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Such stuff as we are made on

Exploring the non-narrative quality of cultural memory through the
poems of Henri Meschonnic

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Writing is a shared adventure. The memory of Charles Blanc and the laugh and twinkle in Marina Tsartsara's eyes accompany this journey. *The poem continues ...*

Abbreviations

- AC Henri Meschonnic (2002) *Au Commencement: Traduction de la Génèse* (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer)
- CB Henri Meschonnic (2004) *Un Coup de Bible dans la philosophie* (Paris: Bayard) —Essay
- CDN Henri Meschonnic (1999) *Combien de noms* (Paris: L'Improviste)
- CP Henri Meschonnic (2001) *Célébration de la poésie* (Lagrasse: Verdier) —Essay
- CR Henri Meschonnic (1982) *Critique du rythme: anthropologie historique du langage* (Lagrasse: Verdier) —Essay
- DP Henri Meschonnic (1972) *Dédicaces proverbes* (Paris: Gallimard)
- EP Henri Meschonnic (1985) *Les États de la poésie* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France) —Essay
- J Henri Meschonnic (1986) *Jona et le signifiant errant* (Paris: Gallimard) —Translation & Essay
- JE Henri Meschonnic (2000) *Je n'ai pas tout entendu* (Reims: Dumerchez)
- MS Henri Meschonnic (1985) 'Mallarmé au-delà du silence', in *Écrits sur le Livre (choix de textes)*, Stéphane Mallarmé, Ed. C. Romana and M. Valensi (Paris: Éditions de l'Éclat) —Essay
- N Henri Meschonnic (2003) *Les Noms: Traduction de l'Exode* (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer)
- NP Henri Meschonnic (1990) *Nous le passage* (Lagrasse: Verdier)
- PRPS Henri Meschonnic (1995) *Politique du rythme, politique du sujet* (Lagrasse: Verdier) —Essay
- RL Henri Meschonnic (2000) *La Rythme et la lumière: avec Pierre Soulages* (Paris: Odile Jacob) —Essay
- RV Henri Meschonnic (1990) *La Rime et la vie* (Lagrasse: Verdier) —Essay
- UJ Henri Meschonnic (2001) *L'Utopie du juif* (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer) —Essay
- VP Henri Meschonnic (2006) *Vivre poème* (Reims: Dumerchez) —Essay
- VV Henri Meschonnic (1985) *Voyageurs de la voix* (Lagrasse: Verdier)

Introduction: Such stuff as we are made on

We are such stuff
As dreams are made on; and our little life
Is rounded with a sleep. Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, Act IV- Sc. 1 - 157-8 (Prospero)

The fact that ‘we are made of our memories’ (Casey 2000, 290) has become an adage for many who turn a lens on memory as raw material or object of study (Radstone 2000, 12-3; Radstone and Hodgkin 2006, 2). One may wonder about the stakes this assertion places on *memories* —the products of our remembering— and their relationship to both the formation of subjectivity and the (self-)reflexive practices deployed to get a hold on (how we came to be) who we are, either as groups or individuals, in the multiplicity of forms these processes entail. The kind of ‘memory work’ I refer to acknowledges that any sense of immediacy is always already lost whenever and however we “experience” the past in the present and that the process of working memory over and meandering through its intricacies and vicissitudes is at least as important as what our memories contain. However, it tacitly roots both memory and its relationship to self-knowledge in ‘story, projection, and their powerful combination in parable’, which Mark Turner (1996, 168) takes to be the source of all our cognitive processes. Narration, in one form or another, is the omnipresent premise to our critical and creative endeavours with memory, seeking to make sense of ourselves in such way as to foster an element of disciplined choice, to regain some sense of agency over our lives, and hopefully to lessen our chances of repeating our sore past.

This dissertation aims to complicate this understanding of memory reified as narrative by moving our attention towards whatever ‘important’ yet ‘undervalued’ —or even etherealised— dimension of memory is ‘at work in texts in ways that are not what is usually encompassed by the description “textual”’ (Middleton and Woods 2000, 6). Moving away from the reductionist yet widespread outlook alleging ‘the opacity, the non-transparency and the arbitrariness of language as a *medium* for remembrance’ (Radstone and Hodgkin 2006, 6, my emphasis), the view explored here restitutes corporeality to the workings of language as a movement that ‘governs meaning’ and ‘transforms the modes of signifying’ even in written discourse (Bedetti 1992, 431).

One major and tenacious exponent of the primal anthropological value of language — taken in the wider sense of the French *langage*— ‘comme activité de sens des sujets’ (CR, 45-6), Henri Meschonnic (b1932) is also a translator of the Hebrew Bible and a poet. Although all three inseparable aspects of his work have much to offer, nowhere is Meschonnic’s engagement with memory more explicit than in the dense and most personal, albeit shared, space of his poems. Even though he declares an utmost involvement in his poems —‘[t]oute ma vie est dans mes poèmes’ (VP, 7)—, the poems are only autobiographical insofar as they are ‘littéralement, une *écriture* de la *vie*’ (Ancet 2002, 82), and as opposed to the belated or retrospective reconstitution/narration of personal experience that would project a personable, recognisable image of the author in the poem. Reflexive rather than confessional, invocatory and illocutionary rather than narrative, ‘[u]n poème, pour moi, says Meschonnic, ne raconte pas d’histoires’ (VP, 7). If poems are a ‘langage d’expérience’ (JE, back cover), this experience is attached to a strongly felt ‘impulsion d’avoir à dire quelque chose’ more so than to circumstances (2002, 7). Meschonnic emphasises the anodyne character of context, linking the ‘déclenchement d’un

poème' to 'la force de l'infime', without nevertheless undermining those 'bouleversements majeurs, qui nous remuent, qui nous retournent' (Martin 2003, 14). In this sense, his biography bears scant relevance and, aside from the drive and development of his work, Meschonnic volunteers little of his personal history beyond that which this "note biographique" discloses:

Henri Meschonnic est né le 18 Septembre 1932 à Paris, de parents juifs russes venus de Bessarabie en 1924.

Il y a ensuite la guerre et la traque. Puis des études de lettres. Un passage de huit mois dans la guerre d'Algérie en 1960. Premiers poèmes parus dans la revue *Europe* en 1962.
[...] (PB, 97)

The reduced choice of historical markers reminds the reader that 'le rapport entre ma vie et mes poèmes est premier' (Mazo 2004, 18) with the otherwise peripheral mention of Algeria. However, it also distances Meschonnic's writing from its identification with the Jewish individual, whose history factually 'a été passée par l'expérience de l'antisémitisme entre disons 1940 et 1945' (Martin 2003, 26). If the poet acknowledges 'qu'il y a ça et là des traces de moments vécus [...] ou de choses senties', the experienced past is never explicitly present as a theme in his poetry. Notwithstanding 'une sensibilité qui est [en partie] l'effet de cette histoire même', Meschonnic is at odds with the notion of Jewishness and so his poems need to be read in conjunction with his refusal to postulate on 'quel sens a le mot «juif»' (25). In the critique paired with his translation of the biblical verses, Meschonnic takes a stand against the excess of meaning given to history. This excess, he argues, deprives the 'signifiant juif' from its radically historical dimension 'qui déborde la conscience ou la volonté des sujets' (UJ, 58). At its worst, it holds the 'signifiant juif' together with the highly problematical terminology used to designate the extermination of

Jews under the Nazi and the Vichy regimes.¹

Interestingly, such a reading of Henri Meschonnic's poems and poetics may contribute to academic debates around the perduring equivocation of post-holocaust memory. Broadly, it rejoins the demand for 'a vigilant resistance to alterity's assimilation by knowledge' that Josh Cohen (2003, 4) infers from Theodor W. Adorno's pronouncement of a 'new categorical imperative [...] to arrange [...] thought and actions so that Auschwitz will not repeat itself' (1973, 365). However, for Meschonnic, the historical foundation for this demand is not restricted to the horrific events of the last century but is borne by language throughout history, particularly by what 'l'herméneutique, juive ou chrétienne' (*UJ*, 9) and '*l'idole poésie*' (*CP*, 186) have hindered in the language of the Bible or in the poem, respectively. In both his theoretical and creative work, Meschonnic seeks to retrieve the dialogism of poetry from a long tradition that has elevated poetic inspiration as an object of adoration, a relic of Orpheus' dismemberment.

