which is precluded as the melancholy is continually generated by the text.

In the following chapter, we will continue to investigate this problematic of mobility and in thwarting the construction of a stable identity for the poetic subject. Music and poetry are mobile forms, by which we mean that an understanding of their content is based on how they unfold over
time. Subjectivity is represented in time in music and poetry through diverse and multi-layered forms of periodicity, organized under the conceptual categories of meter and rhythm. In our analysis, we will turn to the poem, “Spleen” from *Romances sans paroles*, which appears as part of the subsection *Aquarelles* in Verlaine's collection. The analysis will focus on rhythm and meter in both the poem and Debussy's song setting, as well as how the subject's expression in time prevents the misprision of a stable or unified subjective identity. Instead, the mobility of the poetic text and musical composition propose an alternative definition of the subject as produced in time, a subject whose identity is therefore always dependent on its gradual unfolding and articulation in time.
Chapter 3:

The Subject destabilized in time in “Spleen”

Poetry and music are necessarily mobile categories. Ascertaining meaning from a piece of music or poem is tied to its directional and durational representation in time. Therefore, evaluating the subject in time is an important method for understanding the mutability of the subject's identity as it is constantly changed and operated on in time. In the last chapter, we explored the sourcelessness of the subject's melancholy, which operates throughout the poem, but whose origin is impossible to locate as arising from one moment; rather the melancholy is known by its fluid, non-localizable presence. In the poem, “Spleen,” and Debussy's setting to follow, time becomes an approach to understanding the mobility of not just melancholy, but also subjective identity.

Time is of course central to understanding both music and the poem. Forward temporal movement connects isolated terms in a cohesive phrase or idea. We are able to construct complex meanings based on how musical and linguistic phenomena unfold and relate to one another through the passage of time. As Richard Parks explains: “[musical] compositions consist of congeries of diverse musical events, whose concatenations over time convey impressions of vitality to us as listeners and performers...these impressions are a crucial aspect of musical experience”. In both music and poetry, time is expressed and organized through meter and rhythm. Rhythm is a more flexible category than meter and something we might understand in light of Verlaine's concept of the mutable changeability of subjectivity. Instability is exacerbated by the continual change experienced by the subject as a result of its transformation in time. However, in another sense, it is impossible to know a subject outside of its durational representation. Temporal change is inscribed

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in the very formation of subjective identity, although paradoxically, it also seems to represent a threat to an idealized stability. Music and poetry are apt mediums through which to interrogate the mobile changeability of identity, as they are both characterized, and even determined by being in time.

An effort is made through the use of *meter* to regulate time. But rhythm testifies to the fluidity and contingency of subjective identity as it is changed by and through time. As Christopher Hasty explains: “By calling attention to something rhythmic we mean that it is not fixed – it is dynamic as opposed to static, fleeting as opposed to permanent.”98 My argument in this chapter is that the subject's portrayal in time prevents a construction of its stable identity, suggesting that subjective identity is actually defined by its un-fixedness, by its potential for change and its fluid expression in time. In order to show this, we will examine the relationship between meter and rhythm in music and poetry, and then move on to an investigation of prosody, verb tense and metrical ambiguity.

There are a variety of connections that can be extended to poetry and music but an area of correspondence that can perhaps be seen to almost foreground them all is temporality. Apprehending meaning from a poem or composition is dependent on the way in which all elements unfold in time. The specific, structural parameters through which this process occurs are organized by meter and rhythm. Broadly, meter is a fixed category that regulates the repetition of temporal groupings. Rhythm is also a conceptual category that is defined in poetry by internal partitions within a verse's overarching metrical structure. Within these definitions however, debate continues as to how to define the precise relationship between meter and rhythm. That there is no easy, reducible answer to solving questions of rhythm and meter is perhaps what makes it such a continuous and rich area of study in both music and poetry. Modern approaches to meter and rhythm in French poetry, prompted especially by the studies of Benoît de Cornulier, differ in key

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ways from the way nineteenth century poets and critics, such as Théodore de Banville, understood it. 99 Evolution in the thinking surrounding key features of verse point to their status as malleable, discursive categories while also establishing paradigmatic categories that can be generally applied to analyses of French versification. 100

Meter and rhythm are central features of poetry and music, but are applied somewhat differently in each. Poetry captures the rhythmic movement of language, while music is concerned with connections between notes. 101 In poetry, meter is determined by the number of syllables in a line of verse. In music, meter is somewhat trickier to define; it is also considered the structure of the line from which rhythm proceeds. Meter denotes a series of different considerations, which Richard Parks explains as: “[arising] from series of equal durations separating accents, with non-metrically-accented material filling the intervals between.”102 Through its notation in the score, meter can be read in the time signature (i.e., whether the piece is written in 3/4, 4/4, 7/8, etc.) and the bar line. 103 However, as we will find later when we look at Debussy's treatment of meter in “Spleen,” meter is not limited to expression in the time signature alone; competing meters may be tacitly embodied in the music, undermining or at least presenting alternatives to what is noted in the score.

**Meter and Rhythm in French poetry**

According to the rules of French versification, meter simply refers to the number of syllables in a line of verse (which then affects the accented moments of emphasis and non-accented material within the line, designated by rhythmically-determined *coupes*, which then demarcate smaller

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99 De Banville's theories about poetry posit rhyme as the most important organizing feature, determinative of the rhythm of a verse. For more on theories of the preeminence of rhyme in determining rhythm, see Théodore de Banville, *Petit traité de poésie française*, Alphonse Lemerre, éd. (Paris: Bibliothèque-Charpentier, 1891), 44-86.
101 The definitions supplied here are not exhaustive, but instead attempt to offer a possible framework for considering how meter and rhythm relate in a side-by-side study of music and poetry.
groups of syllables within the line, called “measures”). In French poetry, one of the most common meters is the 12-syllable alexandrin, characterized by its metrical division in half, at a point called the césure (caesura). This division results in two metrically-balanced groups of six syllables each. The césure is a metrical unit that is necessary for dividing lines containing more than eight syllables. It is thus based entirely upon the meter of the verse (the syllabic count of the line). In the alexandrin, the césure designates the midpoint of the line. However, in verses with other syllabic counts, the césure does not necessarily refer to an exact half-point of the line, but can denote other structural pauses that do not have to occur at the midpoint of the line. The measures are the divisions of accented and non-accented material that are based in the rhythm of the line. While it is certainly possible for lines of more than eight syllables to be further divided rhythmically by coupes, they must also be grounded metrically in the césure.

In studying Verlaine’s poetry, and in particular a collection like Romances sans paroles with such an explicitly musical orientation, the way that rhythm and meter interact is especially germane. As Verlaine pits his own poetic techniques against the norms of French versification, it will be helpful to have a basic understanding of the system he is undermining. The first poem, “Spleen,” is a part of the subsection of Romances sans paroles called Aquarelles. Its octosyllabic meter means that the poem will have a meter of eight syllables per line of verse. The octosyllabe also means it will be released from metrical dependence on the césure, allowing rhythm to determine the

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104 It is possible to have a 12-syllable line that is not evenly divided by a caesura into two 6-syllable groups (called “hémistiches”). However, this type of verse is referred to as a “dodécasyllabe” and does not carry nearly the same weight or reputation as the revered alexandrin.

105 Beginning with his influential study Théorie de vers, 1982, Benoît de Cornulier establishes that in French the largest, cohesive grouping of syllables perceptible is eight: “En français, au-delà de huit, le nombre syllabique exact est inaccessible à la perception” (“Conventions de codage des structures métriques: pour une grammaire des strophes”, Le Français moderne, t. LVI, no. 314, 1988, p. 47).

106 In a vers complexe (a line of more than eight syllables), there are two structural pauses built in to the line, which may be placed variously. One of these pauses derives from the metrical césure while the other is based on the more rhythmic rhyme.


108 There are a total of five subsections in Romances sans paroles. For his transcriptions, Debussy used mostly poems the first group, Ariettes oubliées. The other sections are (in order): Paysages belges, Bruxelles, Birds in the Night, and Aquarelles.
prosody of each line. Its rhythm is based instead on a division into measures which correspond more to the flow of the individual verse as opposed to the hegemonic halving of the line at the césure. “Les coupes rythmiques sont mobiles, puisque leur place se détermine selon le vers et même quelque fois selon l'interprétation du lecteur” (The rhythmic breaks are ‘mobile’, their placement determined by the flow of the verse and sometimes even according to the interpretation of the reader). The octosyllabic line is short enough that rhythmic regularity from one verse to the next cannot be established. This leaves the internal coupes and moments of emphasis to be more individually developed within each verse, highlighting the transformative potential of the poem. It is not a concrete text but rather one that embraces greater variability through rhythmic flexibility. The continuous movement of music and poetry, legible at the level of rhythmic fluctuation that forecloses the possibility of a stable subject. As Christopher Hasty explains: “Rhythmic continuity is a ‘holding together of parts’ in transition or in a gradually, temporally unfolding process of becoming parts. In this transitory, fluid process, while it is going on...nothing is ever fixed.” This reflection on rhythmic mutability indicates that even in movement and the process of continual “unfolding”, rhythm seeks to flexibly hold together, or perhaps more accurately, to make connections between differentiated moments, which when taken together cohere into a shape that is indicative of their meaning. Such a conception of rhythm holds true for both poetry and music, as we will see in our exploration of temporality “Spleen”.

109 The octosyllabe, along with the décasyllabe, are also the most common types of meters used for song in the nineteenth century. The most common scansion for the 10-syllable décasyllabe meter is 6-4 or 4-6, and more rarely in nineteenth century, 5-5. Daniel, Grojnowski, “Poesie et chanson: de Béranger à Verlaine,” Critique, no. 243-244 (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1967).
112 Rhythmic variability in the octosyllabe is still within reason however. While the verse may be less structurally-determined than the alexandrin, it still follows the basic rules of French verse, in which more important, “major” words within the line, and moments of rhyming, are the recipients of emphasis. Smaller, more minor words such as articles and prepositions would not be accented. If and when they are, such accents are a posed as a very purposeful transgression of convention that indicate an important commentary being made by the poem. In Verlaine’s “Spleen,” I do not think that this is the case, but rather, in writing in the octosyllabe that he wished to focus on a sense of rhythmic pliancy.
113 Christopher Hasty, op. cit., 67.
Les roses étaient toutes rouges, 
Et les lierre étaient tout noirs.
Chère, pour peu que tu te bouges 
Renaissent tous mes désespoirs
Le ciel était trop bleu, trop tendre, 
La mer trop verte et l'air trop doux.
Je crains toujours - ce qu'est d'attendre - 
Quelque fuite atroce de vous
Du houx à la feuille vernie 
Et du luisant buis je suis las,
Et de la campagne infinie 
Et de tout, fors de vous, hélas!¹¹⁴

Interaction of Rhythm and Rhyme

Internal rhymes abound in “Spleen,” creating an atmosphere of rich interwoven sounds and textures. The role of internal assonance in this poem is largely what gives it such a clear sense of mobility, but also what affords it a certain sense of rhythmic indecipherability.

The prosodic or metrical substructure of the octosyllabe is minimal: the only imperative is that the line should have eight syllables, and an accent on the final syllable. There can be no further stipulations about accent, no stipulations about the degrees of rhythmic juncture, that is to say, no coupe is structurally pre-eminent within the line by virtue of position, nor where there is more than one coupe within a line, can one be called major and the others minor by reference to any metrical principle.¹¹⁵

Traditionally, placement of accents corresponds to moments of rhyming. This is not necessarily a naturally arising prosodic feature, but an artificially conceived tradition within French verse.¹¹⁶

Nevertheless, its application has persisted as one of the most structurally-determinative dimensions

¹¹⁶ Accents are elements of the measure in French verse; they help determine its rhythmic partitioning, by always falling on the stressed (or “tonic”) vowel of a word, and usually align with the more “important” moments in the line of verse.
of French verse. As the prolific Parnassian poet Théodore de Banville notes: “On n'entend dans un vers que le mot qui est à la rime” (In a verse, we hear only the words that rhyme). Technically a line of verse is only required to make an end rhyme (at the end of the phrase), which means that in an octosyllabe, a structurally determined accent would occur minimally on the final, eighth syllable (Scott, 33). Placement of rhythmic accents is more flexible, deriving more from the specific syntactical organization of the verse. This paradigm is shifted in “Spleen,” however. The proliferation of fluid assonances and internal rhymes within each verse distract from the all-important end rhyme. This has the effect focusing attention more on the momentary déroulement of the verse itself, drawing away from metrical emphasis on the linear “fulfillment” of the line in the final rhyme.

In Verlaine’s “Spleen,” deciding the placement of measures is a choice complicated all the more by the many vowel sounds within the line, combined with the relatively short length of the octosyllabe. The extensive use of internal rhyme not only shapes rhythm, but privileges it in such a way that rhythm comes to overshadow the traditionally dominant meter. Clive Scott points out that this tendency toward rhythmic variability in the octosyllabe effectively isolates each verse as an autonomous rhythmic unit whose flow is determined by the independent interaction of rhymes and sounds, rather than by the grasp of the césure (Scott, 32). In terms of a contrast between meter and rhythm, it certainly seems that the octosyllabe is more fluid and prone to rhythmic variability than a verse that is dependent upon the unavoidable division of the césure. However, I would argue that an emphasis on rhythmic variability does not necessarily isolate verses, but instead leads to a fluid development of rhythmic identity, one that cannot be so easily regulated by a pre-determined césure, and is thus more changeable and continuous throughout the poem.

Internal rhyme produces a sense of rhythmic indecipherability from the introductory verses of “Spleen”. In comparing the first two lines with the subsequent verses of the poem, we can see

117 Théodore de Banville, op. cit., 44.
118 Alan English, op. cit., 15-16.
how much prosodic differentiation plays a role in determining the internal rhythm of the *octosyllabe*. “Les roses étaient toutes rouges/et les lierres étaient tout noirs”. These first two verses resemble each other closely in syntactical arrangement. As a result, their rhythms, and the distributions of accents in the line is quite similar (“Les roses étaient toutes rouges/et les lierres étaient toutes noirs). However, the prosodic arrangement of the third verse is quite different, and as a result, its rhythmic identity departs significantly from the first couplet. The third verse presents a series of choppy, single-syllable, relatively minor words, which are each accented and even a bit staccato. In a verse that more or less explicitly points to the displacement the poetic subject fears (“Chère, pour peu que tu te bouges”, “Dear, if by chance you move”), this rhythmic punctuation interrupts the flow of the line and poses the break-down of the movement introduced in the text.

**Repetition**

The first notes of the vocal line in Debussy's piece features a series of successive, single eighth-notes repeated on E natural. The rhythm on these introductory notes in the vocal line is consistent for the first five bars.
Significantly, each note is both accented and marked as staccato. In just the first line, an interaction is deliberately staged between musical and poetic rhythm. With each syllable falling on the same note, rhythmic modulation is not as strongly anticipated. Such rhythmic and tonal repetition raises questions about its role in Debussy and Verlaine's work, and the powerful interaction of both their theoretical and aesthetic interests in repetition. The introductory, repeated notes of the vocal line call attention to the complex interplay of repetition and temporality: where an event of tonal verisimilitude is replicated in a novel temporal moment. While the successive notes do not change, their situation and the way they relate to one another in time does shift. Their difference is entirely one of temporality, as opposed to harmony, encouraging a reflection on “sameness” in its harmonic sense (as in, they are repeated on the “same note”) versus temporal sameness (in this sense, they are separate incantations in time). The division exposed here by Debussy, between harmonic and temporal difference, reveals that the significance of a repetition is based on our ability to temporally distinguish it from previous, similar events, “as a condition for the particularity of what is presently becoming”. In other words, we could not recognize the significance of repetition without being able to distinguish it from past moments it resembles, but is temporally distinct from.

**Repetition as a condition of spleen**

In Verlaine's poem, repetition works prosodically and semantically. We have discussed how internal assonance helps to affirm the prosodic mobility of the poem and the rhythmic discretion of its octosyllabic verse. But repetition also informs Verlaine's aesthetic conception of melancholy and spleen itself. The meaning of “spleen” in the nineteenth century referred to a limitless and

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119 The accents are represented by the lines above the notes and staccato is indicated by the dots.
120 Christopher Hasty, *op. cit.*, 76.
unassuageable melancholy, the cause of which could not be identified. Its usage in terms of modernity was popularized in the nineteenth century by Baudelaire, whose work had a profound influence on Verlaine. In Verlaine's work, the notion of spleen has to do with the infinite replication of douleur. The poet returns often in his poetry to the principles of nocturne and crépuscule (dusk), as well as to the season of autumn. Drawing on the medieval understanding of melancholy as a sickness derived from “black bile” originating from the organ, spleen, the disease was associated astrologically with Saturn, the “most malignant planet,” (source of the title for Verlaine's previous collection, Poèmes saturniens). In its medieval usage, melancholy, was also linked to the season of autumn, and dusk, both harbingers of darkness and a slow deterioration toward death. Arnaud Bernadet explains Verlaine's interest in night in terms of repetition: “Chez Verlaine, la logique du ressasement participe d'une variation continue. Le contexte nocturne ou crépusculaire dominant y installe la mortalité répétée et infinie du sujet en paradoxe” (For Verlaine, the idea of a continuous return also partakes in a continued variation. The context of night or dusk sets up a paradox in which the subject's mortality is infinitely repeated).