Part 1 reacquaints us with the foundational myth as a way into Meschonnic's particular stance on poetry, introducing the notion of poem as a relational activity in language that holds and transforms subjects through history. By drawing some contrasts and parallels with recent memory scholarship, it appeals for a 'poetics of memory' (Michon 2003, 130) that transcends the reduction of poems to memory texts. Part 2 observes the eclipse of

1. See Jacques Sebag's commentary on the inappropriateness of the designation "Holocauste" — a complete sacrifice offering to God, "burned whole" in the Greek etymology— in the newspaper *Le Monde* (2005). Meschonnic followed suit with an unreserved denunciation of the 'theologico-politique' usurpation of the biblical term 'Shoah', on which '[l]e consensus s'est déplacé, en français' and which 'condense «de culte du souvenir»' (2005). A small polemic ensued between Meschonnic, who concludes that '[i]l serait plus sain pour le langage que ce mot ne soit un jour que le titre d'un film', and the author of the film in question (Lanzmann 2005). My use of the term "Holocaust" in this dissertation strictly refers to the *memorialisation* of the extermination, whilst "Auschwitz" is used when referring to Adorno's thought on the matter.

memory's narrativity through two poems of *Nous le passage* (1990) tangential to an evocation of the extermination. The poems revive the interrupted mourning of anonymous dead, drawing the vicarious witnessing of the past and its representation to the vanishing point of our conscious remembering. From there, an embodied and forward-looking form of mourning emerges, mixed with immemorial links to past generations and with sensuality. This motif expands in *Combien de noms* (1999), read alongside other collections of poems in Part 3, inviting us to listen out for the bodily quality of language through which memory understood as a relational form of on-going subjectivation is most at play. It substitutes a live dimension of language for the relative closure of narratives: 'Dire constitue le vivre. Il ne se substitue pas au vivre' (*DP*, 8). Drawing from this, my conclusion points to the poem's 'capacité de continuer d'agir sur le présent' (Martin 2003, 26), hinting at the ethical and political implications of the poem's activity as embodied memory of language.

On écrit avec son corps, langage instinctif-réflexif. Parce qu'il est le désir, comme le rêve, il a raison en avant de moi, sur moi, avant et pour les autres pratiques du langage, contre elles — et ceux qui s'y confinent. Il annonce, sous le sens apparent des mots-choses-événements, un sens infini. (*DP*, 8)

Reinstating memory in the body through the activity of language offers a necessary counterbalance to the current focus 'on the particularities and specificities of contemporary Western culture's imbrications with memory' (Radstone 2007, 193) and on the 'mnemonic fever' (Huyssen 1995, 7) rising in response to the perceived fragility of memory. It renews our conceptualisation of memory with the universal anthropological given that Samuel Butler argued to be an essential, if not the only, life-defining attribute of all being:

Life, then, is memory. The life of a creature is the memory of a creature. We are all the same stuff to start with, but we remember different things, and if we did not remember different things we should be absolutely like

each other. As for the stuff itself, we know nothing save only that it is «such as dreams are made of [*siz*]» (Butler 1878, 299-300)

Beyond its humanistic simplicity, this statement invites further consideration. First, it distinguishes the activity of remembering from the products of our remembering. Second, it asserts the fundamental indivisibility of our community as remembering beings, and acknowledges that this indivisibility is both the necessary result of and the necessary condition for singularity, alterity and the maintenance of these. However, we cannot name this stuff that unites us: all we know is its elusory dimension, which, to echo Prospero's lines, once conjured up in dreams, dissolves. Hoping to bring this non-narratable relational basis to light, I now turn to the one activity that resists our temptation to name things: the poem.

Part 1 – Re-membering Orpheus: towards a relational poetics of memory

Éduquez votre nudité. Orphée était nu sur un
rocher. Kenneth White

Poems, like dreams, are the scene of our nocturnal wanderings. This is the mythic element of poetry, whose ‘cultural, form-giving, work [...] is to counter the oblivion of darkness’ (Stewart 2002, 1-2). Poetry continuously follows or repeats the endless ‘Orphic task of drawing the figure of the other’ out of the ‘inarticulate world that is the night of preconsciousness and suffering’ (2, 3). A poem needs to come out on the page or in any other recognisable form in order to find its indispensable audience, starting with the poet herself. However, the poem must resist any definite recognition, if it is to go on being a poem —that is, if it is to persist as form instead of disappearing irretrievably out of the affective domain of our likely sense-experiences. Its promise carries the interdiction of its own fulfilment. The glance Orpheus turned towards Eurydice just before both lovers could emerge safely from the dark abode of the dead, the failure to suspend his reliance on ocular ascertainment, interrupts the dream of deliverance and confirms nothing but the trauma of his loss. Like the dream, the poem ceases to exist once we attempt to set eyes upon its figurative world and bring it to the intelligible surface of our awoken reality. Accordingly, the careful economy of darkness and light marking out the aesthetic path of *Poetry and the Fate of the Senses* that Susan Stewart explores, culminates with the image of the nocturne. By calling on the heightened interplay between the immediacy of perception and the kind of abstraction the night affords, the nocturne form ‘restored [the darkness of the Orphean

excursion] to the continuity of our human experience' (253). The intersubjective intimacy of poetry owes to the sense impression evolved from this nocturnal venture its maintenance in the 'continuing struggle' to foster 'the expression of the historical and individual person of sensuous being' (325) as a necessary condition of individuation.

For the poet and scholar Henri Meschonnic, a poem is a space where life and language are coextensive; it is a *vivre poème*. Poetry, that is, 'l'activité d'un poème, des poèmes' (*VP*, 23), 'c'est l'union maximale de la vie et du langage' (12). This statement supposes a rereading of the etymology —from the Greek *poiēsis*, derived from *poiein*, "to make"— as the creative act of giving life to and through language. To write or to read a poem, is to be traversed, worked on or transformed by its life-making activity, at the same time as we partake in the transforming life of language through our writing or reading practice.

La poésie fait vie de tout. Elle est cette forme de vie qui fait langage de tout. Elle ne nous arrive que si le langage même est devenu une forme de vie. C'est pourquoi elle est si peu paisible. Car elle ne cesse de nous travailler. D'être le rêve dont nous sommes le sommeil. Une écoute, un éveil qui nous traverse, le rythme qui nous connaît et que nous ne connaissons pas. (*RV*, 208)

Much of Meschonnic's theoretical corpus is centred around the conceptualisation of the poem as the privileged space where the subjectivation of discourse is at its maximum, and through which 'nous devenons langage', 'fai[sant] de nous une forme-sujet spécifique [...] que nous ne serions pas sans lui' (*CP*, 247). Something of the order of the poem happens, interpellates us and invokes us in a way we can neither control nor clearly recognise. We commonly say we are moved or touched by a poem although we may not be able to tell why it affects us in such way. We invest in the poem something that profoundly belongs to us, something we know we do not know, a *je ne sais quoi* always yet to be

discovered. Each poem is the space of a happenstance between this part of unknown and ourselves. It is the site of an expansion of the subject-who-writes in and through what-is-written; a site that is always already shared, for it demands the participation of a subject-who-reads, knowingly or unknowingly, and her expansion into what-is-read:

[L]’activité du poème fait du texte tout entier un *je*, et transforme par là le *je* du lecteur, en sorte qu’il participe, même [...] s’il ne le sait pas, de ce *je* nouveau, continu, contagieux, historique et trans-historique, trans-subjectif. (*PRPS*, 192)

A poetics that defines itself as the practice of the poem and ‘le travail sans fin de [...] reconnaître’ (*VP*, 31) everything in the continuum of language that is of the order of the poem —beyond poetry as genre— places sociality and historicity at the heart of the activity it seeks to give an account of. It uncovers the tension between a particular historical situation, circumstantial to the activity, and the ability for this activity to escape indefinitely the conditions of its production, such that it goes on to have an action. Thus formulated, this tension resembles that underlying the conceptualisation of memory and its workings, whose renewed ‘foregrounding’ Susannah Radstone relates to ‘memory as the [holding] site of a conjunctural, late modern working-through of [...] modernity’s ambivalences and equivocations’ (Radstone 2000, 4)¹.