Notes of Verlaine's formulation of repetition as a kind of infinite re-articulation of mortality emerge in the way the poetic subject expresses his anxiety about the movement of his lover in verse 3, “renaissenent tous [ses] désespoirs”. Movement does not necessarily imply progress for Verlaine; in the case of “Spleen” it is instead suggestive of a continual return to melancholy that is repeated ad infinitum, in new moments in time. The series of repeated E natural tones in Debussy's song render the tension surrounding repetition as eternal replication. Each note occupies a novel moment in time, but is at once nothing more than a tonal replication of what came before. The contentious relationship between past and

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121 The term “spleen” is borrowed from English, and entered the French lexicon beginning in the eighteenth century. It is derived from the English name of the organ, spleen, which was then thought to be the site of “bad humour”. It application was expanded in the nineteenth century (particularly by Baudelaire, in response to the changes brought about by the experience of “modernity”) to describe a listless, anxious state that we might now most closely identify with depression. The dictionary entry in Le Nouveau Petit Robert defined “spleen” like this: “mélancholie passagère, sans cause apparente, caractérisée par le dégoût de toutes choses – cafard...” (Le Nouveau Petit Robert, 2009)


123 Arnaud Bernadet, op. cit., 87.
present rests in the pressure that the past still exerts upon the present moment, despite its inability to ever fully participate temporally within the present.

Debussy's “Spleen” is written in F minor, which makes the sudden E natural that rings out in measure 4 even more disruptive in contrast to the brooding nature of the introductory motif. Rhythmic and tonal indecipherability figures into the moment just before the vocal line is introduced: E natural is not part of the minor mode in F; however, when F minor's seventh tone, E-flat, is raised to E natural as part of the harmonic minor scale, it has the effect of further increasing the tension and anticipation of a resolution to the tonic. The E natural continues however, and is incorporated and extended into a tied chord, which is not constructed all at once, but stacked up, drawing out the dissonance of these conflicting harmonies. This chord is also extended by a fermata, so that the determination of its length is left not to the strict constraints of meter, but instead to the personal discretion of the performer. The instance of the fermata here in the very beginning of the piece is somewhat unusual as well. Fermatas occur most often at the end of a piece of music, or at least at the end of a phrase, where an extended break or pause seems natural. This fermata however, has the effect of building a kind of temporal tension that complements the tonal dissonances that will be further developed throughout the song.

**Debussy's Metrical Ambiguity**

Like Verlaine's, Debussy's use of meter is notoriously ambiguous and complicated by the fact that he found meter beyond just its traditional expression in the bar and time signature of a piece.124 A certain degree of metrical ambiguity is evident in Debussy's “Spleen” in the opposition of the 3/4 meter indicated by the time signature and what actually plays out in the score, which seems closer to 6/8. Simon Trezise recognizes metrical layering as a common feature in Debussy's music: “...the conjunction of 3/4 and 6/8 was a favourite of Debussy's and produced some of his

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124 Simon Tresize, *art. cit.*, 236.
most characteristic cross rhythms and polyrhythms.” Alternative meters are superimposed on top of the one indicated by the time signature, underscoring a degree of metrical ambiguity in the tension between the two. The effect of cross-rhythm, particularly as it is used by Debussy, is to obscure meter in such a way that rhythm is detached from its reliance on this overriding structure. Of course, the existence of two meters at once frustrates the attempts of one to determine accents and places of emphasis. Cross-rhythms, and particularly the choice of the 6/8 meter to undercut the time signature's 3/4 notation seems consistent with Verlaine's strategic use of the octosyllabe in “Spleen”. The lack of the metrical grounding offered by the césure in the middle of the line allows a more liberated and fluid rhythm to take shape. Rhythmic mobility also has a destabilizing effect, however, as the specific rhythm of each verse can vary widely due to the lack of organization around a césure. The construction of the poetic subject's identity, and that of the poem itself, is always felt to be in some state of development or flux. “L’âme universelle emplit une conscience en allée” (the universal soul permeates a consciousness in movement).

**Verb Tense in “Spleen”**

The rhythmic flexibility of the octosyllabe situates “Spleen” and the identity of its poetic subject in a state of continuous instability and transition. The variability of internal rhythm in the poem allows for the creation of its own, insular experience of time that is not regulated by a metrical superstructure. Christian Hervé discusses how Verlaine works to achieve this in Romances sans paroles through playing with verb tense and mood. Verb tense in “Spleen” shifts from the imperfect (“étaient” in verses 1-2) to the subjunctive (verse 3: “...pour peu que tu te bouges”)

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125 Ibid., 238
present (verse 4: “Renaissent tous mes désespoirs”). Such transitions bely a degree of temporal uncertainty that aligns with the kind of rhythmic transitions going on between verses. The personal feelings of the poetic subject are expressed in the present tense (“je crains toujours”, “...je suis las”), in effect, orienting the poetic subject in the immediate “now” of the poem. The past imperfect is slightly more ambiguous. While located in the past, it is often used for description and the present is often understood to be implicated in the imperfect. In “Spleen,” the imperfect is used for descriptions of color (“les roses étaient toutes rouges”; “les lierres étaient tout noirs”; “le ciel était trop bleu...”). The subjunctive is not a tense, but a mood; and in this case one that aptly communicates the sense of uncertainty and anxiety thematized in Verlaine's text. The subjunctive in “Spleen” follows expressions that look outside the space of the poem to speculate about what might happen (“pour peu que tu te bouges”). The use of the subjunctive designates an uncertainty about the future, a forward-projecting concern that undermines, and, to an extent, determines the nature of the subject's present which is now tinged by an anticipatory anxiety. The poetic subject's ability to fully engage with its present moment of being is restricted by an awareness of what is past and concern about what is to come.

In verses 3-4, the fear of future change is expressed in the form of a displacement, “pour peu tu te bouges” meaning something close to “if by chance you move”. The nature of the present is characterized by the fear of a future displacement, presented quite viscerally by the concern over an actual physical move by the poetic subject's lover. The expression “pour peu que” may also be read as “each time that”, indicating that every movement of the subject's addressee is a renewal of his despair. In this interpretation, the verb would be situated in the present indicative rather than the subjunctive. The ambiguity of “pour peu que” in this context also has the effect of diminishing certainty as to the exact verb tense or mood of bouges (in this case, for the verb bouger, the second-person singular is spelled the same way in both the present and subjunctive).

129 Paul Verlaine, Oeuvres poétiques complètes, 137.
With the subjunctive mood, we see how the future irrupts into the present, destabilizing it. The same undoing of the subject's present occurs in verses 7-8 ("Je crains toujours, - ce qu'est d'attendre ! -/Quelque fuite atroce de vous"). Verb tense in “Spleen” undoes our assumptions about the presence of neat divisions separating past, present and future. Instead, the poem proposes a mobile flux between each state, and looks at how each state converges to define its temporal present. But the fluctuation between, and co-existence of each of these states of being also shatters the poetic subject's ability to exist securely in the present, adding to the anxiety and uncertainty surrounding time in the poem.

Musical and Poetic Representation of Excess

While Debussy's music is always composed according to a certain time scheme (3/4, 2/4, 3/8, etc.), he explored other areas of metrical potential within the phrase, in ways that blend and extend motives across measures. As a result, musical ideas are no longer necessarily dependent on the bar, and can be advanced independently of this structure. The best example of this in “Spleen” can be observed in the use of leading tones to introduce new motifs and phrases. These leading tones thematically predict the new phrase, but structurally belong to the previous measure. They are disjointed from the new idea they announce by a bar line. The introductory notes are thematically and rhythmically attached to new musical phrases that they predict, despite their metrical association as part of the preceding measure. In “Spleen” they correspond most often to small words, like articles (le, les, de, du, etc.), conjunctions and prepositions that support the more important words of the poem.  