The close association between memory —together with its alter ego forgetfulness— and poetry is an ancient one. For the early Greeks, Mnemosyne, mother of all Muses, took the form of a magical loadstone whose ability ‘to *invoke*, to call down its subject from

1. Radstone refers to the ‘equivocations between community and [individual] subjectivity; tradition and invention; the past and the present’ amongst others that still ‘bear [...] forcefully upon’ our times (Radstone 2000, 4).

above' (Paterson 2007, 57), induced knowledge of the mythical past into the minds of poets, rhapsodes and their captive audiences, 'transmitting the attractive force from one into another' (Plato cited in Casey 2000, 13). To wander through this past was to loosen one's anchoring in the empirical present and 'discover what lies dissimulated in the depths of being' (Vernant cited in Casey 2000, 12). It emphasised the propensity to exceed one's knowledge over the mnemonic function still commonly assigned to poetry as guarantor of lore preservation in pre-literate societies. The contrast I want to draw here bears some similarity with the latter in that it destabilises the reliance on both 'memory as *tekhné*' (Frow 1997, 222) and the intelligible materiality of its manifestations.

To be sure, cultural memory is often defined in terms of both the active mediation of the past in the present and its articulation 'through technologies and media that shape even as they transmit memory' (Hirsch and Smith 2002, 5). That '[a]cts of memory are thus acts of performance, representation, and interpretation', that '[t]hey require agents and specific contexts', encourages one to think of memory and narration as indissociable. Indeed, Mieke Bal mentions the 'implied' narrative basis of habitual memories and roots the pathological reenactment of traumatic experiences in the failure or interruption of narrative —and healing with 'generat[ing] narratives that «make sense»' (1999, x). My issue with this understanding, however, is that, like John Frow's 'logic of textuality' (1997, 222), it promotes an archival appreciation of memory as an on-going, albeit not foolproof, accumulation of closed inscriptions of the mediated past whose intelligible meaning we are free to decipher and construct for ourselves retroactively in our readings. Of course, we are never quite free in that our acts of memory occur within an economy of institutions, discourses and practices, that takes in as much as it shapes the regimes of knowledge and power we evolve in. However, the 'romantic objectification of memory' dominating

Western discourse ‘both in much disciplinary work and in popular culture’ raises much concern, particularly in view of the risk of individualist and essentialist *dérives* it entails for processes of identity formation (Lambek 2006, 210).¹

The alternative Michael Lambek suggests takes its inspiration from practices of spirit possession. It moves away from the commodified conception of memory, embedding memory within a ‘practical and relational’ form of subjectivation (212), binding the spirit medium to historical forms of subjectivation still active in the present, and leaving her free to re-enact them differently. In his critique of competing philosophical approaches to cultural memory, Pascal Michon reaches a similar prognosis, advocating the ‘forms of transsubjectivity’ Henri Meschonnic foregrounds in and through the workings of language, and pointing out to the unpredictable yet decisive dimension of these forms ‘which sometimes come from very far, upset us, and help us to live’ (Michon 2003, 128). This parallel, supported by the theoretical link Michon elaborates elsewhere across traditionally distinct academic disciplines (2005, 2007), leads me to intuit the kind of spirit possession that the poetic experience is as a vantage point to ponder ‘whether there *are* inassimilable and incommensurable aspects of memory, and if so how they can be understood’ (Radstone 2005, 148).

There is no doubt as to the response to this question, according to Luisa Passerini. In a fascinating reflexive essay (Passerini 2003), she makes the crucial distinction between the sort of silences that are part and parcel of our narrative or narratable constructions, and the silence that escapes them indefinitely. The latter is the terrain ‘inhabited by *Homo poeticus*’

1. Barbara Mizstal (2004) and Susannah Radstone (2005) also warn us about the individualistic take on memory as a reified route to self-identification.

(247) that exposes the disciplines of cultural memory to their limits and ‘exclude[s them] from coming across the «unknown»’ (251). This silence points to the ‘«embodied memory» enlivened by intersubjectivity’ (248) and to the ‘particular form of experiencing the relation between language, body, and society’ that Michon (2003, 126-7) entices us with.

It is in the elusive dimension of this silence that ‘un sujet s’invente. Pas: s’inscrit. S’invente’ (Meschonnic 2002, 8). I take Meschonnic’s insistent correction between subjective inscription and invention to be the very touch required to turn *tekhné* into *poiésis*. Though it bears something of a divine dimension, this should not to be mistaken for a transcendental given. To continue my earlier parallel with spirit possession, it is brought back to earth and embraces a negotiation similar to what Lambek (2006, 213) argues to be ‘the very thing that [...] is central to memory’: the negotiation between guilt and responsibility that makes up our necessarily ‘continuous practical judgement in living a moral life’. He quotes Fingarette: ‘Guilt is retrospective, but responsibility is prospective ... To accept responsibility is to be responsible for what shall be done’ (213). The poem allows just this:

Un poème est fait de ce vers quoi on va, qu’on ne connaît pas, et de
se dont on se retire, qu’il est vital de reconnaître. (CP, 252)

The fact that Meschonnic inflects this statement from the call of responsibility Mallarmé assumes in describing his ultimate task to Verlaine —‘L’explication orphique de la Terre, qui est le seul devoir du poète’ (Mallarmé 1985, 144)— seems apropos. Mallarmé’s assertion lays a claim on the fraught relationship between morality and knowledge, which the poem brings forth. The figure of Orpheus is that of a refusal of what-is-known even as it is acknowledged, a refusal to refer to the reality of the world, ‘travailler avec mystère en

vue de plus tard ou de jamais' (145). Of course, what Mallarmé dreams about here is 'le Livre', the necessarily incomplete task of a lifetime in poetry. However, it is also the minute works of invention and transformation renewed with each poem, whose 'mystère' Mallarmé identifies, elsewhere, in the opposition between *nommer* and *suggérer* (*MS*, 40). In Meschonnic's reading of Mallarmé, *nommer* proceeds from the instrumentalisation of language and turns the poem into a form of prosthetic memory/emotion which then participates in the public memorial space, '[l]e stock [qui] est toujours le *passé* de la poésie' (*VP*, 21). *Suggérer*, on the contrary, supposes the active attention to all that participates in the invocatory quality of language in the poem — 'toutes les paroles doivent s'effacer devant la sensation' (Mallarmé quoted in *MS*, 39-40). The poem needs to substitute a maximum of affectivity conveyed through the movement of language in the poem itself for the expression/recognition of the author/reader's feelings in what the poem says. For Meschonnic, 'l'important est que l'émotion passe du sujet qui pense, du sujet qui sait, qui veut, qui a des émotions, au sujet du poème' (Martin 2003, 14). It is in coming close to the movement organising this sensation from within the poem that, as writers or readers, we are swept along by the movement and become part of it. Put another way, a poem needs to take the risk of underdetermination to the extent that it relies on a sustained relational form of subjectivation and on the (unconditional) complicity of the writer/reader in order to give a sense to her life, more so than the poem itself makes sense.

The poet's duty — which is also the reader's, for a poem is always 'un poème à faire, maintenant et aussi un poème à lire, maintenant' (*VP*, 22) —, then, is to be responsible for what is always already ahead of us, a reminder that 'l'inconnu qu'il [le nom d'Orphée] désigne continue en chacun de nous' (*CP*, 250). Orpheus' journey starts anew with every poem. To follow his trail, accepting the responsibility the poem entails, is to resist

bestowing knowledge from our experience, and to seek the stuff we are made on across and beyond the stories we tell (about) ourselves. It requires an attention to memory outside the limits of its possible articulation into a narrative or narratable form. Like Orpheus, we need to hold our face-to-face encounter in abeyance and not look back towards the past in expectation of what we hope or fear to see. In avoiding recognition, it is not the image of a human person we bring into being through memory or through the poem, but a relational intimacy that is constantly renewed and held in tension. For Orpheus' journey is also Eurydice's, inseparably. The premise of their adventure is at the height of all intersubjective relations. In order to recognise, following Serge Martin (2004b, 2005), that 'les poèmes même quand ils ne *disent* pas l'amour le *font*', we need to closely align our critical undertakings with poetry towards the subjective relational movements it performs. Such engagement demands that we step out of any remnants of substantialism to listen out for all the modes of address, most intensively at play in poems of all instances of language, and what these require or make of us.¹