Besides acting as leading tones, anticipating critical moments of emphasis and downbeats in the musical phrase, the presence of leading tones as structurally part of previous phrasal group blends metrical boundaries across measures. A sense of continuity takes shape as verses and motifs begin and end within the same measure. This is especially well-

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130 See measures 4, 6, 13, 15, 21, 22, 23, 25, 27.
represented in measures 22-30, in the vocal line (for example, “*du houx...et de la campagne...et de tout...*”).

Christian Hervé observes the frequency with which definite articles occur throughout the poems of *Romances sans paroles*. “Spleen” abounds with them, and Debussy's interest in drawing our attention to their relationship with the “important” words they introduce bears consideration. In this poem, the articles *le, la* and *les* precede nouns that in some sense exceed the neat categorical boundaries they attempt to create. For example, in the third couplet, “Le ciel était très bleu, trop tendre//la mer trop verte et l'air trop doux,” the sky, the ocean and the air are all in some sense quantifiable phenomena, but are also elements that defy our subjective capacity to encapsulate. In pointing to the sky, for example, we designate both the one that opens up above

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132 Lyotard explains Kant's idea of the sublime as related the subjective experience of a phenomenon. “To judge the ocean as 'too big' for presentation leads one to experience it as sublime.” While the ocean (or the air, or the sky) are all real, quantifiable phenomena, they can be experienced as sublime for the perceiving subject who feels in them “the presence of something that transcends the object.” In Verlaine's poem, the phenomena of these categories is not doubted, but it is individual's experience of them that designates them as 'sublime'. Jean-François Lyotard, “The
us directly, but its continuousness as it appears to people on the other side of the world. This sky is still materially of the one that we perceive and is technically implicated in a reference to “the sky”. However, the perception of the sky as phenomenon may exceed the bounds of the subject's imagination and in doing so, it becomes something more or other than strictly a phenomenon. The air and ocean function similarly; referring to “the ocean” denotes many different bodies of water at once, all in a state of continuous mobility and change. The definite article is a practical component of language, creating abstract, yet convenient categories that permit us to conceptualize and simplify things that would otherwise exceed understanding.

We might see the function of definite articles here as similar to meter. Like the definite article before the potentially excessive categories of ocean, sky and air, meter erects neat, yet abstract structures in order to regulate, in its case, time. The sky and air are particularly apt metaphors for Verlaine's exploration of the défini/indéfini tension. We recognize the sky and air as unique elements that we rationally know to exist. At the same time, however, they are elements that consistently surpass our ability to conceive of wholly, in an uninterrupted way. In the final verses of “Spleen,” the poetic subject expresses defeat and exhaustion at the impossibility of ever resolving the definite/indefinite dialectic. The subject is surpassed and exhausted by the “campagne infinie” that surrounds him (“et du luisant buis je suis las/et de la campagne infinie/et de tout, fors de vous, hélas!”). The vastness of this “infinite countryside” is incomprehensible to the perceiving subject, and it is thus depleted of meaning in the subject's inability to grasp it conceptually. Paired with the enigmatic, unfixable adjective descriptors, Verlaine calls attention to the troublesome interaction between the definite articles and the infinite inscrutability of phenomena they can never hope to grasp. Like the sky and air, time is also an effervescent, constantly shifting flow which is possible to understand only in terms of its mobility and continuous movement. For his part, Debussy underscores the definite/indefinite tension by metrically isolating definite articles from the

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Ibid., 260.
rest of the phrase, distinguishing the definite articles as leading tones part of the previous bar.

**Color as a scale of difference**

The register of color and other descriptors in verses 5-6 of Verlaine's poem propose an important method for conceiving of the mobile subject, modified by the adverb *trop* (“too”), indicating these descriptors as potential sites of excess. Like rhythm and time, color is characterized by constant fluctuation along a scale of gradational difference. Such variation in the register of color is infinitely diverse. Similarly, the chromatic scale of pitch modulations in music continues *ad infinitum* and comprises a diverse array of combinative possibilities, whose character can then be altered more by context, volume, touch and rhythm.  

Verlaine's use of adverbs to modify or suggest movement along this register of tonal differences suggests its variability, and to a certain degree, its indecipherability. In the first two verses, the roses and ivy are described as “*toutes rouges*” and “*tout noirs*” (“all red” and “all black”). In verses 5-6 however, we move to the more indiscernible *trop*. The poetic suggestion of tonal difference is based on a scale of difference that can only be understood in terms of their comparison with other shades that appear along the scale.

There is not “one” established or exhaustive color but rather infinite possibilities along a grid. As Julia Kristeva explains, “The chromatic apparatus, like rhythm for language, thus involves a shattering of meaning and its subject into a scale of differences...these are articulated within an area beyond meaning that holds meaning's surplus.”  

In the introduction to this work, we looked at how musical meaning too can be thought of as a “shattering” of subjectivity into a multitude of directions and interpreters. Color traverses a dynamic scale of difference whose variations can only be perceived through discursive comparison. The correspondence between such an approach

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136 See my discussion of Lawrence Kramer's ideas of musical subjectivity, on page 6 of the Introduction.
to color can be applied similarly to understanding subjectivity, as a fluid articulation of difference, rather than as a stable or unifying structure.

Debussy's musical interpretation of color is one that aligns with a conception of color as occupying a scale of difference. The composer strove for “different combinations that can be obtained from one color – like a study in grey in painting.” Debussy too sees color as gradations of expression, that shift and derive meaning from their interaction with other shades. In “Spleen,” the register of color difference is rendered musically first through tonal and rhythmic repetition and then chromaticism. In the opening verses, Verlaine describes the color as *toutes rouges* and *touts noir*. Debussy repeats each syllable on the eleven eighth notes falling on E natural. The totalizing depiction of color as “all-red” or “all-black” is re-affirmed in the stagnancy of melodic line. A comparison of tonal or color shades that would contextualize these colors is absent. However, the more nuanced suggestion of color in verses 5-6 (“le ciel était *trop* bleu, *trop* tendre/la mer était *trop* verte, *trop* doux”) is paired with a descending chromatic scale in the vocal line of measures 14-17. According to Arthur Wenk, chromaticism is also supported by the activity of dominant ninths in the piano accompaniment “which function as a chromatic prolongation of the diminished seventh chords”. It is useful to recall that the chromatic scale is unique in that it lacks a tonal center; therefore, each note is of equal importance, one leading automatically to the next, but never toward a resolution. The discreet color variations initiated in the text by the adverbs and adjectives *trop, doux, tendre* correspond to the slight chromatic modulations in pitch that articulate a dispersal of meaning fluidly, according to a scale of equal differences rather than according to an established structure of totalizing meaning. Verlaine and Debussy enlist color to locate subjective identity along a mobile scale of comparative difference, rather than as a completed or stable wholeness.

In Verlaine's poem, “Spleen,” the poetic subject experiences destabilization as it is changed

137 Quoted in Edward Lockspeiser, *Debussy, His Life and Mind*, vol. 1, 128.
138 Arthur Wenk, *op. cit.*, 118.
and moved constantly through time. The experience of time is represented in both the poem and its musical transcription by the interaction of rhythm and meter. While meter provides an overarching structure to orient the passage of time, rhythm is used in both the poem and musical setting to reveal the insufficiency of meter to impose permanence or continuity on a constantly shifting state of time that disrupts the formation of a stable subjective identity. An emphasis on rhythm exposes the dynamic instability of the poetic subject as it is constantly changed through time, and reveals any consistency and fixedness claimed by meter to be unreliable. Verlaine uses the rhythmically variable octosyllabic verse to explore the close interaction of rhyme and internal assonance in affecting the fluidity of the verse. Debussy's blending of cross-rhythms to create superimposed meters also destabilizes fixed metrical structure, revealing the representation of the subject to be knowable only through its dynamic changeability. In calling attention to the more variable and liberated qualities of rhythm, Debussy and Verlaine suggest an identity for the subject that is at once constantly displaced by time, but ultimately only realizable through its continuous, progressive articulation in time.