The parallel drawn in this section between memory and the poem's intersubjective or relational dimension stays suggestive in more than one sense of the word. It calls to mind some theoretical perspectives that could not be explored in full in the scope of the present discussion. Psychoanalysis, for instance, may have a lot to contribute in that it 'is more than the creation of a narrative, it is the active construction of a new way of experiencing self with other' (Fonagy 1999). Meschonnic suggests that Didier Anzieu's comments on meaning borne by the bodily interaction between mother and child—including what Anzieu terms 'le bain sonore' (1995, 16)— 'sont peut-être non seulement à étendre à

1. As Hugh Hochman argues, '[p]oems do not refer to the world mentioned on the level of their themes or fiction but rather perpetually refer to relationships they sustain with the reader' (2005, 173).

l'adulte, mais encore à reprendre par la poétique et par l'anthropologie du langage' (*EP*, 132). Recalling the suggestion that the non-narrative element of memory is the result of a syncretisation of the body in language, the relational poetics of memory I allude to calls for a sensualisation of language, the primary and most acute empirical ground of which is 'le travail du poème, du vivre poème' (*VP*, 31). The remainder of this dissertation focuses on those of Meschonnic's poems which attend to cultural memory on one of its territories of predilection, blending the haunting presence of the past, particularly in reference to the extermination of European Jewry under the Third Reich, with the intimate sensuality of a love relationship omnipresent throughout Meschonnic's poetry. To what extent can these opposite extremes be reconciled, if at all? Although the later Adorno came back on his famous injunction against 'poetry after Auschwitz' (O'Connor 2000, 210) declaring that '[p]erennial suffering has as much right to expression as a tortured man has to scream', he jointly 'raise[d] the less cultural question whether after Auschwitz you can go on living' (86) —or indeed loving, one may presume. Life, love and the poem are inseparable in the work of Henri Meschonnic and the question unavoidably underlies the reading I am about to offer. However, re-membering Orpheus, whose journey through darkness shares the impossibility of its own fulfilment with our 'new categorical imperative' (Adorno 1973, 365) in the shadow of Auschwitz (Cohen 2003), perhaps the only chance we stand to 'go on living' is to keep our eyes shut to the objective reality of memory narratives and look up to the sensual promise of the poem-relation.

Part 2 – Suspending memory: a walk on absent gravestones in search of our intimate selves

un cri
rentré dans la pierre
il garde de la vie sur
le mort
notre infini Henri Meschonnic (CDN, 14)

Reading through the sum of Meschonnic's books of poems reveals a singular poetry imbued with sensuality and lyricism that convey lifeworld experiences at once commonplace and unpredictable with a rare simplicity of vocabulary and syntax. An overall sense of consistency and continuity is emphasised by his abandonment of all punctuation marks and capital letters. However, one moment stands out, interrupting the poetical flow in both form and content, with a section of standard prose and a tangential, albeit unequivocal, reference to the extermination unmatched in a poetry otherwise written in verse lines. The poem in question literally takes the central position in *Nous le passage*, giving the reader a plausible clue towards undecidable allusions that appear elsewhere in this and other collections.¹ By avoiding a hint at any historical or contextual situation, Meschonnic leaves his readers in suspense, haunted by shadow of mortuary motifs whose density invokes the moral demands such past traumatic events exert upon us. However, the insistent articulations of these motifs with their counterpart —e.g. 'mort' (and 'cimetière', 'stèles', 'tombes', 'pierres', 'noms' or 'inscriptions') with 'vie', 'mémoire' with 'oubli', 'cris'

1. Already significant in *Voyageurs de la voix* (1985) and *Nous le passage* (1990), these allusions take their most prominent place in the next collection, *Combien de noms*, published at the opposite end of the 1990's but 'écrit[s] dans un même mouvement' (Ancet 2002, 78).

with ‘silence’—, or with the sensual poetics at work in the poems are never quite resolved. As readers, we are placed in a situation of discord between the imperative to face up to the presence of the Holocaust in our consciousness and the banality of indecipherable moments on which the poem thrives. Confronted with the cultural effect our engagement with the past has on meaning—a much diffused ‘*retrospective witnessing by adoption*’ or ‘postmemory’ (Hirsch 2001, 10) challenging any sense of rationality to the extreme—, we are forced to adopt an ambivalent stance. Should we let our postmemories temper with our experience of life and poetry?

I consider this question by looking in turn at two poems taken from *Nous le passage*. The historical reference in the central poem invites us to read the oblique allusions against the grain and gives us the opportunity to test how they relate to, or depart from, the specificity of the Nazi genocide. The particular postmemorial encounter staged in this poem continues in a short poem that twists our implication in the process, invoking the mythical dimension of biblical events and becoming the scene of a sensual encounter.

In the central poem of *Nous le passage*, we accompany the poet walking on the absent gravestones of an old cemetery, a defaced site of mourning that has been written out of guides. The poet pauses on this *non-lieu de mémoire*¹, this site where the memory of the dead has been buried a second time, effaced by events that trigger testimonies so banal as to blend with the anodyne landscape, as much as they project the dead themselves into

1. I use this term to designate either a place deprived of memory or one that did not meet the utilitarian criteria to be instituted as what Pierre Nora calls a *lieu de mémoire* (1989), in the same way a judiciary ‘non-lieu’ means the abandonment of a case for lack of judicial ground. It also hints at Marc Augé’s critique of spaces whose promotion as *lieu de mémoire* entails their loss of relational potential and historicity (1992).

oblivion:

Il n'y a plus de pierres au cimetière juif de Radom. Dans le pré où nous cherchons, deux vaches sont couchées. Nous marchons dans des trous d'herbes. Deux blocs cassés portent des noms en polonais et en hébreu, renversés. Plus loin, une dalle, son inscription contre le sol. La mort des morts. Un campement de tziganes longe le début du chemin qui coupe le pré et qui finit vers une usine, d'où un camion nous croise. Une vieille paysanne s'est approchée. Elle raconte. Les hitlériens ont brisé les tombes en marbre. Les Polonais les ont prises pour le remblai du chemin de fer au bout du pré. Un train de marchandises siffle. Le cimetière a disparu des guides

5 dans le calme
 le souvenir du cimetière
 reste sur l'absence des tombes
 où nous marchons seuls debout
 à la recherche des pierres
 ainsi les stèles sont en nous
 par nous la deuxième mort
 de ces morts
9 n'est pas accomplie (NP, 50)

The prose narrative gives the poem the status of *lieu de mémoire* that the cemetery had been denied, blocking the work of forgetting in the face of past 'traumatic events that can be neither understood nor recreated' (Hirsch 1997, 22). It would be tempting to take the reference to the desecration of a Jewish cemetery as a symbol standing for the full scale of historical events we have no adequate words for. This would be to risk evacuating the specificity of experiences that the poem calls up, and to risk re-staging the second burial of the dead under the incommensurable weight of the Holocaust. In the passage from prose to verse, the poem shifts our postmemorial encounter from one directly concerned with the Holocaust and with stories and images so monumental that we have incorporated them as our own memories, to the remembrance of those timeless anonymous dead who rest under the unfathomable and irrevocably absent gravestones. It qualitatively retains attributes Marianne Hirsch associates with postmemory, insofar as it articulates 'generational

distance' with 'deep personal connection', and 'because its connection to its object or source is mediated not through recollection but through an imaginative investment and creation' (22), drawing on something other than our conscious cognitive engagement.

Our experience of the poem is one where the (belated) narrative content is, to a large extent, evacuated. The names carved in the stones of the descriptive, almost anecdotal, prose narration of a journey through the old cemetery are emptied of life. Yet, the memory of the cemetery and the dead lives on through the poem and through the experience of research and discovery infused into the verses. The poem's invitation epitomises the kind of 'imaginative investment' Marianne Hirsch refers to: amid the empty space, the absent stones *we* seek carry *us* 'seuls debout', giving the sense of an embodied memory implanted in the personal pronoun *nous*. *Nous* unknowingly becomes the physical bearer of immemorial stones, the (funerary) 'stèles' in the poem. It is the active repository of a timeless remembrance, through which the second death of the dead, their fall into oblivion, remains unaccomplished against all odds.