In the following chapter, we will address the contested identity of the poetic and musical subject through reflection in Verlaine's ninth ariette, “L'ombre des arbres”. The poem introduces a struggle as the subject attempts to reconcile its internal conception of selfhood with the image represented to the outside. The splitting of self that occurs in the poetic subject as a result of its encounter with its outer image creates anxiety, as self-reflexive awareness leads to a fragmentation of the self, and the boundaries between the self as source and image as reflection become blurred. The dialectic between subject and image, source and reflection gives rise to the subject's anxiety. However at the same time, it is this division that is unavoidably constitutive of subjective identity.
Chapter 4:

The Reflected Subject in “L’ombre des arbres”

In the previous chapters, we have discussed at length the conflicted state of the poetic subject and its relationship to the poet in Verlaine's *Romances sans paroles*. This tension is powerfully represented through reflection in the poem, “L'ombre des arbres”. The importance of this theme is not lost on Debussy, whose transcription of this ninth *ariette* is replete with musical “mirrors”. Reflection serves as an apt metaphor for the tension between the “real” object and its representation in a poem or song. The certainty of a difference between real object and its reflected image is thrown into question in this poem, which blurs clear distinctions between the two. What emerges is a sense of anxiety surrounding the fluid boundaries between object and image. The argument in this chapter is that Verlaine and Debussy shift clear distinctions between the subject as source, and its reflected image. In doing so, reflection is no longer posited as an externalized, distanced encounter, but derives internal significance via its perceptual experience within the subject. Internalized experience of the subject's encounter with its image is fundamentally what constitutes identity, rather than a binary division between interior and exterior. Verlaine draws upon a variety of poetic techniques to underscore the obscure, unsettled dialectic between subject and image. We will turn first to an analysis of reflection in Verlaine's poem, and how it is used to confound boundaries between object and object-image as represented in the poem. Secondly, we will evaluate the image in terms of an absence, and what this means for the poetic field; finally, we will look at the relationship between sound and visual image and how this is approached by both artists.
Object versus Image

In Verlaine’s poem, the process of artistic representation is called into question via a dédoublement (“splitting in two”) of the object and its reflection, as part of the text. However, this process cannot take place except within the text; so in reality, both image and object are textual creations. In the first line, “L’ombre des arbres dans la rivière embrumée,” (the shadows of the trees in the shrouded river), the insubstantiality of the shadow prefaces the source it reflects (the trees). While in reality shadows are immaterial creations cast by the interaction of objects and light, the text produces object and shadow in the same way, through language. What the text wants us to believe is “real” versus what is “reflection” are fundamentally both generated in the same way.

Verlaine approaches this difficult and contested relationship between the two by what Christian Hervé identifies as a juxtaposition of clarity and vagueness, effectively clouding sensibility and the lines between impression and reality. The preeminence of the “real” world of objects fades into the infinitely vague and representative impressionism of the poem. As object and image are conflated, and the real world is subsumed into the poetic space, the source of the object-image becomes less certain. The supposed “reality” of the object as source is thrown into question as the boundaries between object and image are blurred.

The source of melancholy in much of Verlaine’s work, as Christian Hervé suggests, rests in the impossibility of ever locating its source (“ce deuil est sans raison”). The reason that these lines between object and poetic representation are so difficult to define is because, as McCormack-Festin explains, the image is not simply a symbol that stands for the object it represents; rather, in representing its form, the image can only suggest the reality of the object, simultaneously obscuring its reality in the process of writing it. “L’objet est en même temps plus et moins que ce qu’il

représente; il n'a pas la transparence d'un symbole, mais il enclôt la suggestivité d'une vitalité propre (...) On dirait la conscience des choses qui se réveille et se jette en avant.” (The object is at the same time more or less what it represents; it does not possess the transparency of a symbol, but captures the suggestibility of its own vitality; we might say, the conscience of the things that awaken and enliven it).¹⁴⁰

The “vitality” embodied in reflection could be read, for example, in the way it transforms and shifts in response to the movements of its source. The space between object and image is difficult to distinguish, and the interwoven confusion between the two categories (with particular attention to inverting the hegemony of the source/subject to its reflection) is of interest to Verlaine. The Ariettes oubliées are often understood in terms of the dualities they set up.¹⁴¹ The cause of the anxiety and alienation stems at least in part from a division constantly at work throughout the poems in this collection. However, the real cause of tension that results from this splitting rests not only on the subject's inability to reconcile itself with its reflection, but also in the impossibility of understanding the nature of the division, due to its fluid resistance to remaining within constructed boundaries.

The effects of this torsion are on display in Verlaine's ninth ariette, “L'ombre des arbres”. As Christian Hervé describes: “La logique du binaire ne permet pas de penser ces moments où la dualité, atteignant le sujet, le confronte à sa part d'impersonnalité ou d'absence. Dans ces fins d'ariettes (III, IV, VII, IX), il y a un clivage du même, issu du double mais qui n'est plus le double. Une intérieurisation de la dualité dans la réversibilité” (The logic of the binary does not allow conceiving these moment where the duality, reaching the subject, is confronted with its own impersonality or absence. In these small ariettes (III, IV, VII, IX), there is a similar break, issued from the double but

which is no longer double. Rather, it is an internalization of the duality in its reversibility). Binary divisions found in Verlaine's *Ariettes* are important not only in that they cause displacement through division, but also because they challenge conceptions of a neat polarity and stability existing between the two sides. The source of the poetic subject's anxiety resides not in simple division, but in the indeterminacy of the porous categories that separate subject and reflected image, which are always susceptible to change and reversibility. We will explore and expand on the ideas suggested above in turning to the poem itself.

“L'ombre des arbres”

L'ombre des arbres dans la rivière embrumée  
Meurt comme de la fumée  
Tandis qu'en l'air dans les ramures réelles  
Se plaignent les tourturrelles.

Combien, ô voyageur, ce paysage blème  
Te mira blème toi-même,  
Et que tristes pleuraient, dans les hautes feuillées,  
Tes espérances noyées!

“The shadow of the trees”

The shadow of trees in the misty river  
dies like smoke  
While in the air, amidst the real branches  
Turtledoves sing their plaint

O voyager, how this pallid countryside  
renders you pale yourself,  
And how sadly they wept, in the highest leaves  
your drowned hopes.

Unstable Poles of Self and Reflection

The inversion of object and image is presented quite powerfully from the start in Verlaine's poem. In “L'ombre des arbres,” the reflected image (the shadow) precedes the objects (the trees) that ostensibly create it. A shadow is of course different from pure reflection; it is the area of

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darkness cast by the object-source, which acts as an obstruction to light. In fact, the object producing the shadow actually prevents its perfect reflection by blocking light. Nonetheless, the vacillating shadow is useful for conveying the sense of mutability in its relation to the object. Disrupting the power dynamic of “real” object to its reflected image throws into question the reliability not only of the binary division between the two, but also of the preeminence of the object as principle source of the reflection. In doing so, the poem itself becomes a powerful equivocator and space of creation, where all boundaries are shown to be relative, produced within and via the text. As Daniel Bergez explains, “Verlaine ne coïncide avec aucun des deux pôles; il est l'hésitation entre l'un et l'autre, le mouvement qui les sépare et réunit tout à la fois, le creux au centre de cette dualité.” (Verlaine does not align with either of these two poles; he is the hesitation between the one and the other, the movement which both separates and reunites them all at once, the axis at the center of this duality). The “poles” Bergez refers to are those of the object and its reflection in the subject; namely the internalization of that object within the perceiving subject. The reflection in some way represents the complicated dialectic between origin and representation, between source and image, which are troubled in the poetic text. The duality is not so much one of oppositional poles, between reflection and its real, stable source, but rather one that reveals a tension between the instability of both sides. Henri Peyre attempts to explain the complexity of this relationship: “Le réel est saisi, mais jamais immobilisé ou matérialisé (...) [D'où un] sentiment de la fluidité de toutes choses et de l'insaisissable dans des poèmes d'où ni la vie intérieure ni les sentiments en lesquels se complètent les impressions ne sont bannis.” (The real [object] is grasped, but it never stabilizes or materializes...It is from a sense of the fluidity of all things, and from the imperceptible in [Verlaine's] poems from which neither interior experience nor the feelings created by these impressions can never be eliminated). The poem traverses the poles between self and reflection, inner and outer, and concludes that reflection is not distinctly exterior to the self, but instead one

143 Daniel Bergez, “Incertitude et vacuité du moi dans les Ariettes oubliées”, 421.
that is created by, and significant only insofar as it is internalized by the subject.

“L'ombre des arbres” is comprised of alternating lines of *alexandrins* (12-syllable meter) and *octosyllabes*. The mixing of metrical categories is not unconventional in French verse, but it is more common to adhere to one consistent meter throughout the poem. Neither meter is predominant; there are four lines of each, and although the *alexandrin* starts the poem, it is not posited as a principle source. Oscillation between metrical counts can be understood in terms of a sourceless reflection, as well as a formal reference to the blending of poetry and song. In the nineteenth century, one of the most common meters for the *chanson* was the *octosyllabe*; the *alexandrin* is a well-respected metrical institution in the French poetry. Thus, besides their metrical function in the poem, the fluctuation between *octosyllabe* and *alexandrin* is itself significant of the discourse between poetry and music.