Memory's force lies neither in the inscriptions, 'noms [...] renversés' found on a negated *lieu de mémoire*, nor in a witness testimony, but it lives on through *us* as *we* listen to the silence that moves *us*, the voice/way *we* literally or metaphorically travel by. It substitutes a 'silence de vie contre tous les silences de mort' (Martin 2004a, 44), against the assignation and the victimisation of those *we* survive:

5 les morts que nous avons sous
 les paupières
 ne savent pas qu'ils sont morts
 ils passent par nous le désert
 et la marche
 nous aussi nous avons été passés

une nuit pareille à nulle autre
 parce qu'elle nous traverse
 c'est depuis
 10 que le temps boite
 par nous et que nos mots sont
 le passage et tu as dit
 je suis de ton avenir
 14 nous vivons de bouche en bouche (NP, 57)

Although it may seem difficult not to read an evocation of the horror in this and other poems, the closer it comes to a naming of sorts is in the ambivalent silence of 'une nuit pareille à nulle autre'. To be sure, literary or artistic portrayals of the extermination easily lend themselves to 'references [that] are often shadowy, tentative allusions to loss, nostalgia, mourning, or melancholia' in an attempt to reconcile ourselves with the paradoxically necessary yet 'unwanted beauty' they conjure up (Kaplan 2007, 105). However, Meschonnic's dense poem contains a large part of undecidability in its complex use of allegorical motifs that blend an elusive allusion to the extermination and the expressive sensuality of the final line together with biblical references and liminal inclusions of the author's thoughts on language. The form of the poem, in particular the line breaks and caesuras, reinforces the interplay of suspension and continuity of meaning/memory conveyed throughout the poem.

The first line leaves the reader hanging onto the safe expectation of a distant visual reference, and yet 'les morts' are nowhere to be seen since we carry them within. Our unsettled reliance on visual signs is doubled with a sense of bodily discomfort emphasised by the line break. The suspension in the fourth line suggests that we linger on the equation between 'nous' and 'le désert', sustained two lines later by the affirmation that, like the desert, 'nous avons été passés': a sense of arid emptiness and forgetfulness precedes and accompanies the forward and salvaging movement of 'la marche'. The live/embodied

remembrance of the dead demands that we forget in order to make space for that fleeting dimension of memory that gets lost in representation. It is not through images, narratives or monuments but in and by *nous* that the promise of a journey through ‘le désert / et la marche’, like the unaccomplished death of those invisible dead *we* survived in the previous poem, holds the possibility of being realised.

The unexpectedly suspended movement of phrases on line 10-2 plays on oppositions and associations in a way that supports this last assertion. It is not the existence of words as material traces left in memory of the dead, but the primacy of ‘le passage’ that constitutes ‘nos mots’. A poem in *Combien de noms* gives the reader a retrospective cue in this respect, playing around and against ‘l’association-cliché morts/mots’ (Païni 2005, 346) that recalls ‘[l]e vieux calembour grec [...] *sôma-sêma* [...] montr[ant] une équivalence physique entre le corps, *sôma*, et le signe, *sêma*, en même temps tombeau’ (RV, 209). We are compelled to contrast between ‘mots’ qualified by a definite article or a possessive adjective in : ‘les morts sont couverts de mots / mes mots sont pour ceux qui vivent’ (CDN, 31). A distinction is made between words-as-memorialisation, that is, the stage of performative acts of memory detached from the words themselves, and words-as-remembrance, that is, the inherent activity of remembering which holds language and life, one in and with the other, through the activity of a subject underlined, here, by the possessive adjective.

The poem above clearly fosters the latter sense: ‘nos mots’ are the binding agent joining the two terms doubly accentuated by their respective positions at the beginning of line 10 and 11, and by their echo in the title of the collection: ‘par nous [...] / le passage [...]’ (NP, 57). As readers, we are encouraged to recognise ‘nos mots’, the poem we write or read, as the space that ties in the activity of language with the activity of a subject *nous*, and

vice versa, and to favour these over the sepulchral weight of ‘les mots’, the memory texts we lay on the dead. Encouraged to recognise ourselves as part of this plural subject *nous*, at once intimately personal and anonymously collective, we implicate ourselves in this activity. Moreover, it is in and through the subject and the language, enmeshed in the poem by a mutually binding and transformative activity, that ‘le temps boite’. Both the disruption of time ensuing from the historical event and the onward march of history are borne by the subject *nous* and its constituting activity, *le passage*. As the assertion on line 9 and 10 recalls, the extermination once and for all shattered any hopes for a progressive or redemptive conception of time and history. However, the following line suggests that time is not to be considered separately from our activity as subjects. It is this activity rather than a sense of purpose or finality, whether experiential or transcendent, that drives the course of history. *Nous* is the a-teleological and a-theological space that destabilises our representation of historical time by taking the sort of activity at play in a poem, rather than the chronology of historical events, as its measure.

This is where the undecidability of ‘une nuit pareille à nulle autre’ take its full relevance. If we read it as an allusion to the extermination, we hear all the strident cries piercing a silent yet immemorial night, irremediably interrupting the course of history and unsettling our apprehension of both our world and ourselves, for ‘cette nuit [...] nous traverse’ unceasingly and its destructive force is still uncompromisingly felt in the present. However, and particularly in conjunction with the earlier evocation of the desert and the march, it recalls the Israelites’ overnight crossing of the Red Sea to their divine liberation (*Exodus 14:20-1 - N*, 87)¹, one of the major moments amongst ‘ce que Maïmonide appelait

1. Entries to the biblical text are given as (chapter:verses) and refer to Meschonnic’s translation e.g. *Les Noms* for the Exodus.

des «événements de l'âme»' (N, 9) which 'ont joué un tel rôle historiquement, symboliquement, dans la Bible, qu'ils sont inachevables' (UJ, 173). *Nous* may well be bearing the weight of the innumerable dead that have passed through *us*, but at the same time, it is an opening towards a continuous becoming both for them, through *nous*, and for *us*, since 'nous aussi nous avons été passés'; a 'promesse qui, ne se tenant que de s'innaccomplir, ouvre par là même l'infini du sens et de l'histoire' (N, 11).

The poem spells out this promise through the voice of the other : '[...] et tu as dit / je suis de ton avenir'. Like God's response to Moses (*Exodus* 3:12,14 - N, 39-40), 'il s'agit d'une promesse, d'un être-avec qui va durer dans l'avenir' (N, 10). It holds the past of the narration, the present of the utterance and the future of the projection together as part of the same idea of non-achievement that makes of *nous* the *passage* in question. The poem not only tells us about this passage but it effectuates it from subject to subject. The first person singular *je* appears only through losing her direct voice to the other *tu* who in turn projects and abandons herself to *je*'s future. The personal pronoun *je* is occupied, both simultaneously and consequentially, by the other whom *je* longs for and includes –*tu*–, by the subject writing the poem, by those who read it, and by the poem itself, that is, the overarching allegorical subject *nous* towards whom the poem aspires.

Meschonnic's characteristic work of pronouns opens yet another dimension of the poem, where *je* can only say *je* because there is a *tu*, with whom she sensually tends towards a *nous* in an intimate and impersonal interplay at the bosom of the couple *je-tu*. '[U]ne des constantes essentielles' of Meschonnic's poems, the conjugation of *je-tu-nous* turns the poem into the active space of a relation, and 'l'amour' into 'la substance même de la parole' rather than a theme (Ancet 2002, 74). The 'nuit pareille à nulle autre' now evokes the

sensuality —eroticism, even— we incidentally read across the page from the explicit reference to the extermination in the central poem, where we found ourselves in the intimate nudity of a night pregnant with ‘le silence entre nous’, which the poem identifies as ‘notre force’ (NP, 51)¹. Transposed from this earlier poem, this silence now is infused with some of the bodily imagery that Meschonnic uses to articulate the explicit involvement of the body in everything that is felt, perceived, said or thought. The silence passing by ‘nos mots’ is the creative life force that carries *nous* ‘de bouche en bouche’. This force makes of the entire poem the subject *je* who inscribes herself in ‘ton avenir’ and whom ‘le couple déplace [...], décentre et même [...] invente en se l’incorporant, par érotisation de la relation intersubjective qui le fonde’ (Païni 2005, 352).

The earlier biblical allegory embraces the silent sensuality of the last line, around which the entire work of memory and forgetting elaborated through the poems revolves. As Claude Vigée puts it, ‘[c]’est ainsi que nous vivons au désert des mots, mis en contact, unis, désunis, dans une Pâque précaire de chaque instant’ (2001, 93). This bringing together also follows from a passage in *Voyageurs de la voix*: ‘et les cris qu’on n’entend plus sont la mer rouge qui s’écarte / chaque jour pour que quelque chose de nous passe entre l’oubli’ (VV, 69). The dividing of the Red Sea stands as metaphor for the space and the activity yet to be announced as *Nous le passage*, what escapes the bounds of what one commonly hears or understands (‘entend’) in the narratives populating our contemporary memory culture. These unheard cries are the lost substance of our time-framed and dedicated remembering, what passes and gives sense without our necessarily knowing it, bearing our chance to close in on the unachievable *nous* ‘[p]ar l’oralité, par l’écoute [...] une inclusion réciproque [de

1. The full poem reads: ‘même si nous sommes nus comme / la nuit / notre force / ce n’est pas nous / c’est le silence entre nous’ (NP,51)

deux «je»], qui n'est pas une fermeture de l'espace, ni une clotûre du sens, mais leur ouverture infinie' (Païni 2005, 353). As the space of this listening and of its confrontation with *on*, who is deaf to the silent cries and opposed to *nous* in the play of pronouns, the poem and the 'manière de se taire [...] qu'on prend pour de l'oubli' (*VV*, 33) are allegorically the promised exit from Egypt, what Meschonnic terms *L'Utopie du Juif* (*UJ*). The poem is home to the a utopia geared towards 'un devenir à tout ce qui nous fait dans et par une forte relation amoureuse' (Martin 2004a, 43) rather than a vague hope of progress or redemption. The biblical reference to the *Exodus* fuses forgetfulness with a part of the divine that we carry within, against the sacralisation of memory: a path to our continued and ever-unresolved becoming is there for us, the poem proposes, insofar as we can make out the cries lost in the deafening silence. This, however, is not given to everyone but only to those who open themselves to a certain kind of listening, in the sensual passage from *je* to *nous* of the poem-relation.

The interruption we stumbled across at the start of this section eventually turns out to be the explicit inclusion of our concerns for memory in the face of horror within the life- and love-embracing gesture of the latter poem and its discovery of a subject 'comme pluriel interne [et intime], non plus un singulier' (*UJ*, 16). Walking along with the poet through the absent gravestones, we are compelled to engage in a double movement that suspends the intelligible meaning of words or signs, and what they contain of memory, in order to let the oral sensuality and the promise of our silences clear through the forgetful sieve of narratives.

Part 3 – Listening to the gesture of memory in the silence of the voice

Et toute l'assemblée est à genoux et le
chant est qui chante ... Chronicles II 29:28 (UJ, 245)

The equivocation the last section revealed in the dyadic relationship between memory and forgetting is hardly new. Nietzsche founded his *Genealogy of Morals* on the careful economy of the two categories, refining his earlier perspective against historicism (1997) into on 'active forgetting' as 'a form of strong good health' (cited in Weinrich 2004, 130). Freud conceived of the forgotten as the 'latent' (un)pacified memories dwelling in the unconscious, either screened or repressed as a means of avoiding displeasure (134). Forgetting has also been thought of as that disturbance to memory necessary as a 'fundamental precondition of thought' (145) or 'the source of a kind of poetic surplus value' (150) that formed the Penelope work of Proust's masterwork.

My discussion of the poems and poetics of Henri Meschonnic so far shows some resonance with Proust's invocation of a '*mémoire du corps*' (cited in Weinrich 2004, 148) buried 'in the depths of abyssal oblivion' (150) where '*une mémoire de l'intelligence et des yeux*' (148) has plunged it. The latter found the spring of his creative and redemptive inspiration in the fortuitous resurgence of long forgotten experiences recognisable and narratable as lived past. In Meschonnic's poetry, however, forgetting does not ease fragments from the far reach of a past 'purified [...] of all contingency' (151) but takes the form of 'la mémoire tournée vers son inconnu' (Païni 2005, 347). In this sense, the poetics of memory and

forgetting unfolding through Meschonnic's work does not directly compare but instead offers a possible extension to Harald Weinrich's history of *The Art and Critique of Forgetting* (2004). Following Luisa Passerini's reading of Wilfred Bion, our access to the 'unknown' is hindered by memory and anticipation, respectively understood as 'the past tense of desire' and 'its future tense' (2003, 251). Embracing the inherent activity of the poem, we explore the limits of our access to this unknown that intuitively contributes to the elusive stuff we are made on.

Combien de noms continues the adventurous exploration initiated in the central poem of the previous collection. The declarative-interrogative form of the title phrase invites us to ponder not only the accumulation of names but also what is lost or transformed when the (un)quantifiable accumulation is substitute for the individuals these names spell out¹. Their inscriptions in the stones open them to forgetting and anonymity as a counter-side to memorialisation. In *Voyageurs de la voix*, these inscriptions 'commémorent l'oubli / et il [l'oubli] a tellement de noms qu'il en a plus que Dieu même' (VV, 76). However, effaced by their accumulation, the names hold a promise for us in *Nous le passage* since 'tous le noms ensemble / font une absence de nom / [...] / l'anonymat / qui fera de notre nom une phrase' (NP, 29). *Combien de noms*, and particularly the poem giving the collection its title, further spell out the promise of this anonymity in becoming:

5 et j'ai combien de noms le
 souffle de ton souffle est mon
 nom et nous vivons dans nos mots
 comme nos mots vivent de nous
 nos livres s'ouvrent à la page

1. Apart from a short-lived pointer to the gravestones of a 'vieux cimetière' arrested in time in Prague (CDN, 10), there are no proper names in the poems: it leaves us to guess whose names the title refer to and where they are to be found.

subject *nous*, than one *I* am able to verbalise— whose movement continues through our silences and economy of words:

les morts sont couverts de mots
mes mots sont pour ceux qui vivent
ils ne ferment pas une vie
je ne fais que commencer
5 de les dire des bouts de mots
qui sortent à peine de nos bouches
tant ils sont mêlés à nous
que la phrase à dire c'est nous
elle n'est pas pour les pierres je
10 ne sais pas ce qu'elle dit elle
continue si on s'arrête
12 se tait si on parle trop (CDN, 31)

The 'phrase à dire' that *we* are, only unfolds if one forgets oneself in its activity rather than saying what one knows and/or knowing what one is saying. In the poem's declension of pronouns, *on* takes side with the unifying totality of what is (to be) known—which includes but is not reduced to knowledge of the self— whereas *nous* points to the inherent plurality and infinite possibility of the unknown. It is through the illocution of such 'bouts de mots' borne by and phrased towards *nous* that the subject-of-the-poem *je* can 'naître à [sa] propre parole' (Mazo 2004, 20). This 'voix' or 'parole' impersonalises the subject, wresting her from the conservative reflexivity of the individual self or *moi*:

[...]
7 Maintenant une parole me détruit pour naître
et transporte de moi ce que de moi peut passer
du côté de ma parole
10 où je ne me connais pas encore. (DP, 15)
[...]

These lines can be read in continuity with the earlier allegory of the desert and the Red Sea, from one (known) side of 'ma parole' towards a promised other (unknown) side where

the subject would be revealed to herself. On two occasions in *Combien de noms*, this passage through language also takes the sense of danger, fright and urgency of a flight that alludes less to the biblical *Exodus* than it does ‘la guerre et la traque’. Even though the poet’s sense of being ‘un de l’autre côté’ (*DP*, 15) resonates with the lived experience of anti-Semitism, it mostly situates the kind of poetics he proposes within the dominant regime of language.

1 parler autour de sa bouche
 voir en dehors de ses yeux
 en faire le silence des mots
 pour écouter retenir
 5 c’est notre permis de vivre
 que nous tendons pour passer
 à travers le langage comme
 on transporte sa famille
 9 et que le temps est compté (*CDN*, 35)

1 nous ne parlons pas avec les mots
 ce sont les interstices entre
 eux qui creusent les pierres
 la ligne de démarcation
 5 que nous passons comme des trous
 dans la nuit la main sur la
 7 bouche des enfants (40)

The somewhat extreme and provocative comparison between the poem and the Jew’s struggle to escape extermination leaves the reader perplexed. It obliges her to read, beyond the initial awkwardness, the promise of survival attached to voice’s movement, which the poem observes in ‘le silence des mots’ or ‘les interstices entre / eux’. First subject to the poem’s estrangement, the reader is called in by the solidarity of the *nous*. Irrespective of any consideration of culture and faith, the reader is compelled to disclose herself as a Jew in the activity of reading the poem.