**The Force of Death**

The first verse begins, “l'ombre des arbres dans la rivière embrumée,” suggesting that aside from the unreliability of its source (the trees), the image is also distorted by its hazy shadow in the misty river below. The relationship between the words *ombre* and *arbres* belies a kind of distorted reflection, both visually and aurally. The syllable, *-bre*, in *ombre* is nearly mirrored in the beginning of “*arbres,*” with the sole difference of the “a”, and the liquid “r” in the first syllable. Besides that, the words closely resemble one another in terms of rhyme and visual form, evoking a semiotic dynamic of reflection. A final instance of reflection is shared between the first and last words of the verse: *l'ombre* and *embrumée*. A clear auditory correspondence initiates the opening and closing of the line. Neat, well-established boundaries do not exist for long in this poem, and we see sensory correspondence spill over into the next verse of the poem, in *meurt* (dies). Christian Hervé identifies the theme of “lability” as a common trend in Verlaine's *Romances sans paroles*, in

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145 For more on the role of the *octosyllabe* in nineteenth century French song, see footnote 111 from Chapter 3 (p. 54) for Daniel Grojnowski's discussion of its role.
which a constant and ever-shifting change of state precludes the creation of a stable identity, whether of the poetic subject or text itself. The vaporous mist suggested in *embrumée* is suggestive of identity in a state of continual flux and becoming. In the first two verses, an alignment can also be found between the formal and textual material of the poem; as mist covering the water is in a constant state of transition, the combinations of phonemes shift and recombine as they pass into the next line. The recombination of phonemes has the effect of creating new words with different meanings. In the opening of the second line, the letters “m”, “e”, and “r” are borrowed from *embrumée* to form *meurt*. The distorted reflection that flowed through the clouded mist of the first line is ultimately attenuated and destroyed by the semantic implication of *meurt* (dies) in the second verse.

It is also possible to interpret the opening and closing of the line with the “br” combination as a circularity. The critic Eléonore Zimmermann suggests reading the entire poem as a circle, one in which the drowned hopes (*espérances noyées*) of the last verse circle back to the immaterial nothingness of the shadow cast on the water of the opening. “The last word of the poem leads us back to the first line, where the near non-existence of what has been described...dissolves entirely in terms of air (“meurt comme de la fumée”) just as the “espérances noyées” dissolve in terms of water.”

The constant circling around a tension or unresolved division within the subject, as it attempts to reconcile identity as self with alterity is echoed. The failure of reconciling this division is what gives rise to a sense of melancholy, echoed first in the turtledoves' plaints and then in the drowned hopes of the voyager (both appearing as the closing verses of the poem's two small strophes).

According to this formulation, the subject seeks a return to a primordial state of nothingness (*néant*) and non-being, before life gives way to the torsion between subject and outer reflection. In Lacanian psychoanalysis, circular movement is an indicator of drive, which is defined by its

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circulation around an object that will never be attained. In Verlaine's poem, the loss concerned is one of the illusion of subjective completion or wholeness. The realisation of the division between image and self results in the poetic subject's anxiety. In understanding “circling” around the subjective split that has taken place, we might look to Lacan's distinction between the object of desire versus the object of drive. Whereas desire is concerned with the lack initiated by the loss of an object, in drive, the loss itself becomes the object. Slavoj Zizek explains: “in the shift from desire to drive, we pass from the lost object to loss itself as an object. That is to say, the weird movement called 'drive' is not driven by the 'impossible' quest for the lost object; it is a push to directly enact the 'loss' - the gap, cut, distance – itself.”

In Verlaine's poem, circular movement powerfully enacts loss and anxiety as the object of the poem. Melancholy is no longer the tangential production of lack (created by desire), but rather constitutes the energetics of the text itself. A continual circling back on, and return to latent tensions within the self makes such material at once familiar and unfamiliar to the subject, as repetition of the same content causes a sense of estrangement from it within the subject. In a similar way, the musical reprise is temporally distinct from the original motif it replicates, but it is nevertheless the return, the circling back upon defamiliarised material.

Death exerts a powerful presence throughout much of Verlaine's poetry, although much of the time its presence is implied or felt, rather than explicitly stated. For example, in the poem, “Promenade sentimentale,” the poet's evocation of douceur is never separated for long from its inescapable link to death, whose contrasting definition necessarily sets up the meaning of douceur. One of Verlaine's preferred phonetic combinations that appears frequently in the titles of his poems and collections, is the combination, m-o-r. (cf. Romances sans paroles, the poems, “Nevermore,” “Promenade sentimentale,” “L'ombre des arbres,” “Crimen Amoris,” “Amoureuse du

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149 Arnaud Bernadet, op. cit., 90.
diable,” “Amour,” “La mort”

“m,” “o,” and “r” each exists in *amour* and *mort*, suggesting the inseparable implication of love in death, and vice versa. Each is tinged with the contrast of the other, underlining the unavoidable presence of the dialectical opposite in its other.

In the opening measures of Debussy’s song (pictured above), the vocal line is comprised of repeated E-sharps; and in the next verse, repeated incantations of F natural and E natural fall on “Meurt comme de la fumée”. In regarding the image as something that is itself created by internalization within the subject, the artist avoids the hollow, futile replication of a lost source whose fullness can never be restored, and whose absence is only affirmed through vain efforts at replication.

**The Mirrored Musical Subject**

The idea of rendering a mirror in music pushes the limits of sensory experience. Normally we think of mirrors as reflecting visual images. In Verlaine’s poem, interwoven reflections cloud distinctions between the audio and visual spheres, revealing the possibilities of both seeing and hearing reflected information. Portraying reflection musically presents a powerful critique to the idea of sameness, origin and originality. Musical subjectivity shatters the fixed equivalency

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150 Christian Hervé, “Autour le titre” dans *Relecture de Romances sans paroles.*

151 The implication of love in death is a well-known Romantic literary trope, called *liebestod*. It refers to an “erotic death” in which the consummation of love is only realized in the presence of its destruction. “Liebestod” is also the title of the dramatic final aria from Wagner’s 1859 opera, *Tristan und Isolde.*
typically attributed to reflected reproduction. Its mobility reveals the two apparently diametric categories to be ultimately sourceless, unstable and infinitely replicated. As Lawrence Kramer explains, “[musical] subjectivity has no origin or locale...the subjectivity called forth musically...stands as a simulacrum for an original subjectivity that exists only in the multiplication of simulacra...like a dormer of mirrors, although with immeasurably greater impact, music both gathers and scatters subjectivity in the same gesture.”  

The ideas of origin and replication are particularly apt for studying “L'ombre des arbres,” in which the status of origin and reflection is addressed, as well as for a comparison between poem and music. In Verlaine's poem, the trees' reflection in the clouded river is evanescent and transient. It has evaporated and “died” in the shifting mists already by the second verse. In this way, the object-source of reflection is again presented as unstable and fleeting. Such a conception of the source (in this case, the poetic text) can help orient an exploration of the relationship between the poem and the musical setting.

In the next section, we will examine how musical reflection and subjectivity are rendered in Debussy's setting of “L'ombre des arbres”. In considering the relationship between music and poetry in terms of mirroring, it may be tempting to think of Debussy's setting as a “reflection” of Verlaine's poem. However, this would be limiting and fail to fully acknowledge the formal differences and originality of the composition. Debussy's song is a unique entity in and of itself, not a mimetic reflection of the poem; rather, it emerges through a process of internalization by the perceiving subject. Therefore, it should by no means be misunderstood as an imitation of the poetic text (in Chapter 1, we looked at Peter Dayan's analysis of Chopin's understanding of “rain”, not as an effort to replicate an outside image or object, but instead as the output of his own internal creative “dream”).

In the same way that the musical work is not an effort to imitate an external image, neither is it an attempt to “mirror” or reflect the poem. In both senses, Debussy's musical

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setting is a distinct, original expression of an interiorized, personal experience of Verlaine's text.

“Slipping” between sides

The organization of Debussy's “L’ombre des arbres” underscores the element of reflection in its overall form. Particularly in the accompaniment, an almost exact repetition of the introductory motif of the beginning of the piece (measures 1-6) recurs in measures 11-16.