Meschonnic’s ‘awkward poetics’ —to borrow the term from Anthony Rowland (2005)— disperses not the horror of the event but the ascription of its memory to the question of a Jewish identity; it takes the Jew out of the image that makes her a survivor of history. Survival is no longer conditional to any form of theodicy nor to the meaning of words ensuring the continuation of memory as narrative, but to the act of illocution. Instead, survival is what makes the Jew alive to herself as much as in each of us through ‘[la continuité de] l’énonciation qui [seule] en fait un vivant’ (67). The term *énonciation* points to all in language organised as discourse that does not refer to an objective reality but to the on-going process by which meaning comes into being through the activity of illocution itself. It continues and radically extends Benveniste’s attention to linguistic ‘indicateur[s]’ (1966, 253), into the relational and embodied activity of the poem presented in Part 1. Rather than circumscribing the Jew through memory, writing, religion or history, Meschonnic places the Jew in the activity outlined in *Exodus 24:7* —‘nous ferons et nous écouterons’ (N, 128)— that escapes any definition: ‘[u]n rapport à’ more than a ‘transport dans’ memory, writing, religion or history (UJ, 52, see also 29-34).

Both the poems above demand of this activity to be receptive to what ‘l’imperceptible [qui] est notre registre / de renaissance’ (CDN, 45) allows us to listen, tell or see with our skins and bodies more than with our aural, oral, or visual apprehension, for it surpasses our common experience of words and vision.¹ This silent illocution or *énonciation* eventually implies ‘écouter retenir’, that is listening *and* retaining, remembering or holding in, but also listening *to* the activity of retention. The latter does not strictly form part of our cognitive

1. This bodily substitution of the primary senses is sustained both throughout this collection —‘la peau écoute’ (64); ‘nous voyons / de toute notre voix’ (60)— and in the rest of Meschonnic’s poetry.

ability to remember, or to devise strategies for remembering, but rather pertains to language and to the ‘interstices [.../...] qui creusent les pierres’ without our consciously being aware of it. In other words, the poems encourage us to stand sideways from words and their meaning ‘pour écouter retenir’ what Meschonnic elsewhere calls ‘la subjectivité de la mémoire dans la matière des mots’ (*M*, 40).

The *énonciation* supposes that *we* forget the allegorical collection of stones bearing inscriptions, words and names which, reduced to their intelligible sense, accumulate into a collective epitaph that dominates meaning (*VV*, 25). Commenting on the following poem, Philippe Pâini underlines the position against the ‘mémoire normative [...] qui est une sacralisation qui s’ignore’ (2005, 348):

1	pas de traits plus sacrés que d’autres	
	toute marque écrit une mémoire	
	seule la mémoire creuse les pierres	
	nous imprime dans le temps	
5	mais l’oubli est le lecteur	
6	et ce qu’il lit est l’oubli	(<i>CDN</i> , 15)

This poem expands the inclusive take on memory and its politics expressed in the first line to encompass the part of memory that is irretrievably lost to the accumulation of meaning given through representation. The poem subtly contrasts the fixity in time that ‘*la mémoire*’ afflicts upon us with the *énonciation* at work in reading. The latter doubles up with a mode of forgetting that is at once the limit and the condition for ‘*une mémoire*’ to unfold in ‘toute marque’. Akin to Nietzsche’s formulation quoted at the start of this section, Meschonnic invites us to ‘[c]élébrer l’oubli actif’ (*RL*, 140): from the moment we no longer make intelligible sense of these stones and inscriptions, ‘de leur oubli se déchiffre / une autre mémoire une autre / langue’ (*CDN*, 7). This memory-language, which the singular

Meschonnic presents ought not to be confused with the spoken word. Instead, it is a qualitative appreciation of the subtle internal and embodied dynamics of language: 'l'immobile / [qui] remue en nous' (CDN, 52) of these stones whose memory 'marche dans nos pas elle bouge / dans notre chaleur' to the extent that 'nous ne faisons plus la différence /entre ce qu'elles disent et nous' (85). Meschonnic points to a movement that doubles up the known dimension of language, voice, time and ourselves with unpredictability —'nous nous déplaçons imprévisibles / pour nous même' (66). This movement is an inward expansion towards 'ce qui me / prend du dedans fait mes gestes / dans ce temps à l'intérieur / du temps' (66). It is 'la force de l'infime' (Martin 2003, 14) opening onto an infinite register of meaning that never ceases to come into being, 'une voix dans notre voix' (CDN, 65) revealed elsewhere as 'ce savoir' inhabiting *our* compelled silence doubled with intimate sensuality:

1 entre nos bouches serrées il y a du temps nos paroles
 l'entendent elles sont dedans autant que dans notre voix
 il est le sens de leur sens
 4 ce savoir est notre voix
 [...]

(36)

Amongst the allegories in *Combien de noms* and other collections, 'ce bouche à bouche' (56) and the 'marche' (68, 72, 79) provide more than a convenient link with *Nous le passage* and the poems analysed in Part 2. Both point to the continuity between language and body, giving indirect reference to the very bodily mechanics Meschonnic identifies at the core of 'le mouvement de la parole dans l'écriture' (CR, 350, after Gerard Manley Hopkins' notion of *Sprung Rhythm*) and generalises to all instances of *langage*. The 'savoir' announced by the above poem is elaborated in *Nous le passage* as our ability '[de] commence[r] à dire / ce qui passe de corps en corps' (NP, 31) or 'ce qui de moi vit le plus / en moi par toi hors de moi

/ comme le goût qui tient ensemble / les mots' (70).

This metapoetic observation is an obvious allusion to the foundational activity organising meaning from within the entire biblical corpus, in and through its *énonciation*, which Meschonnic advances in his essays and biblical translations. Meschonnic emphasises the role '[d]es accents rythmiques et de cantilation' or *te'amim* (CB, 225), omnipresent in the Bible, whose organisation determines the various modes of signifying beyond, albeit in necessary relationship with, what the text says. He also invokes the literal translation of the singular form *ta'am*, 'c'est-à-dire *le goût*' (CB, 233):

Le goût de ce qu'on mange, le goût des choses. Le sens du goût. Je prends cette métaphore (l'hébreu médiéval en fait la *ratio*, la raison d'être et la rationalité) pour une désignation de l'affect. Et c'est alors l'affect qui fait la *ratio* du langage: le mouvement de son sens. (CB, 234)

It is this *mise-en-bouche* that teases us into writing or reading in the way we do, transforming us by way of 'une somatisation du sens et une sémantisation du corps' (Bernardet 2005, 147). What matters is not what is said, not the meaning one draws or interprets from the narrative, but what we do not necessarily hear in what is being said, yet invokes us, works through us and brings us together as we engage in the intimate sensuality of the poem-relation through its *énonciation*. In his translation of the Bible, Meschonnic seeks to reinstate 'la poétique du divin' and let these workings, effaced by the religiosity of the text dominating historical translations and their attention to meaning, be heard (Martin 2003, 21). In the biblical verse quoted in epigraph —'et le chant est qui chante' (UJ, 245)—, it is the Song of the Sea (*Exodus* 15:1-18) that sings and draws the Israelites together in the ecstatic moment of salvation (Vigée 2001, 92). The force of this gesture is echoed in *Nous le passage*: 'les mouvements qui nous joignent / nous disjoignent sur un air dont nous ne

pouvons pas dire / que nous le chantons mais le chant est celui qui nous chante / et qui nous laisse sans voix' (*NP*, 71). The speechlessness accounts for the maximum of affect in language and a silence which is neither 'une intention de silence' nor 'dans la mythologie de l'indicible' but 'une forme intensive du langage' (Meschonnic 2002, 13-4). Beyond the intelligibility of the words we utter, this imminently infectious 'chant / silencieusement passe en nous' and moves us, 'nous déplace' as much as it links us to one another, holding time —'nous nous tenons par le temps'— and voices —'ma voix dans ta voix'— as we hold hands (*NP*, 78). This internal physics of language operates as an incorporating 'act of transfer' —to borrow Paul Connerton's notion (1989, 39) and radically subvert his 'heuristic' distinction between the 'incorporating and inscribing practices' contributing to memory's sociality (79)— 'd'un sujet qui passe à tous les sujets' (*J*, 115). Insofar as it is the continuity of an *énonciation* in and through the specific mode of signifying at play in any poem as much as in the biblical corpus, 'ce chant' is the historical activity of a subject 'par [qui] nous sommes à nous-même' (*NP*, 78), that is, as subjects, '[o]u plutôt, indéfiniment en voie de le devenir et de se défaire' (*J*, 101). The 'oralité-socialité' (86) of this chant is the embodied element that constantly relates us to others and to history to the extent that all that we are left to hear in the silence of our voice is but the gestures of memory in the continuum of language that propels the subject towards 'ce qu'il devient — contre ce qu'il se sait déjà' (Païni 2005, 346):

1 nous savons à quel prix
nous apprenons ce langage dans le langage
il change la voix
la voix elle-même devient les mouvements
5 de la mémoire

[...]

(*VV*, 33)

Conclusion

Les poètes ont peur de devenir prophètes Victor Hugo, *Dernière Gerbe*,
LXXXIV

•

V syom kbristiannyshem iz mirov

Poety — zhidy!

[In this most Christian of worlds

All poets — are yids!] Marina Tsvetaeva, 'Poem of the end' (1924)

The contemporary drive for bearing witness to history hinges on a rhetoric of morality and (self-)discipline regulating *what* is or ought to be remembered/forgotten as well as *who* we tell ourselves and others we *are*. Jeffrey Blustein's recent uptake of memory within moral philosophy, for instance, echoes the commonplace view that to give an account of one's personal and collective pasts is to make a claim for potential recognition so that one's subjective experience can be heard, validated as authentic and given some authority (2008, 339-40). Under these terms, to remain silent would be to deny the affirmation of one's moral standing and the right to be given such metaphoric voice. However, it would not be the denial of a past we all bear within us, but the refusal to subscribe to a meaningful (self-)representation that would inevitably follow one's trail like the shadow of Holocaust victims floats in the stepmarks of the contemporary Jew.

This silenced voice is both the price one has to pay to come closer to the inner workings of language and the wager Henri Meschonnic makes, in his poems as in the rest of his work, to show that what he calls the *signifiant* 'porte et contribue à faire une histoire,

collée non aux semelles mais à la langue' (J,113). Meschonnic's use of the term *signifiant* does not follow directly from the dyad signifier-signified inherited from structural linguistics but rather is to be understood as 'le participe présent du verbe signifier' (UJ, 10). It refers to all in discourse that participates in its indefinitely coming into meaning through the continuity of an *énonciation* and comprises the sensual or embodied quality set in motion through 'la voix', 'le chant', 'le souffle', amongst other motifs identified in my reading of Meschonnic's poems. This is why it sticks to the tongue like the *ta'am*, the 'goût' of the biblical text, lingers in the mouth. Moreover, the *signifiant* is also the taste of the metaphorical water we borrow from the historical and 'social cistern of language' (Bedetti 1992, 432) —that is, the infinite sum of discourses ever enunciated within a given, albeit evolving, system of lexicon and grammar — even as we continually add on to it and renew it. The dynamical reading Meschonnic's poems invites illustrates this movement by emphasising a way of saying, more so than what the poem says, turning every line into an epic of meaning (Bernardet 2005). It produces an effect of corporeality that epitomises as much as it sustains the sensuality and internal plurality of the relational poetics of memory expressed through the literal dimension of the poems.

The thread running through the poems hints at the embodied memory of language as 'l'histoire qui arrive à la voix' (UJ, 39) and the pregnant life-force that carries the subject forward through history and draws *us* together as subjects into the intimacy of a 'vivre à venir' (CDN, 63). The stake, however, is to recover this non-narrative quality of memory, to unearth memory from the intelligible weight of words, images and representations we have buried it in like 'on avait enterré un cimetière / pour le sauver' (67). Meschonnic sits uneasily with the dominant task of thought that gives currency to mending the shattered coherence of historical meaning —or memory's ostensible fragility— under a deceptively

space' (Cohen 2003, 139). The poems invoke our postmemorial engagement with the extermination such that it 'replicates the structure of historical catastrophe' (Middleton and Wood 2000, 191) that has programmatically been erasing the *signifiant* out of the conceptions of language dominating thought to this day —conceptions which, to make matters worse, 'effacent qu'elles effacent' (Martin 2003, 21). Following Meschonnic, 'cette violence inaudible et invisible' (21) takes 'le degré maximum [...] entre la vie et le langage' (26) out of poetry and reverts it to '*l'idole poésie*' (CP, 186), which privileges the poetic form over the poem as activity. Similarly, the prevailing translation of the Bible, from the Septuagint onwards, is 'une *effaçante*' (UJ, 245) since it impedes 'une activité de l'historicité des signifiants' (J, 83-4) and buries 'une oralité-socialité' (86), that is, the embodied repository of Jewish memory as *énonciation* (101), underneath the narrative and its interpretations. One of the major effects of this linguistic effacement is the loss of 'la distinction capitale à faire entre le sacré, le divin et le religieux' within the Judaic tradition as well as other confessions, subsuming the first two under the latter (Martin 2003, 21):

Radicalement rythme, prosodie, la signifiante biblique est une oralité-socialité. C'est par là qu'elle n'est plus une communion cosmique, mais paradoxalement, dans le rapport au divin, une historicité toute humaine. Le primat du signifiant déborde la théologie comme telle. Le langage, qui est histoire et rapport à l'histoire, suffit. Dieu même est dans le signifiant. Puisque le dialogique y est. (J, 86)

The poet/Jew who becomes poet/Jew in and through the work of *signifiant*, is an outcast of both the dominant regime of language and the poetic/Judaic tradition. However, she is also the figure of displacement, the maintenance of the dialogical promise that we carry viscerally and that we share in the intimate sensuality of our practice of the poem through the movement of the '[c]orps individuel-social' (RV, 57) which transforms and transports *us* through language, and so through history. This continuous and embodied

substance we are made and unmade on, the *signifiant*, ‘n’a pas de garant [...], il n’a que le risque, l’inconnu qui recommence’ (*J*, 133).

Such is the double stake of the wager Meschonnic already implied at the outset of his first collection of poems —‘Le langage m’a mis à prix. Je n’ai pas fini’ (*DP*, 8); a wager he also reads in the biblical parable of Jonah, comparing the *signifiant* to the belly of the fish as ‘la matrice de la vie’ (94) —hence the Hebraic notion of history as ‘*toldot*, naissances, généalogies, continuité et discontinuité des recommencements’ (119)— and substituting an ‘au-delà de sens’ (77) for the Jew’s quest toward self-knowledge. It is precisely because it refuses the question of identity, and even its preservation as a question, that awaking our senses to the *signifiant* may tell us how we ought to re-conceive the ‘ethico-political task’ of thinking not only as the ‘new categorical imperative’ pronounced by Adorno in the wake of Auschwitz (Cohen 2003, 4-5), but as a demand embedded in our critical, theoretical as well as daily apprehensions of language.

Our poetical journey has disclosed the risk we face under the vexed conditions of language and memory. This risk, to paraphrase a Buddhist saying, is to keep mistaking the finger pointing at the moon for the moon, relying on the tangible, narratable manifestations of memory in our moral and critical undertakings instead of aiming for what relates us ‘at non-narratable levels of existence to others in ways that have a supervenient ethical significance’ (Butler 2005, 135). ‘Our chance of becoming human’ (136) and embrace our responsibility for what shall be done, is yet to accept another risk, that of abandoning any hopes of ‘giving an account of oneself’ (135) in and through the necessary relationship we hold with others or with our past. This dissertation has located an empirical ground for this chance/risk in the poem as the form of language in which the embodied memory of

language is most obviously in play. The poems in *Nous le passage* and *Combien de noms* offers this embodiment its dramatic stage:

L'écrit même redevient cri. Effet de signifiante qui est une dramatisation rare dans cette poésie toute entière opposée à l'anecdote, fût-elle tragique et justifiée. (Ancet 2002, 81)

For all that the cries could stand for the horror and the suffering of victims, the poems avert the ambivalence and multiplying the cry into the intense corporeal charge in language, into the violence that pulls us out of the objective reality of what we know of ourselves and the world around us, and into a calling, which is the part of the divine and of prophecy at the bosom of the relational intimacy of the poem. Our task, then, is to sharpen our senses to this stuff we are continually made on, the poem within us, for Jonah, Orpheus and others no longer to be the myths of the past but the ciphers of this inner calling towards an adventure beginning each day anew.

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