At a broader level of structure, discrepancies arise in terms of the key signature. While the song is written in C# major, it never actually settles into that key until the end, and even at this point, resolution to the tonic (beginning with “espérances noyées,” measure 25-end) is replaced by an ultimate return to the subdominant octaves in the accompaniment (on E #) rather than to the tonic C#. Bruce Archibald points out that the piece never actually is supported by its dominant but is instead points toward to its subdominant, which he identifies as a “mirror” of traditional tonal practice. Archibald's position is summarized by Arthur Wenk: “the whole song is a reflection harmonically...the key of C# (which is perfectly convincing at the end) is never supported by the dominant. Instead, the whole song aims at (or suggests) the subdominant of C# - a mirror of tonal practice.” According to Rameau, a prolific eighteenth-century composer whose theoretical

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154 In music, the subdominant is the fourth tone above the tonic (In this case, the conventional resolution of the subdominant with the cadential return to the tonic is deferred to the end of the piece). It is so-called because it is equal distance below the tonic (first tone of the scale) as the dominant (fifth tone of the scale) is above the tonic.  
writings influenced Debussy significantly, “Il n'y a que trois Sons fondamentaux, la Tonique, sa Dominante, qui est sa Quinte au-dessus, et sa Sousdominante, qui est sa Quinte au-dessous, ou simplement sa Quarte” (There are only three fundamentals in the mode: the tonic, the dominant which is the fifth above, and its subdominant, which is its fifth below, or simply its fourth).\textsuperscript{156} Due to the subdominant's location at an equal distance from the tonic (I) and the dominant (V), it is often understood to establish something of a harmonic balance between the two.\textsuperscript{157} Occurring in the middle, between the tonic and dominant, the subdominant could here be interpreted as a device that balances the two reflected sides of a duality, much like a harmonic mirror. The idea of a balance, swinging back and forth between two distinct poles is described by commentators on Verlaine often as an escarpolette. However, according to Christian Hervé, this balance or “swing” between two neatly divided sides is overcome in Verlaine's poem through what Hervé alternatively labels the glissement (“slippage”). Rather than a swing between clear sides of a duality, dividing subject from object, personal from impersonal, poetic setting from self, the glissement proposes instead a sliding between the two constantly shifting sides, whose instability will always resist apprehension and neat categorization.\textsuperscript{158} Material from one side is always and already implicated in the character and formation of the other.

Debussy's attention to this problematic is evident in his use of tritones, which Arthur Wenk flags as the “elemental building block of the song”.\textsuperscript{159} In music, tritones are intervals separated by three neighboring whole tones.\textsuperscript{160} The tritone divides the octave exactly in half, creating a “balance” between two sides of the scale. As we will see, this is a particularly apt device to thematize the slippage between subject and reflection, as well as interior versus exterior that is explored in Verlaine's poem. Because the tritone divides the scale in half, it has two possible

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item The dominant is typically used to create a sense of tension with regard to the tonic key, while the subdominant is generally establishes a balance between the two, because it is equal distance apart from the tonic and dominant.
\item Christian Hervé, “Labilité du paysage” dans \textit{Relecture de Romances sans paroles}.
\item Arthur Wenk, \textit{Debussy and the Poets}, 108.
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
functions that vary based on the context in which it is heard. Particularly in the second half of Debussy's song, there is a noticeable fluctuation between the intervals F-B and E#-B. E# and F are actually the same notes, both played on the “F” key, but their different notation is critical to discerning their separate harmonic functions. Written as “F-B” (as in measure 15), the interval is understood to be part of the dominant seventh chord of C-sharp major, which signals the ear to an ultimate resolution in the tonic; however, when written as “E#”, the tritone takes on an entirely different role. It no longer serves as part of the tonic's dominant seventh chord, but instead might suggest a resolution to F-sharp major, the subdominant (fourth degree) of the C-sharp major scale. The way that these intervals are “spelled” in Debussy's music (F-B versus E#-B) is an important consideration for the performer as well. When the interval is written with F, the music indicates an orientation toward the tonic, while when expressed with E#, the emphasis is alternatively given in the direction of the subdominant, C-sharp major.

Debussy's reference to the subdominant evokes a similar kind of slippage to the glissement discussed earlier in reference to Verlaine's poem. As Bruce Archibald observes, the composer avoids explicitly writing from the subdominant, which would unequivocally establish a balance between tonic and dominant. But the allusion to the subdominant, which is initiated by modulating the “F” to “E#” provides a still more powerful indication that symmetrical duality between the two poles of the dominant and tonic fields will never quite exist. Music is a useful form to convey this mobility and slippage since it is itself defined by constant movement. The act of pointing toward the subdominant is a reminder that instead of being able to “swing” from one clear category to the other, we are left instead in a state of constant slippage between the two.

**Moving Up and Down**

One of the most striking features of Verlaine's “L'ombre des arbres” is its representation of spatial movement. The poem slips from the shadowy reflection of trees in the river to the highest
branches of the trees, and then falls back again into the water, with the concluding “espérances noyées” (drowned hopes). The oscillation between high and low spatially represents the duality explored in the poem. “Le glissement, lui, allait de pair avec la discontinuité, avec les soubresauts d'une âme qui habitait successivement ou contradictoirement l'arbre et l'eau” (the slippage goes hand in hand with discontinuity, with the lurches of a soul that occupies successively or contradictorily, the tree and the water).\textsuperscript{161} The hinge in Verlaine's text is tandis que (“whereas”) in verse 3. This transition marks the ascent from the shrouded, immaterial reflection in the river below, to the air, where we find the “real” branches, upon which the turtledoves sit (affirming their materiality) and sing. But the divisions between high and low, source and reflection are again unclear. Taking the epigraph from Cyrano de Bergerac as a point of departure will help to clarify: “Le rossignol, qui du haut d'une branche se regarde dedans, croit être tombé dans la rivière. Il est au sommet d'un chêne et toutefois il a peur de se noyer” (The nightingale, sitting on the highest branch, sees its reflection in the river and believes itself to have fallen in. It is at the top of the tree yet still fears it will drown).\textsuperscript{162} The reflection of the trees (or the nightingale, as in Bergerac's epigraph) in the shifting surface of water belies a subject always and already displaced, as a condition of the dialectical fluidity between self and reflection. The impossibility of reconciling the shifting images in the water below with their own corporeality is the source of the birds' anxiety and what makes them weep (“se plaignent les tortourelles”). The encounter with its reflection causes an internal splitting within the birds, where confrontation with the self's outer image serves an index of its own disjunction.

The role of reflection is similar to what Lacan describes taking place in the mirror stage, in which an infant regards itself in the mirror and is confronted with an image of Gestalt or wholeness that does not resemble the fragmentation and physical limitations of its actual corporeality. The specular encounter with this “completed” self seen in the reflected image then becomes the ideal,

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\textsuperscript{161} Christian Hervé, “Labilité du paysage” dans Relecture de Romances sans paroles.
\textsuperscript{162} Paul Verlaine, op. cit., 151.
\end{small}
yet unattainable form to which the person thereafter aspires.\footnote{163} The exterior image of the “whole” self, however, does not really exist in the external; rather, it is subsumed into the space of the subject's interior and plays an important role in the formation of the subject's identity. The division itself becomes an influential figure in determining identity as it constantly aspires to reach the coherence of its reflected image, and is therefore not a remote “exterior” but intimately involved in shaping subjective identity.

**Charles Henry and Lines of Artistic Feeling**

The way that Debussy transforms this spatial shifting to a musical context is suggestive of his familiarity with the theories of scientific, inter-aesthetic correspondences proposed by the aesthetcian, Charles Henry. As a contemporary of Henry, Debussy was likely well aware of his ideas, which proposed mathematical bases for artistic creation. As Roy Howat explains, “[in] short, Henry sought to give simple and workable definition to the relationships between mathematics and art in ways that could also link all the arts”.\footnote{164} While there is no record that the two men ever met, they are known to have kept some of the same friends and published in a few of the same artistic and literary reviews, such as *La Revue Blanche*.\footnote{165} Henry's aesthetic theories are most well-known today for their influence on neoimpressionist painters, particularly Georges Seurat and Paul Signac. Henry published one of his most influential articles, *Introduction à une esthétique scientifique* in 1885 just before the period in which Debussy is known to have composed the *Ariettes* (1885-1888). Given the timing, their identification with many of the same circles in the emerging Symbolist movement, and Debussy's interest in proportion and the mathematical basis of music, it seems reasonable to speculate that compositional techniques we see in the *Ariettes* may have been

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somewhat informed by Henry's theories.

One of Charles Henry's most famous proposals connects the direction of lines (whether in painting or music) to emotion. Henry suggests an ascending line is linked to positive emotion while a descending line is associated with darker feelings. “The agreeable directions from low to high, down to up and from left to right are found to coincide with the tendencies of man towards the light.” In Debussy's, “L'ombre des arbres”, there is a sensitivity to coordinating musical line with the vertical, up-and-down movement of Verlaine's poem. In measures 1-6, very little harmonic activity or spatial movement occurs, particularly in the vocal line (refer to p. 6, examples 1-2). A slight rise and fall takes place over measures 3-4, but even here it is only an incremental increase. The limited range of the beginning is in stark contrast to the arrival of the octave rise on D-sharp in the vocal line that occurs in measures 6-7.

Such a dramatic increase in register corresponds to what is going on in the text of the poem, as we move upward vertically, from the shrouded river to the branches of the tree high in the air. The drastic ascent also signals an important change in the spatial orientation of the text, which is initiated by the conjunction, tandis que (whereas). On the whole, Debussy stays within a close harmonic range in “L’ombre des arbres”. Measure 7, along with the climax in measure 20 and another moment of dramatic tension in measure 24-25, are the only instances of significant register change. The vertical rise in measure 24-25 presents a curious contrast with the example we just

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discussed, undermining the strict alignment made between tonal increase and upward movement, and positive emotion as proposed by Charles Henry.

Rather than descending, as we might expect from the “espérances noyées” (drowned hopes), the vocal line does the reverse, actually increasing by a full sixth. To help us understand what Debussy might have intended by this somewhat startling reversal of direction, let us refer once more to the poem's epigraph: “Le rossignol, qui du haut d'une branche se regarde dedans, croit être tombé dans la rivière. Il est au sommet d'un chêne et toutefois il a peur de se noyer” (The nightingale, who from the highest branch regards itself, believes it has fallen into the river. It is at the top of the oak tree and is nevertheless still afraid of drowning). The fear of drowning is not located outside the nightingale, in its distant reflection below. The anxiety of the birds in Verlaine's poem arises in the turtledoves in the fourth verse, who, in confronting their own disjunction in regarding their distorted reflections in the water below, begin to weep. Rather, Debussy depicts in the musical score how anxiety initiated by the encounter with reflection rises to join the birds among the “real branches” high above the river.

In a similar way, the drowned hopes of Verlaine's poetic subject are not confined to the water

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167 Paul Verlaine, *op. cit.* 151.
below. If that were the case, they would be impersonal and not threatening to the subject. As Christian Hervé notes, “le sensible n'est jamais extérieur” (the perceptible is never exterior).\textsuperscript{168} Melancholy cannot be externalized or disjointed from the internal experience of the feeling subject. The reflection means nothing without being assigned internal significance to the subject. The “drowned hopes” are not lost in the water below but instead, as Debussy's ascending octave line suggests, they rise to join the subject, confounding the neat boundaries between personal and impersonal, self and reflection, and high and low. In Debussy's setting, internalized melancholy is all the more powerful because it cannot ever be fully drowned or forgotten.

That Debussy's ascending octave at “espérances noyées” does not square exactly with Henry's theory of line direction does not necessarily diminish his influence here. Henry's ideas were certainly more complex than the assignment of a one-to-one relationship between line direction and emotion. For example, in describing the musical form of the arabesque, Henry speaks of a mobile line that is in constant transformation, or “continual autogenesis,” a fluid state that he describes as “often intricate, repetitive, self-reproductive and ideally, self-mutative”.\textsuperscript{169} The artistic line is not fixed or stable, but a process that testifies to the continual movement and change that at once creates and negates it.

The vertical movement from high to low in “L'ombre des arbres” is balanced by its spatial contrast, the infinite horizontal expansiveness of the paysage blême. In Verlaine's poetry, the image of the countryside occurs frequently, as a figure of excess that simultaneously surpasses and envelops the poetic subject. Like the countryside, the limits of the subject's melancholy are imperceptible. Here, the tension between the subject and the expansive “outside” of the paysage is particularly important in that it sets up a contrast, or an outside framework from which to understand the fraught position of the “moi” as it tries to relate to a limitless exterior. As Arnaud Bernadet describes, “[l'intime] se définit plutôt comme une intérieurité-extérieurité, moins dans le

\textsuperscript{168} Christian Hervé, “Labilité du paysage,” \textit{Relecture des Romances sans paroles.}
\textsuperscript{169} Cited in José A. Argüelles, \textit{op. cit.}, 131.
sens d'une dulaité que d'une tension féconde. L'examen de soi doit pouvoir coincider avec une sortie hors de soi” ([the interior self] is defined instead as an interiority-exteriority, less in the sense of a duality than of a productive tension. The examination of the self must coincide with an ability to leave, to go outside the self). 170

In the second strophe of Verlaine’s poem, we encounter the element of the personal. The apostrophe to the voyageur initiates a division not only between the poetic subject and the exterior paysage, but also between the moi of the poetic subject and the toi of the addressed voyager. In much the same way as the “espérances noyées” transcend vertical spatial limits to effect the poetic subject, the expansive countryside also works upon the voyager, who is rendered pale by the pallid and infinitely expanding countryside. The inscrutable countryside is impossible to apprehend in its expansive continuation; through its resistance to containment in signification, the paysage becomes pale and emptied of accessible meaning. But the next line depicts the close and important relationship between the exterior, insurmountable paysage and the voyager. The empty countryside “te mira blême toi-même” (reflects you pale yourself). But a mirror reflection is one of equivalence; therefore, while the poem states that it is the paysage that renders the subject pale and empty, it could as easily be said that the void of the countryside is a reflection of the subject himself. As Verlaine indicates in the first line of the poem, reflected image and original object are more complicated categories than we tend to think. Rather than separate dualities, they inform, produce and can be read in the formation of one another.

In Debussy's piece, a sort of musical mirroring corresponds to “te mira blême toi-même,” in the modulation around B natural (measure 17-18). In measure 17, “te” falls on the B natural/E-sharp tritone we discussed earlier, which has the effect of pointing toward a balance between the tonic and dominant keys that is never actually achieved.

B natural acts as a sort of hinge between the dual poles of the tonic and dominant, mystifying the clear boundaries between them, as it is invoked and articulated differently in both modes. B natural is part of the dominant seventh (b7) of the C # major chord, and in this application, effectively undermines the stability of the tonic. However, B natural is also functions to “point toward” F-
sharp, its dominant, but also the subdominant of C-sharp major. The B natural functions enharmonically: acting as part of the dominant seventh degree of C-sharp major, it destabilizes the tonic, while also alluding to the dominant through pointing toward F-sharp.

In another instance of harmonic mirroring, the rhyme in the text between blême and même is affirmed musically when both of these words occur on roughly the same chord (with the single exception that the D-sharp of blême in measure 16 is augmented to E-sharp on même in measure 19). D-sharp belongs the dominant seventh of C-sharp major (G#-B#-D#-F#).171 The dominant seventh on C-sharp (C#-E#-G#-B) includes the E-sharp that falls on the word même. The vocal line is also raised to the D-sharp an octave above in measure 19, reaffirming the preeminence of the dominant key, G-sharp in this instance. As was suggested above, the implication of the text is that the pallid countryside renders the voyager pale as well, as the exterior is internalized and affected upon the subject. We might read Debussy's interplay between the dominant seventh on the tonic, C-sharp and its actual dominant seventh (on G#) in a similar way. The mirroring going on here underscores an intertwinement of two sides, whether of the subject and the paysage, or of the opposing poles of tonic and dominant.

The premise of reflection in Verlaine's text troubles the neat, dualistic boundaries between interior and exterior, object and image, origin and replication. The mirror acts as a powerful device from which to explore subjectivity, as Verlaine's text proposes these categories as unstable and ambiguous. Rather than categorical separation or duality, Verlaine's poem seems to propose an implication of each category within its other, and a constant mobility and slippage between the two sides. The impossibility of a neat division is echoed musically in Debussy's song, where he uses a variety of harmonic techniques, such as the allusion to the dominant seventh and the variously-applied tritone interval to musically render this fluidity between categories. In the end, we are left with a sense of anxiety surrounding the status of reflection that rests in the impossibility of

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171 Situated on the dominant (fifth) degree of the C-sharp major scale, this is the dominant seventh chord that resolves to the tonic interval of C# and E#.
separating exterior relationships from internalized subjectivity. The identity of the subject that emerges, then, is characterized by its resistance to a complete affiliation with either side of this duality. The “exterior” reflection of is in fact located and internalized with the perceiving subject itself, suggesting that the boundaries between source and reflection, object and image, subject and exterior are never clearly divided but always present in, and ultimately, are constitutive of one another.
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